

Fanuel Hanán Díaz

# SEEN FROM AFAR

A REVIEW OF ITALIAN  
CHILDREN'S WRITING FROM SOUTH AMERICA

**IICWA**  
ITALIAN CHILDREN & WRITERS ASSOCIATION  
ASSOCIAZIONE ITALIANI SCRITTORI PER BAMBINI



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ESSAYS AND TEXTS

Fanuel Hanán Diaz

SEEN FROM AFAR:

A REVIEW OF ITALIAN

CHILDREN'S WRITING FROM SOUTH AMERICA

Published with the cooperation of ICWA

Italian Children's Writers Association

ICWA

INTERLINEA

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Front cover: reworking of a drawing by Vamba taken from *Il giornalino di Giamburrasca* (Bemporad, Florence 1927)

## INTRODUCTION

ICWA (Italian Children's Writers Association) is a free association of children's writers founded in October 2012. It currently counts around fifty members who differ in terms of publishing experience, themes covered and writing style, but together they represent a large part of Italian children's literature, published at home and in translation. Among them are winners of the Italian Andersen and Bancarellino awards, and many other award-winning authors and emerging young writers.

The association was founded to help contribute to the recent opening up of foreign markets to Italian children's literature. The first hurdle to overcome in this regard is undoubtedly language: very few children's publishers outside of Italy have readers in Italian. To bridge this communication gap, ICWA set to work straight away, convinced that it would be much easier to advance internationally as a tight-knit group with shared goals while also encouraging other writers to join us. The more members we have the more qualified we are to represent and promote Italian children's writing around the world.

The first step in this direction was the ICWA bilingual website - in Italian and English - presenting a constantly evolving author gallery with biographies and examples of our most recent works.

A second step was to seek international groups with similar backgrounds to ours at the Bologna Children's Book Fair, in order to share our experiences and discuss our respective approaches.

But the spark that got this book project well and truly off the ground was our first conference at the 2014 book fair. Among the various foreign speakers invited to a session at the Author's Cafe' (to promote children's books in the global crisis), we had the pleasure of welcoming Venezuelan critic Fanuel Hanán Diaz. He was very interested in our association and offered to write something that would be useful in the pursuit of our objectives.

This marked the beginning of Fanuel's journey through the works of our members. His literary marathon from a distant vantage point seemed a perfect way to get to know the part of Italian children's publishing that the ICWA represents in order to then tell others about it.

The revelation in the introduction to his "reading diary" that readers in South America are still enthralled by Salgari and De Amicis came as an enormous surprise. As he progresses on his literary stroll through the works of our members, Fanuel also captures the various themes covered, highlighting the characteristics they share and the different narrative solutions used. The overall result paints a very clear picture of what's happening in Italian children's writing.

The power of Fanuel's work lies in how effectively it can represent us and share our stories, not to mention the prestige of its author; it will play a huge role in promoting ICWA and the books of our members, and we also hope that when the original Spanish version and the English translation are made available online, they will encourage more foreign readers to take a look at Italian children's books.

As Fanuel says in the conclusion, "The intention was not to create an academic work but for the texts to be inviting to all those who want to take a closer look at a significant portion of books written for children and young adults in Italy. In fact, many Italian writers picked up their pens because of their belief that children's books can be drivers of change and can build future generations of more discerning readers."

## ICWA BOARD OF DIRECTORS

[www.ICWA.it](http://www.ICWA.it)

A LITERARY JOURNEY,

A RETURN TO CHILDHOOD

To embark on a journey through contemporary Italian children's writing means to return to childhood itself. Because anyone who ever feasted on stories and fed their imaginations as a child will have memories of characters like Pinocchio, the headstrong wooden marionette, or Marco, the persevering son who travels from the Apennines to the Andes in search of his mother, or even Sandokan, the proud and enigmatic pirate who ruled the seas of the faraway island of Mompracem.

There is no doubt of the impact Italian children's books had on both the pantheon of children's classics and also children's imaginations. The great Italian classics brought us plucky protagonists, exotic locations, a social conscience and never-ending thrills and drama. Moreover, the narratives were made all the richer by the humour, the realistic themes and the elements of fantasy weaved through them in a variety of ways.

This journey through the major trends and voices in contemporary Italian children's writing was initiated by ICWA (Italian Children's Writers Association). Their projects in translation are directed by Anna Lavatelli who welcomed this book project wholeheartedly and worked hard to bring it to fruition. Among her many aims was the desire to promote Italian writing in Latin American countries, a part of the world with which Italy has strong cultural ties. There are innumerable Italian communities across Latin America and a number of academic associations have set up useful exchanges between the two worlds. Children's literature is of huge importance in our culture but unfortunately it is often relegated to the sidelines of the industry. This initiative is therefore all the more important.

More generally speaking, we hope that by bringing our two worlds together we can create something of interest for a readership that wants to know more about what's being published for children in Italy or for people who enjoy Italian language and culture. By extension, we hope to sow the seeds of future translations and closer collaborations capable of consolidating the already firm bond of friendship between Latin America and Italy.

## THE PAST: ITALIAN CLASSICS SEEN FROM AFAR

To understand the Italian children's books of today, we must first dive into the country's most famous books and authors of the past, some of which became classics, others forerunners of an approach to childhood that stepped away from the models of the times and created characters that would inspire children's authors of the future.

Pinocchio is perhaps the most notable example of a toy that comes to life; he is also the most significant character in Italian children's culture. Indeed, you only have to walk into a tourist shop anywhere in Italy to meet countless wooden marionettes and the iconic Pinocchio clothing, as immortalized by Enrico Mazzanti. In the imaginary world of children, Pinocchio represents their desire for sublimation and to confront the sacred. The gradual transformation of a wooden marionette into a real boy, after multiple self-inflicted misadventures, is of the epic variety. The hero embarks on a journey that sees him come of age as he overcomes the many difficulties on his path and in life, as well as eventually facing up to his habit of telling lies. Carlo Collodi originally wrote Pinocchio in 1881 as a serial by for the children's weekly paper, "*Il giornale per i bambini*", combining magical elements and crudely realistic themes and situations in the experiences of a cheeky marionette taking his first steps towards becoming a real boy. Pinocchio's key feature - his pointed nose which magically grows whenever he tells a lie - is an allegory for the Oedipal complex and the twin worlds of reality and make-believe that are interweaved in the narrative. These days we see Pinocchio in a variety of contexts, from musicals and comic strips to animated cartoon films and even statutes immortalising this childhood legend.

Not long after, in 1896, Emilio Salgari launched his swashbuckling series with *The Pirates of Malaysia*. Despite publishing an extensive body of work, his most popular and durable success revolved around the figure of Sandokan, the swashbuckling hero with the heart of a lion and nerves of steel. The exotic setting of Malaysia, with its remote, uninhabited islands and thick vegetation, paints the maritime location as a lawless territory, ruled by pirates and traders. Salgari denounces imperialism and the British rule imposed on large parts of Asia by having Sandokan, the Borneo prince, fight tooth and nail against them. The series mirrors the great action adventure classics loved by younger readers and mixes it with a tragic love story between the protagonist and Lady Marianna Guillonk, the niece of James Brooke, otherwise known as the "White Raja", who was a real-life character.

The criticism levied at the colonial system is one of the main themes explored in this body of work, written at a time when colonialism existed alongside the desire for independence. The dramatic tension created in this combination of trends, punctuated with scenes of shipwrecks, bare-handed combat, persecutions and alliances, was Salgari's signature style. Unfortunately, he never obtained the acclaim of critics during his lifetime, despite being a prolific writer and very widely-read.

Another great Italian writer from the 19th century was Edmondo De Amicis, notable among young readers for *Cuore [Heart]*, published in 1886. The strong patriotic flavour, within the period of Italian Unification, the description of everyday characters and the strong emotional undercurrents combine to provide a clear indication of how childhood was perceived at a time when it also enjoyed great literary fortunes. Themes like immigration, the love of country, family, death and poverty make for some very realistic and also emotionally-charged stories that touch readers profoundly.

We read about extraordinarily brave children who overcome challenges that are bigger than they are, such as Marco, the young boy who embarks on a long and arduous trip from Italy to Argentina in search of his mother; the little Florentine scribe who spends his nights working in secret to help his father; the courageous drummer-boy who loses a leg in battle. This said, De Amicis also counters these brave souls with other scenarios featuring the poorest people in society, describing their plights, their beliefs and the difficulties they faced.

All three writers are undoubtedly part of Italy's literary heritage and will continue to shape Italian literature in the future. Their influence will be felt in the personification of inanimate objects, the knitting together of reality and fantasy, the social commentary, the emotional tugs, the historical contexts and the adventure and coming-of-age formats.

## THE PRESENT: POPULAR ITALIAN CHILDREN'S AUTHORS IN SOUTH AMERICA

The first contemporary Italian children's writer to become popular in South America was Gianni Rodari. His writing was the first of a kind that broke the mould, dipping into the absurd and surrealist in nature. The Grammar of Fantasy, a definitive and still popular work by the Italian writer, opened up classrooms to creative writing, drew a clear distinction between reality and imagination and reclaimed for children things like word play and automatic writing while shrugging off the laws of logic and exploring a variety of creative options. Rodari's other books - Telephone Tales and *Parole per giocare* (Playing with words), to name two of the more famous ones - are a testament to the author's idea of children's literature. His stories not only transport us to places in which the imagination plays a powerful role, they also contain profound reflections on man and a search for social equality. Simple story arcs, surprising events and poetic denouements create energy and humour in his stories. Rodari's contribution was also pivotal in changing the way literature was presented in schools and in bringing an element of fun that had never been part of classroom life until then. The art of inventing stories is, in part, the art of regaining a child's point of view, free of dogma and convention, because from this vantage point creativity knows no bounds.

Bianca Pitzorno is another of Italy's great writers. Several trends emerge in her work, from the exhilarating surrealist approach to women's issues in *La casa sull'albero* [The House on the Tree], the quest narrative with a historical slant in *Polissena del Porcello* [Polissena and her Pig] and schools as a place to grow to the cruelty borne out of social inequality and the protagonist's secret ambition to become a writer in *Ascolta il mio cuore* [Listen to my Heart] and the reinvented fairy tale with a bold eschatological structure in *L'incredibile storia di Lavinia* [Lavinia's extraordinary history]. Pitzorno delights her readers with audacious texts, portraying her female protagonists as strong characters with the wherewithal to overcome adversity. It could be said that she explores progressive themes and elevates children's literature to a level that asks questions in a voice that is anything but compliant and at times critical of the adult world. Empowering children, in this case girls, connotes change in the conceptualization of childhood and an interesting way of constructing this perspective. Humour, in the most farcical of extremes, is employed both as a weapon of social protest and as a meta-literary tool; moreover, Pitzorno addresses the realistic aspects and adversities from the very personal perspective of her characters.

Albeit more anchored in pedagogy and illustration, Francesco Tonucci is one of the most widely-read voices outside of his native country, renowned for attributing to children the role of active subject in the construction of society. His books on the science and theory of teaching dismantle education in its traditional form and outline a more progressive approach in which all children must be allowed to discover their true passions and to be at the centre of their education, learning and development. In Tonucci's view, reading aloud is fundamental in rekindling a passion for books: there is no more powerful method when it comes to seducing with language. His most famous project is as advocate of the *Citta' dei Bambini* [child-friendly cities]. Once again, it brings to bear the literary school of thought that empowers children and refuses to accept their subordination in an adult-centred world, this time in an urban context. The governance of children is given a fresh new makeover in order to reconstruct a shared sense of community.

These three authors are cardinal points on any map of contemporary Italian children's writing. I felt it was important to mention them not just because their books are widely read in Latin America, but also because they crossed new thresholds that subsequent generations of children's writers would later be able to explore. Their contributions weaved nuances into the rich fabric of children's stories, broke paradigms and took childhood out of the confined space in which it had previously been trapped. To read their tales is to acquire a strong sense of sovereignty. At the same time, it breaks down barriers allowing creativity to run free and from which a new and more modern literature can emerge.



## BOOK REVIEWS:

### THE THEMES AND AUTHORS

Of the many popular themes available for young and adolescent readers, children's writers tend to tackle issues that each age-group can specifically relate to, such as stories mixing up reality and fantasy, travel, growing up, relationships with the adult world, emotions and how to control them, the desire to belong to a group, fear of the dark or of being abandoned. At the same time, children's books also present an account of life in all its complexities, portraying problems that are often experienced in the grown-up world. This characteristic can be used to gauge the maturity of the writing, namely when it ventures beyond the boundaries of politically correct, safe content.

The same thing happens with narrative styles, when non-linear narratives are employed, or devices such as layered narratives or alternating text types are used within the same story.

This literary review that ICWA has put together offers a taste of its members work and a map to help readers navigate their way through the fusion of different styles and different worlds portrayed. Issues such as migration, inclusion, multiculturalism, war, identity or coming of age, women's roles, friendship, adventure and travel in every shape and form are signposted en-route. Narrative choices are equally varied, from novels and novellas to cross-category and non-fiction. Needless to say, illustrated books also feature, the titles selected showing an intricate link between text, pictures and book format allowing meaning to be built through the fusion of both languages: namely words and illustrations.

If I were forced to name a common characteristic, something that all these books share, then I would have to say it lies in the spiritual dimension, or the sense of positivity in its various shapes and forms. This emerges in the reflections on the human condition, the celebration of courage, the portrayal of children fighting to change their world, the prevalence of conflict resolution, the pursuit of universal understanding, emotional transformation, solidarity, and hope.

The route we have charted through this literary *corpus* will enable us to look deeper into the texts and find commonalities between them, either in the similarity of their themes or the type of exploration they propose. What emerges from this review, which is representative if not exhaustive, is a world of children's writing that is brimming with vitality.

*Emigration* is a painful and often unpredictable experience. Reuniting with a loved one or the hope of a better life are the main reasons many people feel forced to leave their homes or country and travel to new, foreign places.

*Non piangere, non ridere, non giocare* [No crying, no laughing, no playing] by Vanna Cercenà (Lapis) tackles the issue of emigration within Europe. Until the 1990s, Swiss immigration laws imposed limits on the number of foreign labourers entering the country, especially from nations like Italy. Thousands of women working in factories or employed as domestic labourers had no choice but to leave their children behind because their contracts did not allow it. These restrictions form the frame story for the tale of Teresa, a young girl forced to remain hidden in a room lest her mother lose her residence permit. Many other immigrant children were forced to live a clandestine life just like Teresa. As she tries to adapt to her invisible existence in a suffocating space, Teresa remembers the life she had in the countryside. Time goes by slowly and her days are long and boring.

She catches glimpses of the world outside from the window, where she maintains an anxious vigil awaiting her mother's return in the evening. For eleven days she watches the world go by, the light changing and the clouds drifting slowly. This same window then offers Teresa the chance to join the outside world, a chance she only dares to take when a cat ventures into her room and brings her imprisonment to an end. Outside the walls of her room lies a world full of new experiences that Paul, the cat's young owner, introduces her to. The novel changes pace at this point. The gradual process of getting to know someone begins and a series of events unfold that see Teresa's most private personality slowly emerge. A kidnapping sparks an adventure that draws her into a web of intrigue and risks blowing her cover. The changing scenery, which flits from inside to outside, the contrast between different lives and the criticism of legally-imposed barriers paint a realistic picture of what life was like for an immigrant.

*E arrivato l'ambasciatore* [The ambassador's here] by Annamaria Piccione (Mammeonline) is a much more powerful depiction of the plight of children forced to leave their homeland. Ayub sets off from Eritrea with his uncle Osman, in search of his brother Hakim who has gone missing. After a journey fraught with danger, Ayub arrives in Italy where he tries to trace his brother's steps. Along the way, a series of emotions and memories resurface in the protagonist's mind; distant memories of his father, the spicy flavour of *zighini*, his mother's sad face on his departure. These recollections allow us to reconstruct part of Ayub's past and understand why, at such a tender age, he felt compelled to undertake such a dangerous trip.

By chance, Ayub meets Michele, a retired doctor who lives with his cat, and the plot starts to move in a different direction. Michele decides to join Ayub in his search. After making many enquiries, they learn that Hakim died in dramatic circumstances and both Ayub and the doctor realize that they now have an opportunity to make a new life together. Michele adopts Ayub and reunites him with his mother, offering her the chance to forget the past and think about the future. This book has a strong message about human

compassion and solidarity, weaving together memories, searches and shared experiences, like loneliness and the need to know. The issue of emigration is portrayed through the eyes of a child who faces adversity with outstanding grit and determination.

*Friendship* is another theme in the broad spectrum of issues tackled by this medley of authors. Overcoming individual differences and building lasting bonds, in many contexts, often means having to address uncomfortable situations and make the first move towards striking up a friendship.

In *Tutta colpa di un cane* [The dog did it] by Anna Vivarelli (Piemme) two children in the same class start the very slow process of getting to know one another, gradually breaking down barriers that they previously thought insurmountable. Amelia, the fat girl in the class, is not an easy child and even though everyone makes fun of her, no one dares to do it to her face. She boasts about how clever she is to make up for feeling physically unattractive. Umberto, on the other hand, is the class favourite and all the girls adore him because he's so cute and affable. It's almost impossible to imagine two people more different people becoming friends. Indeed, their dislike for and intolerance of one another and a string of unlucky events create an apparently insurmountable barrier between them. But these very circumstances, harsh and difficult as they are, ultimately bring the protagonists together. An accident that forces Amelia into a wheelchair and the arrival of a dog in her life help them to understand each other: icy Amelia starts to thaw and Umberto sees past her coldness to discover things that bind them together forever.

*Spia* [Spy] by Mara Dompé (Biancoenero) is a school story, a very popular genre in children's literature.

Marta is a bit wild and behaves like a common thug. Her chosen victim is Riccardo, who keeps his calm despite Marta's bullying. An exchange of shopping bags at the supermarket leads to a meeting between Marta's mum and Riccardo's dad, and a gradual change in the relationship between the two protagonists thereafter. The story, told in the first person by Marta, provides a comedic account of how two strangers are brought together and slowly make friends. It makes for an enjoyable read also because of the fast-paced action and quick changes of setting which give the story an easy rhythm that fits perfectly with the illustration style.

*Ali di libellula* [Dragonfly wings] by Luisa Staffieri (Mammeonline) is an interesting tale. Two girls who've been friends since birth grow up like sisters. But they couldn't be more different: Giorgia is outgoing, lively and has the physique of a ballerina. Sara, on the other hand, is very quiet, less gracefully-built and, perhaps for this reason, invents a secret world for herself. Their personalities are like mirror images of one another and each chapter presents two separate levels of narration, one about Giorgia and the other about Sara. The two stories unfold in parallel but readers follow only one as the two voices merge in Sara's secret dream of becoming a dancer. Giorgia's grandmother owns a dance school and has pinned her hopes for the end-of-term show, the pinnacle of her prestigious academy's success, on her granddaughter. By chance, Giorgia discovers that Sara has been secretly training as a ballerina, even though she's too heavy for it. Sara is not happy to have been discovered because she feels betrayed, but it ignites something in her that makes her want to dance as best she can. The prestigious academy ends its show to a standing ovation, with a roly-poly prima ballerina who dances like a dragonfly and melts everyone's hearts with her magical presence. This story provides an uplifting example of true friendship and the poetry elicited when a secret dream comes true.

*Tre amici in fuga* [Three friends on the run] by Vanna Cercenà (Lapis) is a tale of adventure in a historical novel. Granada was conquered by the Catholic Monarchs in 1492 and many Jews and Muslims who had previously lived side-by-side in peace were forced to leave the city. A decree was passed forcing them into exile or to convert to Catholicism, so Esther, a Jew, and Amir, a Muslim, set off for Algeria with their families packed into a wagon, unaware of the adventures and difficulties that lay ahead. Their ship is attacked by pirates and their parents are taken as slaves. During the attack, they meet Nino, a boy from Genoa with whom they face many a danger before being finally saved. The three friends from three different cultures, all scarred by religion, are thrilled to eventually find a place in which to be reunited with their families, as they venture deep into a kaleidoscopic land of multiple cultures and traditions of unquestionable beauty. The three children inhabit a world which knows no prejudice and a place in which friendship, solidarity and looking out for each other are of fundamental importance. When they finally reach the sultan's palace and are reunited with their pasts, we see they have grown as characters, changed forever by their many experiences. The conclusion is that friendship is ultimately a universal sentiment.

*Lola e io* [Lola and I] by Chiara Valentina Segré (Camelozampa) tells the story of a girl and her pet dog Lola. When her family moves into the city, Sasha helps her dog find his way around the streets and teaches him not be scared of the noise of the cars. It's all very different but Lola learns quickly. They visit a host of new places and walk through parks together, stopping for ice cream and doing some shopping. They even spend the holidays together, in the mountains in winter and at the beach in summer. One day, Lola loses her sight in an accident and Sasha has to learn to steer her inseparable companion thereafter.

The intimate feel of this story emphasizes the strong, invisible bond that forms, one day at a time, between Sasha, a human, and her dog. The delicacy of the texts and the arrangement of the sequences keep tension levels running high over a number of scenes, the emotions echoed in the exquisite illustrations. This book makes you think about the genuine feelings and responsibilities humans have towards animals.

*Inclusiveness* is another popular theme. Many writers have produced stories and novels that portray people from various points of view: someone who is or feels different or an object of ridicule, discrimination or persecution. In addressing these issues, many books portray what it's like to feel different while others sometimes tell the tale from the bully's perspective, offering an insight into what it is that makes him or her act so cruelly.

*Tredici casi per un'agente speciale* [Thirteen cases for a special agent] by Ornella Della Libera (Rizzoli) tells thirteen stories of thirteen victims of violence or social exclusion. Blondie is a special agent working in an imaginary city which the writer identifies as Naples. The setting is more or less urban science-fiction: in an undefined period of history in a land marred by chaos, a security team wrestles with numerous criminal acts. The story itself explores the lives of society's most vulnerable people: women, children, the homeless, and victims of abuse and social prejudice. Each case reflects a microcosm of society: broken families, child criminals, and abused children. Blondie, the special agent in the title, serves as a super-conscience: she never passes judgement, just offers profound and often poetic reflections on the fate of the people and the circumstances that pushed them to challenge the social order. Like the best crime dramas, Ornella della Libera's stories paint a dark and crepuscular picture of the human condition.

*Noi* [Us] by Elisa Mazzoli (Bacchilega) is a truly beautiful picture book. It reveals the natural ability some children have to connect with classmates who are different, despite the cruelty groups tend to inflict on outsiders. The crisp images add extra depth to texts which are so delicate they glide by in a poetic flourish. There's a new boy at school: one of his eyes is bigger than the other so everyone calls him Big Eye. He spends most of his time bent over, digging in the ground. One day Filippo is on his own at school, Big Eye's there too, although his name is actually Filippo. The coincidence in having the same name bridges a gap between the two boys and also between their two worlds. Filippo discovers the secret world of the boy everyone laughs at: his collection of tiny stones, feathers and snails is both a secret treasure and also a metaphor for the hidden imaginary world of every child. Readers are invited into the many realms of possibility within this symbolic universe, which is further enriched by the exquisite, delicate illustrations.

*Florian del cassonetto* [Florian from the skip] by Ornella Della Libera (Rizzoli) is set in the gypsy world. Narrated from a realistic setting, the story proves how important it is to read and that books can change people's lives. A gypsy found Florian in rubbish skip when he just a baby. He was accepted into their misfit community but Florian always knew he didn't really belong to their world. One day he goes into a school with a bunch of gypsy boys to steal something, as a sort of rite of initiation. The gang steals, amongst other things, some books which end up having a profound effect of some members of the community. They start to think twice about their nomadic way of life, about how they could have a better life and how their fathers and uncles mistreat the women and children in the community. This signals a turning point and we see the children's lives eventually begin to change after much heartbreak and tragedy.

*Non chiamatela Crudelia Demon* [Don't call her Crudelia Demon] by Anna Lavatelli (Piemme) is an arresting read that whisks you unexpectedly into the past. Katia and her friends are at a difficult age, that stage when they're neither one nor the other and just for a laugh, like acting hard and heartless. The teenage group clashes with Olga Mautino, an elderly lady who scolds them for their lack of respect. The teenagers respond with small acts of aggression against Olga until one day they take it too far. Katia is convicted and sentenced to do community service, which involves spending time with the old lady she victimised. Meeting after meeting, she gradually learns about Olga Mautino's painful past. The gap between what we know about a person and the things we don't creates a space in which we can learn more about humanity and about the other. Olga Mautino talks about her fragmented memories: of her parents, persecuted for political reasons in Russia and never seen again; of the journey to a faraway prison camp with her sister where they struggled to survive the cold and hunger; of the act of love that ultimately cost her sister - also called Katia - her life. The reader gradually pieces Olga's past together and watches as a deep friendship blossoms between the old lady and the young girl. The open ending leaves much room for thought about pain, how deeply it can be buried, and the wealth of things all people conserve inside.

In *H.H.* by Carolina D'Angelo (Principi&Principi), Mauro, a Muslim boy, runs away to escape a beating from his angry father. As he races wildly through the maze of hallways in a giant building, Mauro catches snippets of multiple conversations in unknown languages and comes across many different ways of life. His constant climbing and descending stairs, going up and down in the lift and out onto the street, map out a journey that becomes a metaphor for society in general. People from all walks of life - women, children, young and old - from different religions and occupations - are tiles in a grand cultural mosaic assembled under the same roof. Language barriers are probably the biggest and most explicit concern to emerge in this story: the many different words that Mauro hears represent the Tower of Babel in which he finds himself. The building featured actually exists, as the book explains at the end. The theme is an extremely interesting one and, working in tandem with the illustrations, it conveys the anxiety of Mauro's flight and his astonishment as he explores a building which brings him into contact with the personal spheres of other people's lives, as well as introducing him to a large and diverse world.

*Il segreto di Tom Ossobuco* [The secret of Tom Ossobuco] by Fulvia Degl'Innocenti (Il Gioco di leggere) is an illustrated book in which the idea of the other is never far away. A merchant and his wife move to a country town where they open a butcher's shop. To begin with, the neighbours enthuse about the quality of the meat and the courteousness of the owners. Then, very gradually, they start to suspect that, at night, something very strange is afoot. Packed with humour, this story makes young readers think about prejudice and gossip. The simple narrative structure draws attention to the dialogues and idle tittle-tattle as well as showing how simple speculation can incite fear with completely no foundation.

*History* is a popular theme in the literary landscape we are traversing. War, women's rights and love are often knitted together within strong historical contexts.

*Le valigie di Auschwitz* [The suitcases of Auschwitz] by Daniela Palumbo (Piemme) takes a poetic look at the Holocaust. Suitcases bearing the names and marks of their owners, abandoned in a concentration camp, are the common thread in various stories in this review. Each story ends with the characters packing cases for a journey they will never return from. The quiet, calm prose lays bare the roots of the irrationality, the betrayal, the lack of compassion and empathy, and also the courage of those who overcame their own fears to save lives. The stories focus on the plight of young children travelling with their parents, bewildered by how their worlds have been turned upside down and forced to accept gradual isolation, rejection by their friends, public humiliation and brutality. Memory, as stated in the preface, is a place that can be visited. It is also a journey, starting from each abandoned suitcase and winding its way through one of the most horrific periods in modern history. The literary quality of the writing makes it a memorable journey.

*L'ultimo dei briganti* [The last of the brigands] by Ermanno Deti (Sonda) is set in Maremma, a wild part of Tuscany used as a hiding place by brigands in the late 19th century, some of whom became famous, like the protagonist of this novel. Maremma is a marshy grassland populated by cattle farmers, making it a unique and rather unusual setting. Through the eyes of young Vanni, we learn about an outlaw who turns out to be his father. Wanted by the police, the man is in hiding in the woods and having to deal with such an unusual father figure forces young Vanni to start growing up. The story is therefore one of his coming-of-age, split into short chapters depicting the historical context of a poor and illiterate Italy in the late 19th century. It is also a love story overshadowed by doubt as the death of the protagonist's mother and the murder of Umberto I intertwine in a tapestry that is half-real, half-invention. The result is a cross between an adventure story and a historical novel, with a nod to the spaghetti western tradition. A historical note is provided at the end to explain who the brigands were, namely a mixture of common bandits, popular heroes and mercenaries hired by rich landowners.

*Tre primavere al castello* [Three springs at the castle] by Chiara Lossani (Rizzoli) is a novel with a strong female voice. The story takes place in a castle during the Renaissance and a description of the daily life of a young teenager from a noble family paves the way for an exploration of the female experience, of love and independence. Isabella helps her sister to flee with the man she loves, without their father's consent. In her sister's absence, Isabella falls heir to the title of Countess and is betrothed to a man she has never met. In the meantime, her friendship with Floretta grows stronger, despite the difference in their social backgrounds. Both friends eventually find love, managing to overcome much adversity and prejudice along the way. The historical reconstruction of daily life in this book makes it a fascinating portrait of an era. The story draws on real events of 1557, which gave the author the opportunity to explore the emotions and thoughts of female characters who rebelled against authority.

*Chiedimi chi sono* (Ask me who I am), co-written by Anna Lavatelli and Anna Vivarelli (San Paolo), is set in Italy, before unification, in the mid 18th century. Filbert, the son of the count and countess Saporiti, must travel from Vigevano to faraway Palermo to marry his betrothed Eleonora, daughter of a Sicilian baron. He is accompanied by Dionigi, a peer and faithful servant of the young count, and numerous other characters. Adventures, intrigues, abductions and surprise discoveries unfold in quick succession. The mutating scenery, from north to south Italy, creates an extraordinary mosaic of everyday life in the late 1700s. Music, art, food, architecture, and different cultures are milestones along a journey that is also the backdrop to two great love stories. The experiences of the travellers en route interweave easily with events in Palermo until the two narrative strands knit into one. The female point of view of the two authors is extremely important and plays out in the creation of the two female protagonists: Eleonora and Rosaura.

*All'ombra della Pagoda d'Oro* [In the shadow of the Golden Pagoda] by Chiara Lossani (Rizzoli) tells a tale set in modern Burma, during the military dictatorship. The house arrest of one of the protagonists, San Suu Kyi, the persecution of the leaders of the National League for Democracy and the protests led by Buddhist monks provide the historical context for the story. A group of children from villages destroyed by the army roam the city begging. Helped by a young Buddhist nun, they manage to gain entry to the Golden Pagoda, home to some of the country's most sacred relics. This triggers a chain of events which reveal to the oppressed people the true nature of the dictatorship, causing the rulers serious problems. As we follow the street children, we learn about the

streets of Rangoon, its bustling markets, a deserted garden and the house where San Suu Kyi fought for her country's freedom while under house arrest.

Most importantly, we sense the charm of a country pillaged by the greed of its military, cast into poverty and isolated yet still permeated by a deeply Buddhist sense of pacifism.

*Eligio S. I giorni della ruota* [The days of the wheel] by Guido Sgardoli (Giunti) is set in the Pietà di Venezia hospital known for its discretion and compassion in the acceptance of foundling children. Using interweaving narratives and relying frequently on oral tradition, the author unwinds the various strands of the life of Eligio, a young boy with a deformed leg, and of other people whose lives interlace with Eligio's for various reasons. Set against this historical backdrop, the novel depicts a society in transition from the 19th to 20th century, approaching it from a realist perspective that takes love and its many facets as its theme. Rosapineta, by now an old woman, casts her mind back to when a baby boy was left in the orphanage's founding wheel with a half medallion around his neck: that moment marked the start of Eligio's exciting story with plenty of dramatic plot twists as it unfolds through the labyrinthine streets of little-known Venice.

*La casa delle rondini* [The house of swallows] by Angela Ragusa (Piemme) is a book about not forgetting and about love that lasts for ever. Ilaria lives with her dad in an ordinary house and everything seems to be going well until a letter arrives one day and changes everything: her dad has inherited a palace and noble title, and has no choice but to reveal a secret that he'd kept hidden until then. The move to the new house sees them travel back in time when a hidden diary turns up and transports them to the war in 1940 when Nella, her father's sister, fell in love with a fisherman. Various elements of this affair - their differences in social class, the tragedy of the war and an intransigent father - are buried in the sands of time until the forbidden love between the nobleman's daughter and the fisherman unexpectedly resurfaces in the present, where new revelations await the protagonist.

In *Estrella* by Ermanno Detti (Nuove Edizioni Romane) an Italy torn by Nazi occupation during the second world war is the backdrop for a compelling adventure in which trust and betrayal intertwine. It all starts the night Van finds Estrella and takes her to his aunt and uncle's house: Estrella's wild beauty ignites the passion of young Van and casts doubt over her real identity. Chance encounters, cruelty and a long journey change the course of events for ever and propel the narration forward at a dizzying speed. Van leaves behind a languid adolescence to experience new feelings. In the end, he receives important revelations in a letter.

*Ho attraversato il mare a piedi* [I crossed the sea on foot] by Loredana Frescura and Marco Tomatis (Mondadori) is the **fictionalized biography of Anita Garibaldi**, companion - in life and in battle - of the great Italian hero. A collaborative work, this novel mixes a more personal, interior voice, namely the voice of emotion, with another stronger voice representing the power of decision and courage. Anita is a controversial and recalcitrant character; forced to marry a man she didn't love at fourteen, her life changes radically when she meets Garibaldi. The description of the two heroic characters does not draw on legend, but simply their shared dream of an independent Italy. Two worlds, America and Europe, different geographies and an immense ocean between them, provide the setting for this story which returns the focus of attention to the human side of Anita's character.

*La lunga notte* [The long night] by Sofia Gallo (Lapis) revisits events leading up to the military coup in Chile on 11 September 1973. Pedro lives in Santiago, his father is a journalist and his mother a doctor in a hospital. At age eleven, Pedro understands the changes that are looming, especially the struggle between the working classes, supportive of President Allende, and the ruling classes, supported by the military and fearful of a left-wing government. A few days before the famous "long night", Pedro's mother visits a working-class area to bring medical assistance to a poor family; she takes her son with her who becomes smitten with the young Flor. Political and military events escalate and Pedro's family flees the country. Meanwhile repression also reaches the suburbs and people's homes are set on fire. Pedro and Flor's paths cross once again in a dramatic succession of events described so vividly the reader feels part of them.

*Sotto il cielo di Buenos Aires* [Under the Buenos Aires sky] by Daniela Palumbo (Mondadori) is a novel with a painful story to tell. It describes an Italian family's emigration to Buenos Aires during the military dictatorship. Split into three historical periods, the cleverly constructed narrative depicts three extreme situations: lives ripped apart by emigration, political persecution and the drama of the *desaparecidos* during the dictatorship. The story starts with Inés and her family boarding a boat for Argentina and continues through the installation of the military junta before ending with the search for the stolen and illegally adopted children of the *desaparecidos*. A rich epistolary tapestry woven into the narrative adds a subjective dimension to the characters, affording readers an insight into their most intimate thoughts.

*L'albero della memoria* [The memory tree] by Anna Sarfatti and Michele Sarfatti (Mondadori) tells the story of Samuel, a Jewish boy living in Italy during the second world war. The persecution of Jewish communities in Europe forced many to flee or live in hiding. Samuel remembers that before he was separated from his parents, he used to hide special things in the crevices of a huge olive tree. All that changed as he now lives with his grandmother in the countryside and has a new name. His parents stayed on in the city but before long were deported. After the war Samuel decides to go back to his old house. He searches the tree trunk and finds not only his hidden treasures, but also a small box that his father apparently left him. The box contains an old pocket watch with a picture of

Samuel on it. The fictionalized part of the story is interspersed with historical documents which help to understand and reconstruct the context of Samuel's story, and an appendix provides more detailed information about Jewish culture.

*Informational literature* is another important category on the map we are drawing. Informational books fuse fiction and non-fiction either to broaden readers' knowledge of a subject or to offer a hybrid proposal with a decidedly literary feel.

*La costituzione raccontata ai bambini* [The constitution explained to children] by Anna Sarfatti (Mondadori) sets out the key articles of the Italian Constitution in rhyming text, taking extra time over themes relating to active citizenship. The illustrations and energy in the verses make for an excellent publication.

*L'astronave dei sogni* [The dream spaceship] by Loredana Frescura (Editoriale Scienza) is an original invitation to do some scientific experiments. The author begins with a traditional kind of tale then follows it with simple experiments mirroring the sequence of the story. The reader can thus see the link between the made-up part and the science, making it an original and enjoyable publication.

*L'orchestrosauro* [Orchestrasaurus] by Barbara Pumhösel (Giunti) comes up with a fantastic explanation for where music came from. One stormy day, Felce the baby dinosaur discovers how the wind makes sounds as it blows through his body. When he tries to reproduce these noises, he ends up inventing a flute and with it the first-ever orchestra. We'll never know if there really were dinosaur musicians but the fossilized footprints of these large and fascinating prehistoric animals can still be seen.

*Camillo Fusillo. Una storia davvero al dente* [Camillo Fusillo. A pasta story to get your teeth into] by Chiara Patarino (Carthusia) hones in on the world of pasta. Chiara Patarino uses personification to bring a number of foodstuffs to life in the kitchen. Camillo, a twisty pasta *fusillo* that has slipped out of the bag; Ughetto the *spaghetti*; and the very pretty Isotta are having to negotiate a kitchen in which lots of objects have come to life. They flee the rolling pin only to end up between the tomato and cheese. There are some simple fact sheets at the end providing a history of pasta as well as recipes and curious facts. Pasta is an emblematic part of Italian culture, and this book encourages readers to laugh a little as they get to know it better.

*Morbido mare, morbido giocare* [Soft sea, soft play] by Elisa Mazzoli and Sivia Bonanni (Bacchilega) is a picture book that can be read in both directions. Read from front to back, it's a collection of simple, musical poems about selected inhabitants of the marine world: octopus, sea horses, seagulls, jellyfish, tortoises. Read from back to front, it's an illustrated guide on how to create the characters depicted in the story, using easily accessible materials. The originality of the book lies in the format, the original combination of play and manual dexterity, and the ability to appeal to a toddler's delight in diving into a sea of colours and sounds.

*I ladri di favole* [The fairy tale thieves] by Rosa Tiziana Bruno (Edigiò) explores the world of oral tradition and the belief that fairy tales are part of our genetic heritage, a way of remembering our past. Some very sinister-looking men arrive in the village of Solealto one day: the locals initially think they are tourists unaware they are actually a gang of fairy-tale thieves. Little by little they steal people's stories and their rich imaginary worlds of make-believe people and plots. A feisty young girl, Angiolina, is the only one to stand up and try to save the village's imagination. A prince whose traditional tale has been stolen takes her to Pantagruel's house where the ogre gives her a magic fork. Angiolina uses the fork to travel the five continents in search of magic objects which she is given by characters from the world's best-loved tales. In the end, she manages to find the stolen fairy tales. This book addresses the dearth of imagination, and faced with adult indifference, only a brave young girl can get it back. At the back of the book a list is provided of the most popular fairy tales from the five continents travelled.

*Ti, Spinetta e il colore del cielo* [Ti, Spinetta and the colour of the sky] by Claudia Ferraroli (Fabbrica dei segni) is an activity book that comes with a ready-to-build model and an adult guide to the meaning of emotions and how they develop in children. Ti and Spinetta are two soft toys looking at the sky out of the window. The passing of time is marked by the changing colours at dusk, during the night, in the rain and during a storm. Each change triggers a change in the toys' mood, from joy at the dazzling sun to fear of the storm then back to the calm of a normal winter day. This is an interesting study of human emotions and how they affect individual development and adults may also find it useful.

Another activity book by Claudia Ferraroli is *Alma e un cane da accudire* [Alma and a dog to look after], published by Il Melograno, presents a simple story in easy language about the friendship between a young girl and a dog which comes unexpectedly into her life. The tale unfolds at a comfortable speed and there are many surprises along the way. The book comes with pieces to build the dog's kennel.

*Growing up* is a theme which casts light on dark, confrontational areas of childhood and adolescence. Many books exploring this theme offer different ways of addressing the harsh realities of a young person's existence. In difficult emotional times, make-believe often proves an effective way of finding answers or of getting over a painful event. Many children often go through parental divorce, sexuality, abortion, death, war and exile alone. Alternatively, growing up can also mean a more profound coming of age, such as the journey towards spirituality and the experience of a more mystical dimension.

Roberto Piumini, a writer who very skilfully combines poetry and realism, has three wonderful stories worthy of mention here. The first, *Lo stralisco* (Einaudi), takes us to the fascinating world of the Far East. An artist is summoned by a powerful man whose son has a rare disease that means he cannot go outside or be exposed to sunlight; the artist paints a series of wonderful pictures on the wall of the little boy's bedroom, drawing from the boy's thoughts about life. The scenes leave their mark on the walls and also in the lives of the artist and the boy. Their friendship deepens as they talk and invent new pictures together. *Motu-Iti*, the second story, takes us to a faraway island in the Pacific Ocean. It is set in a distant past when control of a community could be won by proving oneself in a difficult challenge, such as making the crossing from the island to another smaller one in a canoe and returning with an unbroken seagull egg in one's mouth. Unfortunately, envy leads to a betrayal. As the story unfolds, we learn about the powerful relationship Tou Ema forges with the gulls and the reason why, to this day, some stones on Easter Island still bear carvings of human beings with a bird's head. In the third story, *Mattia e Il nonno* [Matt and his grandfather], Mattia goes on an imaginary journey with his grandfather, who unfortunately is dying. Along the way, many wonderful things happen to Mattia which deepen his sense of wonder and his poetic view of the world. At the same time, his grandfather grows smaller and smaller. The three stories by Roberto Piumini included in this journey through Italian children's writing are undoubtedly a gateway to high literature: they are profound and well-constructed, and Piumini uses exquisite language to explore the human heart with the utmost delicacy, creating an intense reading experience.

*La bottega dei fiori* [the flower shop] by Enza Emma Festa (Mondadori) addresses the issue of divorce from the perspective of a young girl facing the difficult and violent separation of her parents. Ilda scratches the rusty railings on the garden wall and she keeps scratching till her nails fill up with grime. Her teacher at school thinks Ilda is not looking after herself and sends her off to wash her hands. What she doesn't see is that Ilda is scratching the railings because she doesn't know how to deal with the overwhelming oppression she feels when her parents argue at home. Ilda bumps into Micol one day. Micol is an old lady who makes silk flowers in a shop on the ground floor of Ilda's building. For both of them it's the start of a friendship in which the delicate art of making flowers provides metaphors for the events in Ilda's home life. The bond between an old lady and a child, the healing power of friendship, the parallels drawn between two very different lives and the transition from innocence to maturity are part of the study of emotional development in this book.

*Io voglio* [I wish] by Emanuela Da Ros (Feltrinelli) portrays the anxieties of five children who write letters to a magic tree, describing their deepest desires and asking the tree to make them come true. The tree, used by the children to hide their messages in its trunk in the hope that certain things in their lives will change, is the symbol around which the story is narrated, but from the perspectives of each of the protagonists. Simone feels invisible at home, Serena wishes she had a "normal" family, Eugenio is afraid of speaking to a girl he likes, Gioia is upset that her mum and grandmother have fallen out, and Tatiana would like her birthday to be amazing. The fates of each of the children are weaved together, their paths ultimately crossing when they reveal their innermost anxieties. An alcoholic mum, an indifferent dad, money troubles, and the fear of revealing our true feelings are just some of the situations the characters wrestle with in the unfolding narrative which sees them mature towards the conclusion. The interesting technique used and the way each story unfolds present a juxtaposition from the inside, like a box opening to reveal the secrets it contains.

In the apocalyptic novel category, Fulvia Degli Innocenti tells the story of Sara, a girl fighting for her life on an island in *Sopravvissuta* [Survivor], published by San Paolo. Events of the past are revealed through a series of letters and we learn that a virus grew into a pandemic. Sara and her family fought to isolate themselves from it but only Sara survived. The letters and layered narrative describe her previous life, building tension gradually as the story unfolds. Despite the difficulty of her situation, Sara, just turned seventeen, never loses hope even though she's been alone on the island for two years. Countless messages in bottles and an ability to reflect and connect with nature create a very special atmosphere in this book, part of a tradition that started with Robinson Crusoe.

*Perché mi fate questo?* [Why are you doing this to me?] by Chiara Taverna (Paoline) describes the ordeal of a teenager whose world falls apart when her parents divorce. Each chapter - six in total, some long, some short - denotes a different stage in her experience, - starting when Ilaria, the protagonist, feels happy with her life, to subsequent events that reveal bit-by-bit how her family is gradually falling apart and how she is pestered by a stranger who comes into possession of her diary. The story is told through different kinds of text - emails, diary entries and text messages - which show Ilaria's relationship with her parents and her closest friends as well as revealing her innermost thoughts. Inside she's torn between irrepressible anger and a sense of defeat while also wanting to get revenge on a mum and dad she feels are guilty of ruining her perfect life. The book describes each of these changes in Ilaria's life and follows her through each decision until she ultimately recognizes, calmly, that her family will never get back together. This realization could be the start of a new, more mature relationship.

*Se* [What if] by Emanuela da Ros (EL) is a powerful teen novel that explores the anxiety of having to make a life-changing decision. Virginia is an ordinary girl who's about to turn eighteen. Various events make her think about things that could alter the direction of her life. A newly discovered sexual awareness and the passion she experiences with Paolo, her PE teacher, have repercussions, and she has to decide whether to abort an unwanted pregnancy. Having to accept the serious consequences of frivolous actions is one of the most common traumas experienced in adolescence. Virginia's world implodes when she discovers Paolo was just playing with her



and his games have put her in a situation that she can't get out of easily. Virginia has to face both his betrayal and the disappointment alone while wrestling with the idea of aborting the baby or becoming a mum before she's ready. In short chapters and in effortless prose, we learn about the day-to-day life of a gloomy teenager in her own voice, and a dramatic ordeal that almost destroys her. The final chapter is narrated by a grown-up Virginia, a device that makes the whole story just a memory cushioned by the nostalgia of time. On finishing the book, readers are free to reflect on their own problems and what they personally could do to change them.

*Oscar sulla via del lupo* [Oscar goes after the wolf] by Laura Novello (Edt) recounts a revelatory journey. At first glance, the story is about Oscar, a little boy who ventures deep into the woods to hunt the wolf that killed his father. But on a second, much closer reading, we realize there are several hidden analogies revealing how Oscar matures spiritually. After searching hard, he realizes there is no point in seeking revenge. He meets a strange young girl in the woods and discovers she's looking for a giant among the tall trees in the heart of the forest. Together they embark on a quest that sees them connect magically with the woods and everything in them. Stella, a little girl-star with amazing powers, finds the giant she's looking for and Oscar finds himself face-to-face with the wolf. Freeing himself of the irrational hatred he was carrying lifts a weight from his shoulders at the same time as his extraordinary friend leaves him. The atmosphere in this story, evoked by the solitary places, the uncontrollable elements of nature, the pitch black of the night and the silence, is unsettling. Oscar's journey changes the way he feels. It makes him realize it's wrong to condemn instinct when it is merely an ancient impulse that sustains a large part of life on the planet.

For younger readers, *La cosa più importante* [The most important thing] by Laura Novello (Mammeonline) presents a philosophical study on what is truly important in life, in a picture book format. Francesco is worried about how to answer a question the teacher has set for homework: "If a hurricane were to destroy everything on the planet, where would we start rebuilding our world? What is the most important thing?" To answer the question, Francesco starts his research in the village, asking adults what the most important thing is for them. Bit-by-bit, he tries to put the pieces of the conundrum together until he comes up with the wisest answer. This book encourages children to go on an amazing exploration of what is essential in life, taking them through a series of conversations which build up to a surprising ending.

*Fantasy and magical realism* are essential characteristics in children's literature. The anthropomorphism of objects, the creation of imaginary characters, and the free use of the imagination or placing of imaginary things in a real world are among the many magical things to be found in numerous books.

*Chi trova un pirata trova un tesoro* [Find a pirate and you've found a treasure] by Guido Quarzo (Piemme) offers a critique of consumer society. Captain Falco and his band of pirates survive by stealing from people travelling on the city's buses, which they raid from their own pirate bus driven by the invincible Nico Quintamarca. In order to catch the pirates, the police chief comes up with a plan that the swashbucklers manage to elude, simply resuming their marauding around the city's streets. The farcical and funny situations depicted paint an interesting parody of modern society, consumerism, crazy situations and team work. Imaginary characters like the band of pirates rebel against a world in which only those who conform seem to be rewarded. It is a light-hearted book that pokes fun at accepted wisdom, while keeping its feet very firmly on the ground.

Another book by Guido Quarzo, *L'ultimo lupo mannaro in città* [The last werewolf in town] published by Salani, builds a story that could be a metaphor for life. A werewolf, grown old and tired, moves through the dark streets of the city. A young girl suddenly appears before him and takes him to task for having forgotten who he's supposed to be. A story within a story, the various echoes of fairy tales and allegorical places enrich a tale that looks very deeply into the meaning of life. The wolf, in his declining years, starts to look back on his younger self, embarking on a journey that brings to mind many memories which prove to be fallacious, as he searches for his identity. On the point of giving up, the old werewolf bumps into some old friends. He stops to talk to them then ends up in the hall of mirrors at the amusement park where he meets the enigmatic girl in the red dress again. Here he finally finds the answer he was looking for. This is a profound story that explores an imaginary place in which the author borrows characters from the literary world to ask a number of existential questions.

In *L'orco che non mangiava i bambini* [The ogre who wouldn't eat children] by Roberto Barbero (Einaudi Ragazzi), a character normally found in stories crashes into the real world. This overlapping of the two worlds enables the author to introduce irony, the ultimate literary device for effective social commentary, the purpose of which, in this case, is to explore human behaviour. Some of the ogres in the tribe still remember the sweet taste of human children. On hearing this and many other stories, Tontolo decides to leave the thick forest. He meets a group of teenagers in town and they introduce him to civilisation. A parody unfolds showing how a wild creature learns the worst habits of the civilized world, giving the author the opportunity to criticize the addiction to television, the use of money, exploitation and numerous other customs which darken the lives of human beings in modern society. The juxtaposition between a child's world and the realm of fairy tales underlines the importance of several important childhood experiences like friendship, freedom and the natural inclination to explore the world around them.

*Il mistero delle fiabe divorate* [The mystery of the stolen fairy tales] by Carolina D'Angelo (Kite) is a picture book that takes a fun look at the world of fairy tales. Someone is stealing prized objects from classic tales: Snow White's apple, Jack's magic beans, Cinderella's pumpkin, and the cakes Little Red Riding Hood was supposed to take to her grandmother. Giovanna discovers who the thief is and cooks up a clever way of teaching him a lesson. Rich in intertextual references, this book plays with fairy tales and food

by drawing ironic parallels between feeding our imaginations and feeding ourselves. The protagonist has to come up with a clever solution that can outwit the magical forces at play and find large enough quantities of food to feed the rapacious mystery appetite.

In Chiara Valentina Segré's *Gedeone* (Il Gioco di leggere), an insignificant-looking pigeon living in a city cathedral reveals the enormous indifference in and lack of communication between human beings. Despite being considered a nuisance and a scourge, Gedeone feels extremely fine-feathered and handsome. From his vantage point as a worthless creature, he has his own way of looking at other people who go unnoticed just like himself: a boy on his way to school, an old lady selling nativity figures, a sax player out in the cold. This book is beautifully illustrated and manages to introduce a somewhat poetic note to reality. Most notably, it conveys how Gedeone has a tremendous ability to dream of a better world despite being grey and insignificant. When he's hit by a car and dies, Gedeone is remembered by all those who knew him as being much bigger than he was. Because Gedeone represents all the anonymous people in the world who have poetry in their souls.

Imaginary things can sometimes barge quite surprisingly into the real world. Like *L'albero delle mille dolcezze* [The tree of a thousand sweets] by Angela Ragusa (Giunti). On a rainy day in the city, a tree suddenly starts to grow. Before long it grows out of all proportion, causing havoc in people's lives. Desperate attempts are made to remove it but the inhabitants can't seem to rid themselves of the tree. Only the children find something to celebrate in this unexpected turn of events. This story creates a magical dimension that interrupts the suffocating monotony of daily life. While the grown-ups struggle to cut the tree down, the children climb its branches and revel in its incredible fruits. The tree is chopped down in the end and just when things seem to have gone back to normal, a strange seed that the children managed to save begins to sprout. This story dips into the power of children's imaginations and the ability they still have to see magic everywhere, while also letting them use their imaginations as a powerful way to change the rigid world that grown-ups inhabit.

*La principessa che salvava principi* [The princess who saved princes] by Claudia Souza (Callis) takes the standard fairy tale format and turns it on its head. In this female-oriented take, a princess prepares to save a prince who has been locked up in a trunk by a wicked witch. Drawing on women's roles in real life and fiction, this story reinstates the female character as the heroine in a direct dialogue with the reader while knitting fairy-tale elements through the narrative.

*Maestri pazzi* by Roberto Barbero (Signum) relies on the absurd as a way of criticizing teaching methods in schools. Stanislawo di Pancrazi is the new teacher of the worst class ever. Thinking they'll be able to play one of their usual tricks on this new and elderly-looking teacher, the pupils are left feeling baffled by his sudden loss of memory and momentary madness. Stanislawo believes himself a knight-errant, like the famous Don Quixote of La Mancha, and starts peppering his lessons with popular legends of giants, spells and wizards, introducing the children to a rather unusual way of learning. Reality and madness, fear and confidence, logic and creativity are just some of the extremes that this amusing story of a new kind of school bounces between.

In *La pianta carnivora di Leo* [Leo's man-eating plant] by Claudia Souza (Callis), an imaginary creation comes crashing into the real world. Leo's dad brings him back a man-eating plant from Australia and Leo makes it his favourite mascot. But the plant eats everything and objects start to go missing from the house, like Leo's maths' jotter, the nail clippers and the keys. Playing with the power of imagination, the story recreates the fantasy world Leo invents to explain away the lost objects. The subtle complicity of his parents allows him to keep on playing the game and inventing strange disappearances. Reality, fantasy and scientific discourse are weaved together in perfect proportion and with a vein of humour.

*La voce della neve* by Barbara Puhösel (Rizzoli) recounts the world of Filomena, a little girl who adores building snowmen. Through the young girl's eyes, a picture is painted of the daily life of an Austrian family, the winter landscape and multiculturalism as a characteristic of contemporary European societies. Filomena has a brother called Florian who loves blackberries. In this peculiar but peaceful context, the snow figures become the catalyst for fantasies drawing on literary references. One day, Filomena decides to empty out the freezer to make a home for her snow woman. Her decision discombobulates their home life, unmasking not only the difference between the child and the adult world but also between logic and imagination. It is a simple story that talks about emotions which can often be cold, like winter, which enfolds everything. In this case, though, reality sets in motion a set of circumstances which interrupt the monotony, like a splash of colour on a blank canvas.

*La tv in testa* [Television head] by Chiara Taverna (Paoline) uses the absurd to criticize how much time children and teenagers spend in front of the television. Stefano has no control over his television addiction, has little interest in books and even less in spending time with other people. Little by little, a change starts to take place in him, until one day he wakes up with a television for a head. This unfortunate event makes life difficult for his family who try, unsuccessfully, to hide Stefano's absurd new appearance. It also forces Stefano to resume his relationship with the outside world and to rediscover a long-forgotten connection with his imagination. The comedic tone and the absurd situations invented to hide Stefano's weird head provide an opportunity to see how much fun conversation and books can be. Television addiction is a fairly common theme, but the paradoxical twist it takes in this story, combined with the many laugh-out-loud inventions, make it ideal for the young reader.

*Il mostro dei budini* [The pudding monster] by Mara Dompé (Biancoenero) is a delightful story for very young children. It's June and Annalisa is going to stay at her grandparents for the holidays. Her worst nightmare is of a monster that turns children into puddings:

kids with freckles turn into strawberry puddings, those with dark hair into chocolate puddings, and those with blond hair into wobbly vanilla puddings. Annalisa's imaginary world helps her to relate to her grandmother's one of rolling pins and baking pans. During her stay, she meets Pepsi (Peppe), a boy who lives with his grandfather. They hatch a plan together to make their grandparents fall in love, but things don't go quite as expected. This simple story is told in short chapters, making it an effortless, enjoyable read. It uses a combination of circumstances that illustrate the humour of a little girl's dreams and the wildness of her imagination to explore the world of children in general, how children relate to adults and how they see the world around them.

In the same fantastical vein, *Mamma Natale* [Mother Christmas] by Luisa Staffieri (Mammeonline) presents a female take on Christmas traditions and the delivering of gifts on a sled driven by Father Christmas. In this version, Father Christmas' wife takes over the round-the-world trip to bring children far and wide their long-awaited gifts. Tradition and modernity mix in this illustrated tale in which the sacks of presents are not loaded onto a conventional reindeer-drawn sled but carried by a flying motorbike driven by a female Santa. The book is a fresh interpretation of a traditional tale, using crisp and simple prose for younger readers.

In *Tino il cioccolatino sulla cima del Vesuvio* [Tino the chocolate up Mount Vesuvius] Chiara Patarino uses a key device in children's literature, that of personification and bringing inanimate objects to life. Her story is part of a series of adventures starring an intrepid chocolate-flavoured sweet who travels the world with a group of friends in search of new and exciting adventures. Mini pastries, chocolates with flavoured centres and other confectionery characters, like Tino's girlfriend Nugatella, travel through cities, seas and forests in a series of escapades that fill the chocolate universe with thrills and laughter.

*Thrillers, science fiction and fantasy* are highly popular genres in children's literature, and they are equally well represented in this review.

*Odore di guai* [The smell of trouble] by Marco Tomatis (Fanucci) fits into the science fiction category. Nicoletta goes through the Great Portal to enter Catorcia, the remote planet where the many things discarded by humans end up. In this weird and wonderful dimension, Nicoletta finds herself fighting to save ViolaLuce, the all-powerful light that keeps the planet alive. While the driving force in the book are the adventures in which good is pitched against the evil Ravanosi and their allies, there is also an underlying criticism of the violence that leads to war and destruction. It is a complex novel with a medley of characters made all the more curious by their connection with mirrors and the philosophical explanations of the nature of objects and the invisible energy that makes existence possible.

*Gli invisibili. La strega di Dark Falls* [The invisibles. The witch of Dark Falls] by Giovanni Del Ponte (De Agostini) is part of a six-part series featuring three teenage protagonists - Crystal, Douglas and Peter - with supernatural powers battling against evil. Their mission in this story is to find Crystal who has mysteriously disappeared as a result of an evil spell cast by a witch who lived three hundred years ago and has come back to life. The saga embeds magic in a realistic context, depicts how the protagonists come of age as the series develops and can be tagged as an epic fantasy. Each novel has its own individual plot combining mystery and adventure.

*The frozen boy* by Guido Sgardoli (San Paolo) contemplates how someone from the past struggles to retrace his past. Doctor Robert Warren works on a research base in Greenland. The story is set in 1946 and the scientist, guilty of having helped to build the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, has recently lost his son. One night he tries to take his life in the barren, glacial tundra, but stumbles across a body frozen inside a block of ice. Three strong narrative threads, coloured white, blue and green, take us from Greenland to Ireland and slowly reconstruct a very painful past. The body in the ice is that of a boy who for unknown reasons has been there for one hundred years. In trying to atone for the guilt he feels as a father, Warren grows very close to the boy who speaks a strange language and has a disease that causes him to age very quickly. The main fabric of the novel is the question it asks about existence, given that it ends with the giving-up of a life. It is a highly-charged but subtle construction of the relationship between two very different people from very different times.

*La baia delle ombre* [The bay of shadows] by Enza Emira Festa (Mondadori) dips into the horror fantasy genre. Virginia has to spend the summer with her mum on an island. Having just split from her boyfriend and hating the place they're staying, she expects it to be pretty boring. But then she meets Salvatore and finds herself drawn into a sinister adventure with him which starts on the day she sees an ancient portrait of a woman who looks just like her. The world of the dead, a mysterious legend and a love affair are the key interwoven elements in this compelling teen novel.

*Acqua Tagliente* [Cutting Water] by Giovanni Del Ponte (De Agostini) is a young adult novel that tells a powerful tale involving the ancestral wisdom of the ancient peoples of Arizona, a group of young eco-cybernauts and a giant water park. Split into three broad sections - Koyaanisqatsi, Atlachinolli and Hanblecheyapi - it recounts the adventures of the young WebTV BoyZ and the strange events that lead them into a dark dimension and along spiritual pathways through the very centre of the earth. Water, a unifying element, gives new cause for concern about the plundering human spirit and the consequences of breaking the invisible ties holding the planet in its very delicate balance.

Traces of *contemporary life and society* in its many shapes and forms have made their way into the work of several ICWA authors, from new family structures to the mafia that destroys families and towns, as well as other serious issues like the alienation of city life.

Portraying this kind of social change in children's literature is proof that children are not cut off from the context they inhabit, and very often stories can help them to understand and deal with the world, contemplate diversity and imagine positive solutions in even the harshest of situations.

*La musica del mare* [The music of the sea] by Annamaria Piccione (Einaudi Ragazzi) is a tale about the Sicilian mafia, known in Italy as *Cosa Nostra*. Rosario is eleven years old and his father, in prison, has informed on members of the "family". His friends, whose parents are also in prison, decide to get revenge. Rosario's life becomes difficult to bear and at school they start calling him a traitor. Then he meets Anna who's spending the summer holidays in the village with her grandmother. Rosario's family struggle on without his father, who has become a protected witness, his mother works night and day and his brother, about to turn eighteen, is sucked into the criminal underworld. As a counterpart to this situation, Rosario gradually discovers what true friendship is and finds joy in music which offers the chance of a better future. Offering a carefully-crafted depiction of two contrasting realities, combined with insights into the psychology of the characters and a clever use of plot twists, this novel handles a controversial issue with the utmost elegance.

*E sarà bello morire insieme. Una storia d'amore e di mafia* [To die together would be beautiful. A story of love and mafia] by Manuela Salvi (Mondadori) tells the story of the impossible relationship between Bianca, the daughter of a judge, and Manuel, the son of a murdered mafia boss. Despite their differences, the two teenagers are swept away by a relationship they are powerless to stop. Bianca lives with her dad in the south of Italy while her mum still lives in the north. The death of her brother, who Bianca writes letters to, has left her family in shreds. The various threads of the story are very cleverly weaved together, alternating literary passages with a shrewd use of suspense to build a story in which the characters must take control of their own lives.

*I lupi arrivano con il freddo* [Wolves come out in the cold] by Sofia Gab (Giralangolo) is a tale about a young boy, Fuad, captured and forced to fight as a guerilla in Turkish Kurdistan. His family was dishonoured when his father was imprisoned for murder and his older brother escaped to the mountains. During his training, Faud crosses Turkey and forms a strong bond with two boys. The arid valleys between the mountains, men as cruel as wolves and a gruelling journey in treacherous conditions make for a compelling depiction of the Kurdish people and the raw beauty of their landscape.

Two picture books by Isabella Paglia introduce very young readers to the roles of parents and the different types of family that now exist. *Di mamma ce n'è una sola* [You can only have one mum] (Fatatrac) explores the idea of artificial insemination and adoption as alternative forms of motherhood. Two little girls argue over whose mum is best until Mario turns up and explains that it doesn't matter whose tummy you were in or who gave birth to you, what's more important is who loves you and looks after you. In a similar vein, *Che forza papa* (Fatatrac) looks at father figures. A group of children argue about whose dad is the best, and one of them even has two dads because his mum has remarried. Mario re-enters the scene to remark on how he lives alone with his dad who's single. It doesn't matter how many dads you've got, he says, or whether they're married or single; what really counts is that they're in your life and look out for you. Both books have snappy texts and unusual situations in which dads are portrayed as superheroes and also as the person who reads the bedtime story or takes you to the doctor's. Both contain strong messages about how important parents are for young children and how safe they make them feel.

## A POSSIBLE CONCLUSION

(ALTHOUGH THE JOURNEY CONTINUES)

This journey through the enormous part of Italian children's literature that the ICWA represents has revealed the broad range of themes covered, the tendency to combine different genres and to use different storytelling methods. We can see that the literature is alive, in constant evolution and well-placed to capture the various changes at play in society as well as responding to literary sensitivities and trends. The books have been grouped into broader themes or genres although many clearly straddle more than one. The list could also have been opened up to include humour, adventure and school stories. Inevitably there are always going to be gaps or grey areas that readers themselves can fill in or reinterpret to suit their own opinions. The aim of this review is simply to provide an outside perspective on a body of literature that has a solid fabric woven from a long tradition of children's writing. My interest in mapping out the most recent production for young people, starting from the broad range of books presented here, lies in my desire to encourage more young readers to see for themselves how inherently great the writing is. It is for this reason that the reviews focus primarily on helping readers understand the context from which the stories evolved rather than just providing a simple editorial analysis. The intention was not to create an academic work but for the texts to be inviting to all those who want to take a closer look at a significant portion of books written for children and young adults in Italy. In fact, many Italian writers picked up their pens because of their belief that children's books can be drivers of change and can build future generations of more discerning readers.

## AUTHOR BIO

Fanuel graduated in Literature and gained a Magister Scientiarum in Science and Applied Arts. For Banco del Libro in Venezuela, he coordinated the Department of Selection of Books for Children and Young People. His published works include: *Leer y mirar el libro álbum: ¿un género en construcción?* (Norma, Bogotá 2007), *Semillas de México* (Ediciones Tecolote, México 2007), *El amor es un bichito* (Ediciones B, Caracas 2007). As a member of the jury, he has taken part in several children's literature contests, including the Biennial of Illustration Bratislava, the Hans Christian Andersen Award and the Bologna Book Fair Award. He provides editorial consultancy and attends conferences in South America and Europe. He currently heads the children's book division for South America at Gruppo Editoriale Norma.

## Colophon

*Many Italian writers picked up their pens because of their belief that children's books can be drivers of change and can build future generations of more discerning readers.*

## Library

Extracts of texts discussing children's literature (Interlinea Edizioni, Novara)

7. Altan et al. (eds.), texts by G. Einuadi et al., **Rodari, le parole animate**, 223 pages, Euro 12.91
32. L. Cerutti, R. Cicala, **Rodari, le storie tradotte**, presentation by P. Boero, 184 pages, Euro 15.
36. AntoniArca, **Fabulas. Per una didattica della fiaba**, presentation by P. Boero, 208 pages, Euro 15.
43. **F. Lullo, T.V. Viola, Il cavaliere che rompe il calamaio. L'attualità di Gianni Rodari**, 116 pages, Euro 15.
52. Walter Fochesato, **Raccontare la guerra. Libri per bambini e ragazzi**, 248 pages, Euro 20.
60. Pino Boero, **Il cavallo a dondolo e l'infinito. Temi e autori di letteratura per l'infanzia**, 136 pages, Euro 20.
63. Roberto Denti, **Le fiabe sono vere. Note su storie e libri non soltanto per bambini**, featuring passage by G. Rodari, presentation by R. Cicala, 112 pages, Euro 12.
65. Walter Fochesato, **Il gioco della guerra. L'immagine dell'infanzia nelle cartoline del primo conflitto mondiale**, presentation by P. Boero, colour illustrations, to be released, Euro 20.