
The arrival of Harry Potter has given birth to a phenomenon thoroughly befuddling for those among us who remain Muggles (or as the Italian translator would have it, “Babbani”). Two separate book covers, one intended for adults, the other for those much younger, reveal the problematic cross-over effect of books written primarily with young readers in mind. Who is reading these books? Children? Tweens? Teens? Young adults? Adults? Complicating matters in the world of kidlit is also the genre cross-over, and the ineluctable intersection of cultures in our globalized environment. Books for children seemed so much simpler in the old days, did they not?

Lindsay Myers would not agree. In her recent study Making the Italians. Poetics and Politics of Italian Children’s Fantasy, she offers a thorough and fascinating critical overview of literature intended for Italian children. Her chronological point of departure is the period following Italian Unification, which by default includes the two unforgettable classics Pinocchio (1881-3) and Cuore (1886). Her discursive point of departure, given that most critical studies of children’s literature available today focus on works written in English, is the problematic nature of the English term fantasy; the Italian term fantasia does not necessarily correspond either by denotation or connotation.

By way of solution, Myers proposes an innovative and persuasive taxonomy of Italian children’s literature, and discovers felicitously that her categories can also apply across appreciable time periods. For each of the categories, Myers describes three or four outstanding works published in the years corresponding to each category. Her categories include: the Memoir Fantasy: 1870-1896, the ‘Monello’ Fantasy: 1897-1908, the Microcosmic Fantasy: 1908-1915, the Quest Fantasy: 1915-1918, the Surreal Fantasy: 1919-1929, the Superhero Fantasy: 1930-1939, the Community Fantasy: 1945-1950, the Pinocchiesque Fantasy: 1950-1980, and the Compensatory Fantasy: 1980-2010. She describes each group in detail, providing convincing arguments for its inclusion in her paradigm, and contextualizes it within its socio-political environment. She warns us, however, that the categories are not marked by strict thematic or temporal limitations and may often overlap with other categories; several represent umbrella descriptions for further subgenres of the type. Her observations, enriched by a detailed initial chapter describing her methodology, are thoroughly researched and well argued. She demonstrates throughout her study her comprehensive knowledge of Italian children’s publications (books and magazines) over the last century and a half; her familiarity with similar French and (in particular) English children’s literature impresses for its breadth; in reading Myers, we can appreciate fully how Italian children’s literature has been informed not only by other similar literature in Italy, but also by other cultures. Furthermore, she shows how the various political and social pressures that impinge on each time period are clearly reflected in each book, albeit in styles and attitudes readily grasped by younger readers. One particularly well developed example is her analysis of Sua Altezza! Favola candida by
Annie Vivanti (1923). Vivanti claims an authorial presence unique even today because of her multi-cultural, multi-national upbringing, and her treatment of edgy, provocative themes in various genres. Vivanti always assumes her readers are as quick, as multilingual and multicultural as she; for her the tension between fantasy and fantasia was not an aspect she considered. Myers discusses Vivanti’s own formation in the English and German traditions of children’s storytelling (without mentioning that Vivanti’s mother Anna Vivanti too published fairy-tales for children, and also without mentioning Vivanti’s friendship with Massimo Bontempelli, represented in this same grouping of authors, along with Antonio Rubino). Myers “gets” Vivanti, even if Sua Altezza is an anomalous offering by this author whose works are generally intended for adults. In a few brief pages, Myers demonstrates she has understood much of Vivanti’s overall impact as writer and here she succeeds admirably in explaining how Vivanti’s children’s book with its “radically innovative and deeply bizarre fantasies” (121), with its topsy-turvey world inscribed within a painting of a Tuscan landscape, serves to reflect contemporary avant-garde movements. These movements, claims Myers, strived to delineate and cope with the “growing sense of unease and anxiety” (143) insinuating itself into the social milieu of the years between the two world Wars (143). Myers contends that Vivanti’s work, like Bontempelli’s and Rubino’s, also attempts to “assert the artistic freedom of the individual in the face of burgeoning State control” (ibid). Thus, she assigns all three authors to the category of Surreal Fantasy, where we find dream-like worlds acting as a collective unconscious. (119).

Myers’ translations from the Italian are much appreciated, especially when dealing with the whimsical pluri-connotative quality of some of the lexical items; however, the inconsistency of translating some of the character names into English but not others is noticeable. The illustrations provided delightfully exemplify only limited categories and could be expanded. Furthermore, the section on the last category, Compensatory Fantasy, while excellent, might well include mentions of recent phenomena such as fandom books, graphic novels and e-books, especially given Myers’ observation that “[f]ears that modern culture is destroying creativity and imagination in the young have also become major concerns in Italy in recent decades…” (220) In addition, this study would benefit from closer proofreading to eliminate the typographical oversights.

On the other hand, each chapter is enhanced by interesting and informative footnotes offering further insight into the historical contexts of Myers’ taxonomy. The bibliography (divided into Children’s Books in Italian, Children’s Books in Other Languages, and relevant theoretical studies), is rich and up to date.

Myers offers a perceptive and highly readable analysis of the books she chooses as examples for each of her categories and in this, gives the reader much food for thought. Her taxonomy will surely remain a fundamental reference for scholars of children’s literature in general, and of children’s literature in Italian in particular.

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