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**REVITALIZATION
AND
RECONNECTION**

再生と再会

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Revitalization and Reconnection through Japanese children's books

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Abstract

In the Swedish Academy for Children's Book's *Seventeen Reasons for Children's Books* it is written that children's books "can explain reality and help us understand how things are connected" and "can comfort us and show us new possibilities". In fact, children's literature is always connected with real life, reflects the events of the world and it can also be a vehicle for environmental, social, and cultural values carrying an important therapeutic power.

My paper aims to show the relevant role that children's books, particularly picturebooks, can play in the process of reconnection with the world and life. After an overview of the picturebooks and their peculiarities, I focused on *Kuma to yamaneko* (The Bear and the Wildcat, 2008) written by Kazumi Yumoto and illustrated by Komako Sakai, which shows the process of coming back to life after a grievous loss.

Then I will show the evolution towards revitalization and reconnection reflected in Japanese picturebooks published during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, from the key word *matsu* (waiting) recurring in many works till *The Earth passport* (2023), a representative project joined by 24 illustrators with the purpose of reconnection with other places on earth in a world of peace.

Keywords: Picturebooks, Japanese children's literature, COVID-19 pandemic, Yumoto Kazumi, healing literature.

Introduction

In the Swedish Academy for Children's Book's *Seventeen Reasons for Children's Books*¹ it is written that children's books "can explain reality and help us understand how things are connected (9)" and "they can comfort us and show us new possibilities (1)". In fact, children's literature² is always connected with real life and reflects the events of the world. Its power is recognized worldwide, it can be a vehicle for environmental, social, and cultural values and an available resource which contributes to building resilience skills (Campagnaro, 2021: 47).

My paper aims to underline the relevant role that children's books can play in the process of reconnection with the real world and life through the analysis of some Japanese picturebooks³, nowadays a particularly flourishing category in the international book market, but still subject to some prejudices or misunderstandings by the general public.

After an overview of picturebooks and their definition, origins and features, which absolutely does not claim to be exhaustive, and for more detailed information, please, refer to the consulted works such as Kümmerling-Meibauer (2021), Nikolajeva and Scott (2000), Nodelman (1998, 2008), Terrusi (2012), etc., I focused on *Kuma to yamaneko* (*The Bear and the Wildcat*, 2008) written by Kazumi Yumoto (1959) and illustrated by Komako Sakai (1966), a representative work of "healing" in literature, which shows the process of coming back to life after a

grievous loss.

Then, I will show the evolution towards revitalization and reconnection with life and world, which is reflected in Japanese picturebooks published during and after the Covid-19 pandemic: from the key word *matsu* (waiting), recurring in many works, till *Senro wa tsuzuku-Nihon isshū* (The lines continue-travelling all around Japan, 2021) or *The Earth passport* (2023), a representative project joined by several illustrators which shows the purpose of reconnection with other places on earth in a world of peace.

Through the analysis of the reaction to traumatic events by Japanese picturebooks, mostly not yet translated outside of Japan, this study tries to add new elements to the research done so far in this field and opens up new opportunities for further works in the field of picturebooks in Japan.

1. Picturebooks: definition, origins and features

Definition

Picturebook is the commonly utilized word for a publishing product that uses two different communication codes to tell a story: the visual code (picture) and the verbal code (text).

As a part of children's literature, which is still subject to the prejudice of being restricted to an audience of children, picturebooks are often considered only a product intended for young readers,

and in fact in bookshops they are mostly confined to the children's book corner. The second prejudice or misunderstanding they are subject to is that pictures in the book have the purpose of illustrating some passages of the verbal text. Clearly distinguished from illustrated books, "where the words carry the primary narrative while pictures are supportive or decorative" (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2000: 226), picturebooks are the result of text and illustrations and the storytelling is developed by both of them.

According to Fochesato (2000: 23)

It can be stated that a good illustration is not a mere completion of the text, but **an autonomous invention** which, together with the text, helps to provide information and suggestions and - at the same time - is not included at all in the written part.(...) In other words there is a **dialectic relationship between the text and the illustration**. This one is capable not only of creating the premises for another story and starting unexpected paths; but manages to capture elements, to describe moments that the text can neither capture nor describe.⁴

Sendack (as cited in Trisciuzzi, 2012) himself underlines the complexity of this product and said: "A picture book is not only what most people think it is - an easy thing to read to very small children, with lot of pictures in it. For me, it is a damned difficult thing to do, very much like a complicated poetic form that requires absolute concentration and control." (95)

Due to the fact that they speak to both adults and children they require direct participation from them who must be able to decode the two systems and the result of their interaction. Thanks to the increasing editorial market they recently became the subjects of several researching fields, but first of all they are an artistic product and, for this reason, we can say they are the first art gallery that a child comes across.

Origins

According to Nodelman (1988, 2: 18) the book commonly cited as the forerunner of western modern picturebooks is Comenius (Jan Amos Komenskí)'s *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (The Visible World, circa 1658), a kind of illustrated catalog for children about everyday objects, but it was necessary to reach the last third of XIX century to have something similar to contemporary picturebooks.

Nevertheless illustrator Lele Luzzati (1985: 9) gives this explanation:

I believe that the illustrator is the oldest profession in the world: already in the Stone Age, cavemen scratched stories of hunting and war on the walls; then all the great civilizations had their painters, their sculptors, to tell stories of gods, heroes, legends, epics (...) Then, at a certain point, I

believe particularly because of the invention of the press, the painter stopped telling stories to tell more about himself, while the illustrator dedicated himself mainly to the page to comment on a written text with a drawing.⁵

Looking at Japanese culture the roots of picturebooks can be traced back to medieval *otogizoshi* (fairly-tales) and Nara *ehon* (Nara picturebooks) of Muromachi Period (1333-1573) or *akahon* (Reddish cover book) of Edo Period (1603-1868), in which well-known folktales rewritten for children are included, even if the first examples of illustrated fiction are commonly considered the *Chōjū-jinbutsu-giga emakimono* (Scrolls of Frolicking Animals and Humans)⁶, dating back to the 12th and 13th centuries and belonging to the Kōzan-ji temple in Kyoto, Japan. However, the development of contemporary picturebooks occurred after World War II in conjunction with the renewal of Japanese children's literature due to the encounter with foreign cultures, and thanks to the crucial role of publisher houses like Iwanami Shoten or Fukuinkan Shoten. (Hiromatsu, 2013: 439-462; Yoda, 2012: 2)

Features

Picturebooks are a really multifaceted art, they differ not only in genre, content, use but even vary in format, line, shape or color, which in particular can have an emotional specific connotation or a cultural specific connotation (Nodelman, 2008: 77), all characteristics that contribute to the story told by the visual part of the book. In fact, as explained before, they "communicate information or tell stories through a series of many pictures combined with relatively slight texts or no texts at all. [They] are unlike any other form of verbal or visual art". (Nodelman, 1988: vii)

Generally, the pictures provide "the visual and emotional information about which the texts themselves remain silent on. (...) There is an inherent doubleness in picture books: they offer two different ways of viewing the same events." (Nodelman, 2008: 77)

Looking at picturebooks world Kümmerling-Meibauer (2015: 249) underlines the increasing number of picturebooks realized every year, ranging from works targeted at infants to those targeted at adults, the variety of technique and style used by the artists, and the improvement on relations with other artistic forms and, at the same time the increasing studies related to this field, involving many kinds of capacities to apprehend that can be improved in children.

The range of approaches to picturebooks, developed over the years, is remarkable. Many fields of research have made them area of inquiry, such as cultural geography, cognitive studies, visual literacy, philosophy, semiotics, etc., they can also be useful

tools in building resilience skills in children:

Stories are beneficial because they assist us in bringing attention to the challenges that young children face while providing ways to cope or even overcome them.(...) Making friends, coping, problem solving, having structure and rules, planning and making choices, and using opportunities for helping are a few of the topics of resilience building found in children's literature. (Petty, 2012: 1-2)

As stated by Hamelin (2024: 26):

Children's literature is the space of total freedom, where it is possible to maintain the connection with the most intimate, fantastic and everyday world and where the reader can immediately understand what you want to say.⁷

But as explained by Carrer (1999: 28-30) image offers

more possibilities of readings of one text and of itself. If the interpretation of reality can take place according to different levels and nuances, the interpretation of a text can also take place in different ways: it can surprise and amaze, enchant and excite, describe, trigger questions and reflections.⁸

2. Reconnecting with life in Yumoto Kazumi's work *Kuma to yamaneko (The Bear and the Wildcat, 2008)*

Kuma to yamaneko is a picturebook written by Kazumi Yumoto and illustrated by Komako Sakai, winner of Kodansha Award in 2010 and stated by critics like a "dream collaboration" between the two artists.

The story starts *in medias res*: little bird is dead, and his friend Bear is heartbroken. He makes a small wooden box, puts his friend inside with flower petals and takes it with him every time he goes out. All the animals he meets in the forest look at him confused and tell that the little bird cannot come back, and he has to forget him. They do not understand his grief and he locks himself in his house in mourning, but one day he opens the window: it is a sunny day, the wind brings in the smell of grass and Bear goes out carrying his small box; he feels like he is looking at the sky for the first time.

Then he meets a wildcat who has a strange box too. They show each other the contents of the boxes, and the wildcat understands the bear's suffering at the loss of his beloved friend and offers to play the violin for Bear and his friend.

Bear thinks back to the special time spent with the

little bird, understands their friendship is not over at all and feels ready to bury little bird with wildcat's help. Then wildcat invites Bear to join his travelling life and gives him a tambourine to play. Bear accepts and the two continue the journey together.

This is the first time that Yumoto attempts to write a picturebook but it is not the first time she addresses the theme of death in her books, in fact death and the time spent to recover from a trauma are a recurring theme in her novels for children and for adults too.⁹

In a certain way she can be considered a representative of *iyashi no bungaku* (healing literature)¹⁰, a kind of literary product which offers comfort and generates a calming mood, developed in the 90s after the two traumas Japan had to face: the Kobe earthquake and the Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attacks, that "along with the more widespread effects of economic recession and restructuring— were often said to have provided the emotional context for the emergence of calm as a lucrative and marketable feeling" (Roquet, 2009: 89).

This kind of works not only shows the recovering process of the protagonist of the story, which in itself generates a sense of empathy, but the calm tone and pace at which the story is told, contribute to relax and to comfort the readers as well. (Tisi, 2018: 137-138)

Like in *Popura no aki (The Letters, 1997)* in *Kuma to yamaneko* Yumoto describes the estrangement to which those who suffer the sudden death of a beloved person are subjected, highlighting the importance of re-establishing the relationship with those who have passed away and of treasuring the memories and everything they have left us, so that death is deprived of its sense of dark inevitability, of laceration, of loss. (Tisi, 2018: 135)

The use of animal characters is a gentle way to introduce difficult themes to young people, because it allows the reader to maintain a certain distance from the difficult issues narrated, but at the same time gives the possibilities to develop reaction skills which are also applicable in dealing with real situations. (Moja, 2022:66)

Source of inspiration for this story was probably the experience of a painful loss Yumoto had in her childhood when she rescued a sparrow who became her loved pet but died unexpectedly. A vivid and unforgettable memory that she shared during her speech for the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award Acceptance in 1997. (Yumoto, 1998: 46-47) But in this picturebook rather than about death she was aimed to write about the theme of "time" that flows from the moment something important is lost, until something new starts again, a sense of gratitude towards time (Uda). As Yumoto said, what we lost, and the time which has passed since we lost it work together for the rebirth. In fact, after a description of almost all the stages of the grief after a traumatic loss, Bear reaches a complete rebirth.

It is unclear what impulse made Bear open the

window and go out or the moment his recover started: an inviting warmth caused by the sunny day, the sunny day itself, the fragrant breeze of the wind, the encounter with the wildcat. What is clear is that Bear feels as if he is looking at the sky for the first time, and, for the first time after many days, he feels a sensation other than pain in his heart: curiosity for the wildcat's box. A look that reconnects him with nature and a feeling that reconnects him to another living being. Yumoto said to have received many letters from the readers in search of a clarification of this question and in 2022 she wrote a new story, also illustrated by Komako Sakai, entitled *Hashi no ue* (On the bridge) with the purpose of clarifying that point.¹¹ She added: "When you realize that you are part of the world, it should also be the time when you become aware of the world within you. I believe that building a bridge between you and the world in your heart and feeling a connection will give you the strength to overcome difficulties and unexpected events." (Uda)¹²

As stated before, in a picturebook words and images do not always coincide; they dialogue with each other, sometimes telling different stories or highlighting different points of view. In this case the title immediately reminds us of *Donguri to yamaneko* (*The acorns and wildcat*, 1924), a well-known story by Kenji Miyazawa (1896-1933), where a mysterious, "noble" wildcat appears wearing a yellowish surcoat, but the image created by Sakai and its tone distances us immediately from this similarity.

The illustrator starts "her" story and the characters in the front cover do not correspond to the title. We feel there is something wrong, not only because instead of a bear and a wildcat, we see a little bird on a bear's shoulder, but because the two are looking sadly in opposite directions. A disturbing image immediately clarified just as we turn the page and under the title we see the little bird lying on its back and stiff.

The book's images created by Sakai are not in color, they are characterized by the use of shades of grey which contributes to create a distance from the drama, but it does not imply a weakening of it. On the contrary, they help to underline the gradual rebirth of Bear, in fact when he reminds the happy times spent with his friend, the gray thread in the spool on the left page turns suddenly pink when it is used to tie a new tail to the little bird. This pinkish thread is the symbol of their friendship which is forever, and when we see again the picture with the little bird lying on its back, we can notice it is there thanks to the color. A color not mentioned at all by Yumoto but that Sakai uses for another thread tied to the wildcat's tambourine, may be the symbol of a forever friendship experienced by the wildcat. Sakai's story underlines friendship and adds an intriguing touch to the wildcat. In fact, even if he does not remind us of Miyazawa's wildcat at all, the development of the plot and his images direct us towards an even more famous character, the

protagonist of *Puss in Booth*, the fairy tale which appeared for the first time in *Le piacevoli notti* (from 1550) by Giovanni Francesco Straparola (1480-1557) where a magic cat helps his master to gain wealth and the hand of the princess. Sakai's wildcat wears a kind of boots and so he resembles the cat in his appearance and also in his role as a helper, in this story both material and spiritual.

Arruda (2017: 66) connects the pink thread that recurs in the story with some traditional legends, but I believe the pink reminds us of the spring, the season of the rebirth for nature and consequently for all living beings including Bear.

The images follow one another with different rhythms on two pages, on a single page, on one page divided into two or three. Blank pages also appear which, as Arruda (54) suggests, should not be considered empty pages, but pages of silence, pages in silence while time passes anyway. In the Japanese language even the sound of silence is represented by the onomatopoeic word *shiiin*, and in the images it is represented by the page without drawing, a space for silence and waiting.

According to Yumoto the illustrations contribute perfectly to allow the reader to feel the passage of time by turning each page one by one, the time flows even if it does not seem to do it, like turning the pages of a picturebook, and one day you feel like opening the window. (Uda)

3. Japanese picturebooks during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

All around the world the COVID-19 pandemic has forced people to an unexpected period of isolation, alienation, suffering, etc. Unsurprisingly, the children's books world has tried to face the situation through its different types of genres, including picturebooks. Several kinds of picturebooks, ranging from "useful books" to storytelling picturebooks, have been published with themes related with disease, loss, lockdown, online lessons, hospital, or even the online buying obsession.

Obviously, the trend was not different in Japan, particularly Yukiko Hiromatsu, during her lecture "Welcome to the World of Children's Books in Japan"¹³ identified the *fil rouge* of Japanese picturebooks in one word recurring in the titles: *matsu* (waiting), introduced in many different ways. Among them we find *Toriaezu machimashō* (Let's wait for now, 2020) by Tarō Gomi (1945), mirror of the everyday life of most of the people in those days, because at a certain point there was nothing to do but wait; *Matte iru* (I'm Waiting, 2020) by Yasunari Murakami (1955), which underlines the value of waiting, a natural action for every living being, and describes a boy staring at the float and waiting for a fish, the spider waiting for a dragonfly or flowers waiting for bees and butterfly, etc.

Then, through *Kodomotachi wa matte iru* (The

children are waiting, 2020) by Ryōji Arai (1956), we see the waiting which gives us hope and reassures that waiting for something, good and beautiful, coming makes sense.

Winner of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award (ALMA) in 2005,¹⁴ Arai was previously also involved in the project realized after 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, when children's books authors and illustrators were forced "to ponder how to convey the trauma of this disaster to children who were not affected as well as how to provide support and understanding to those who were" (Kokusai kodomo toshokan, 2017). At that time many different approaches were explored, from comfort to encouragement or real description of the situation, instead of focusing on the disaster or nuclear problems Arai wrote *Asa ni nattanode mado o akemasu yo* (It's Morning So I'll Open the Window, 2011), which underlines the value and the joy that lies within the repetition of ordinary days, showing the familiar landscapes which appear if you stand by the window to welcome a new day. Wonderful landscapes which come back in his "pandemic related" work.

As previously highlighted, the picturebooks 's narration begins from the cover where we find three children looking at the blue sky, the title explains they are waiting, and every time you turn the page almost the same sentence comes back while an unexpected and bright landscape appears. Children are waiting for a ship, a train, the moon, something familiar and something fantastic, wishes and expectations fulfilled, showed by full page images, painted with bright and warm colors where yellow and orange prevail. Text highlights children waiting, pictures show what is waiting for them.

Hiromatsu (2022: 8) explains that

Kodomotachi wa matte iru was published during the covid-19 pandemic, and it portrays a sense of hope as children wait for something to appear on the horizon (...) Arai's books are not written to relay a specific message, nor do they force on children the conclusions reached by adults. They seek to share the sensibility of children living in the present who have all breathed the same air, to set them free from suffocating conditions and to talk with them through pictures and words.

In the review of Arai's Saihate (2022: 46) wonders who the children are and adds

Adults will recall their child selves. This book has the feeling of one's past and being somewhere in 'the world'. We recall a time when the boundary between the world and self was unclear. (...) The seasons, the oceans, sunflowers—they don't exist alone, yet when they are within sight, we're aware of ourselves perceiving them. For children, clashing with the world, or feeling surprise, those

moments form core emotions. Children respond to the world with sensitivity, thus forming the self. The world's beauty and all its surprises shape a child. Those sensations can be felt even by adults who read this book.

The awareness to be connected with everything around us and the desire to reclaim space and territory as well as one's freedom of movement appear more concretely in *Senro wa tsuzuku-Nihon isshū* (The lines continue-traveling all around Japan, 2021) last volume of the *Senro wa tsuzuku series* written by Fumiko Takeshita (1957) and illustrated by Mamoru Suzuki (1952), started in 2003 with *Senro wa tsuzuku* (The lines continue, 2003) an enjoyable picturebook which describes six kids busy at building a railway.

Since the beginning of the series the kids have to face several impediments to their tasks, like a mountain or a river in the first volume, a group of geese and a field of watermelons, in the second, or a variety of trains running on the same track in the third, but they always solve problems joyfully and successfully and the trains can drive them everywhere, under the mountain or over the river, in a cheerful and festive atmosphere, punctuated by a joyful rhythm of train's onomatopoeic sound.

The last one, published in 2021 leaves the imaginary landscape and shows an existing place where the train is the real protagonist of the "story". The front cover shows the six kids on a locomotive ready to go, and when we turn the page, the trip starts, a trip on the trains, among the trains! Japan is divided into twelve blocks and the trip starts from the Tokyo metropolitan area and page by page we explore the different areas included in the blocks which show the variety of Japanese trains, while the six kids dressed in station staff-style uniforms, jump from one page to the other introducing not only trains but even peculiarities and traditions of the different places, included the two undersea railway tunnels connecting the island of Honshu with the islands of Hokkaido and Kyushu.

It is not anymore a fantastic trip as all the paces and trains are real and corresponding to something that mostly could be seen and used. It is the realization of a concrete desire to reconnect with all the parts of the country that were not reachable during the pandemic period.

The strong desire to broaden the chance of openness towards the rest of the world and reconnect to the other countries explodes in *The Chikyū Passport* (2023), a book published with a declared purpose of helping children from Ukraine and promoting peace all over the world, but which does not hide at all the real hope of flying away freely to reach other places. According to Hiromatsu (2024)¹⁵ to publish a picturebook not in standard shape in Japan this is quite a difficult job but in this case it was necessary: a small size book like a passport with the

first page ready to be filled in with personal data; a cover that gives a warm sensation to the touch, made in the rare shape of a Jabbalah picturebooks. Each double page spread has a different illustration by 24 artists from 6 countries: Japan, England, Brasil, Ukraina, South Africa and Slovakia and all the illustrations are connected. Illustrations introduce a sort of dreamland, and words are limited to the name of the imaginary country, for example “Jugland”, where a gorilla family is drawn, “Amica”, the friends’ country, “Slowland”, a kind of island in turtle shape, etc.

As stated on the book, the illustrators wish “the children to be free to spread their wings.” (*The Chikyū Passport*, 2023). A journey to faraway countries through free imagination with the hope that it could become reality in a not too much distant future. As declared in the kind of warp-around band which keeps closed the book “The earth belongs to everyone. Let’s go on a trip.”

Hiromatsu, who edited the book explained that the project was conceived thinking of all the children who are living in oppressive times, such as the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine, with the purpose of conveying the idea that everyone is truly free of traveling to an imaginary country without borders with this passport." (*The Chikyū Passport*, 2023)

All these picturebooks, published during and after the recent difficult period, try to provide comfort in different ways by making readers aware that even when we do not realize it, our life has a meaning and is linked to the rest of the world.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of some Japanese picturebooks I tried to show how children’s literature is strictly connected with real life events and its crucial role in building resilient skills in children and adults as well.

In addition to Kazumi Yumoto’s work, which describes a grievous loss and time of recovering, some books published during and after the pandemic have been considered as books with an aim of clarifying how Japanese children’s literature reacts to everyday challenges.

Picturebooks cannot be the solution to all the problems but as their pictures offer different possibilities of reading the story allowing several interpretations of the text, speaking to both adults and children they offer further possibilities of “reading” the world and become more aware of being part of it. According to Hiromatsu “they can be shared with people throughout the world no matter where they are, all of us sharing the same problems with seemingly no end to them in sight” (Hiromatsu, 2022: 8).

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¹ The Swedish Academy for Children's Books is an association based in Stockholm dedicated to the promotion of good literature for children and young people.

<https://alma.se/en/inspire-young-readers/17-reasons/> (02/03/2024)

² "Children's literature" is the commonly used word to indicate a wide field which includes works from picturebooks to YA novels which can be enjoyed by young readers.

³ According to Kümmerling-Meibauer (2021: 3) "picturebook", as one word, is the commonly term used by scholars "in order to emphasize the inseparable unit of pictures and text."

⁴ Quotation here is my translation.

⁵ Quotation here is my translation.

⁶ Images of anthropomorphic monkeys, rabbits and frog moving.

⁷ Quotation here is my translation.

⁸ Quotation here is my translation.

⁹ For example, *Natsu no niwa* (The Friends, 1992) , *Haru no orugan* (The spring tone, 1995) and *Popura no aki* (The Letters, 1997) for young readers and *Kishibe no Tabi* (Journey to the Shore, 2015) for an adult audience.

¹⁰ *Iyashi* is the nominalization of the verb *iyasu* (to heal, to mend both physically and psychologically) "the term is used to refer to anything (an artwork, a piece of music,

a person even a scenic view) that creates a sense of peace and spiritual satisfaction." (Hairston, 2008: 257)

¹¹ *Hashi no ue* is a story of bullying at the crucial point where the protagonist, standing on a bridge and looking at the river, is going to give up, give up the fight, give up on his life, but, thanks to the words of a strange man who suddenly arrives close to him, something snaps in him while he is looking down and he can reconnect himself with life and with other people.

¹² Quotation here is my translation.

¹³ The lecture "Welcome to the World of Children's Books in Japan" was given at Bologna Children Book Fair, Author Café, on March, 6th, 2023.

¹⁴ The Award's motivation was "[A]n illustrator with a style all of his own: bold, mischievous, and unpredictable. His picture books glow with warmth, playful good humor, and an audacious spontaneity that appeals to children and adults alike. In adventure after adventure, color flows through his hands in an almost musical way. As a medium for conveying stories to children, his art is at once genuine and truly poetic, encouraging children to paint and to tell their own stories." (Hiromatsu, 2022: 5).

¹⁵ The lecture "New creative and imaginary evolutions in Japanese picturebooks" was given at Bologna Children Book Fair, Author Café, on April, 10, 2024.

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