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Le bambine e i bambini possono sentirsi e fare ciò che vogliono?

The European G-BOOK Projects: Tackling Gender Stereotypes and Promoting Respect and Diversity through Children's Literature

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3/ The European G-BOOK Projects: Tackling Gender Stereotypes and Promoting Respect and Diversity through Children's Literature

Raffaella BACCOLINI, Beatrice SPALLACCIA

ABSTRACT: *Children's literature plays a crucial role in the development of gender identity of girls and boys, who tend to accept the models presented to them and identify with characters that belong to their same gender group. Traditional gender role models are still predominant in many European countries, reinforcing inequality in society. There are still significant differences in the way European countries address gender identity in books for young readers. Where gender equality is more respected, the production of gender-positive children's literature is more widespread. The paper reflects on the relevance of Elena Gianini Belotti's books in the field of children's literature starting from the results of the European project G-BOOK (UniBO). While it is true that since the publication of Gianini Belotti's text, gender-positive literary production has spread increasingly, this production is unevenly distributed among European countries. Therefore, it is very important to strengthen gender-positive children's literature by offering books with characters that break stereotypes.*

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ABSTRACT: *La letteratura per l'infanzia svolge un ruolo cruciale nello sviluppo dell'identità di genere di bambine e bambini, che tendono ad accettare i modelli presentati e a identificarsi con i personaggi appartenenti al loro stesso gruppo di genere. I tradizionali stereotipi di genere restano però predominanti in molti Paesi europei, rafforzando l'ineguaglianza nella società. Esistono ancora significative differenze nel modo in cui i Paesi europei affrontano l'identità di genere nei libri per giovani lettori. Dove l'uguaglianza di genere è più rispettata, la produzione di letteratura per l'infanzia orientata al genere è più diffusa. L'articolo riflette sull'importanza dei libri di Elena Gianini Belotti nel campo della letteratura per l'infanzia, partendo dai risultati del progetto europeo G-BOOK (UniBO). Sebbene sia vero che dalla pubblicazione del testo di Gianini Belotti la produzione letteraria orientata al genere sia cresciuta, tale produzione è distribuita in modo disomogeneo tra i Paesi europei. È quindi fondamentale rafforzare la letteratura per l'infanzia orientata al genere offrendo libri con personaggi in grado di rompere gli stereotipi.*

1. Gender Stereotypes and Children's Literature

In the framework of what is often known as second wave feminism in Western countries, the first analyses of children's literature from a gender perspective took place in the late 1960s and

early 1970s[1]. In the field of studies on gender and children's literature, Italian writer and pedagogist Elena Gianini Belotti holds a significant position, along with the books she authored. In 1973, she published *Dalla parte delle bambine* (On girls' side), which aimed at investigating the damaging impact of a sexist and strongly gendered education on young girls' development. The book soon became one of the most influential works on children's literature and gender in Italy and across Europe, thanks to its translations in many languages. In one passage of her essay, Gianini Belotti criticizes existing children's literature, writing that books for young readers are «responsible for a discriminatory, reactionary, misogynist, and anti-historical discourse»[2]. Nevertheless, she also highlights the enormous potential of children's literature, which can offer new role models, new representations of children, and new educational and social patterns[3]. In 1978, Gianini Belotti published another important work, *Sessismo nei libri per bambini* (Sexism in children's books)*:*[4] here she translated and presented to the Italian audience three pioneering studies that had been carried out in Great Britain and the United States. The book also featured interesting proposals from McGraw-Hill for a non-discriminatory treatment of the sexes.

Gianini Belotti's work has thus impacted profoundly the debate on children's education and the production of books for young readers. In Italy, her first book inspired the creation of Edizioni dalla parte della bambine (On girls' side Editions) in 1975; founded by writer Adela Turin, and illustrators Nella Bosnia and Francesca Canterelli, this was one of the first feminist publishing houses and children's series, which remained active until 1982. It offered fairy tales that challenged conventional gender norms and paradigms, and empowered female protagonists, while targeting all children, regardless of their gender. Soon after its creation in Italy, the series made its appearance in other European countries, such as France and Spain, in collaboration with local publishing houses.

After this first moment of interest and despite the publication of some studies in the years that followed, feminist criticism of children's literature has developed internationally since the late 1990s and the early 2000s[5]. Also stimulated by an increasingly genderized literary output, these

[1] The authors are aware that the feminist wave model has prompted a number of criticisms, such as the risks of oversimplifying history and overgeneralizing feminist movements and theories (see CAMERON, Deborah, *Feminism*, London, Profile Books, 2018). Here we refer to this model just to contextualize the evolution of feminism at macro level.

[2] GIANINI BELOTTI, Elena, *Dalla parte delle bambine*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2009 [ed. or.: 1973], p. 121. Our translation.

[3] *Ibidem*.

[4] GIANINI BELOTTI, Elena (ed.), *Sessismo nei libri per bambini*, Milano, Edizioni dalla parte delle bambine, 1978.

[5] See, for example, PAUL, Lissa, «Sex and the Children's Book», in *The Lion and the Unicorn* 29, 2/2005, pp. 222-235. Paul traces the contribution of feminist criticism to children's literature, from its inception to the year 2000. Fewer are the studies in Italy (cfr. PACE, Rossana, *Immagini maschili e femminili nei testi per le elementari*, Rome, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 1986), while in France a pioneering study is PERROT, Jean, HADENGUE, Véronique (eds.), *Écriture feminine et littérature de jeunesse*, Paris, La Nacelle/Institut International Charles Perrault, 1995.

studies have been produced within the field of literary criticism, but also in non-literary disciplines such as pedagogy and education, or psychology and sociology[6].

While being developed with different methodological approaches, these studies have succeeded in raising awareness about the influence of children's books on the development of gender roles and children's representations. Academic research has thus been crucial in identifying and analyzing gender stereotypes in books for young readers. According to these findings, a significant portion of modern children's literature still contains reactionary and sexist stereotypes that are more or less overt[7]. These books have also served to perpetuate binary and traditional models by reinforcing a strict opposition between genders. Girls are traditionally portrayed according to the old division between good and evil women. They are therefore often depicted as both envious, petulant, and spoilt, on the one hand, and beautiful, kind, sensitive, sweet, fearful, affectionate, emotional, and caring, on the other. Their actions and behaviors align with the triple imperative of being good-looking, obedient, and caring. Boys, on the other hand, typically have more options: they can be bold, strong, rebellious, resourceful, self-centered, adventurous, boisterous, reckless, and confident in themselves. Boys are typically portrayed as strong, self-assured, and brave, and they have more leeway in their roles and behaviors. The roles that female characters can play are limited to those of ballerinas, princesses, fairies, teachers, mothers, grandmothers, and witches. Even while they are working, they always look after the family and the house. On the other hand, male characters play a greater variety of roles. They can be directors, doctors, bank clerks, actors, scientists, captains, explorers, detectives, dads, grandfathers, magicians, wizards, engineers, police officers, builders, artists, singers, firefighters, and so on. Upon returning from work, they are exhausted and are granted permission to relax in their own armchairs[8].

Issues of gender representations, identities, and sexualities have also been investigated in interdisciplinary studies focused on different literary corpuses[9]. In particular, since the 2010s

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[6] For literary criticism studies, see, among others, CLARK, Beverly, HIGONNET, Margaret (eds.), *Girls, Boys, Books, Toys: Gender in Children's Literature and Culture*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 1999; HINTZ, Carrie, TRIBUNELLA, Eric, *Reading Children's Literature: A Critical Introduction*, Boston, Bedford-St. Martin's, 2013. For works in pedagogy and education see, among others: BIEMMI, Irene, *Educazione sessista. Stereotipi di genere nei libri delle elementari*, Torino, Rosenberg & Sellier, 2010; LIPPERINI, Loredana, *Ancora dalla parte delle bambine*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2007. For psychology and sociology see, among others, CROMER, Sylvie, «Genre et littérature de jeunesse en France: éléments pour une synthèse», in *Nordiques : Filles intré-pides et garçons tendres: genre et culture enfantine*, 21, 2010; DAFFLON-NOVELLE, Anne, *Littérature enfantine: entre image et sexisme*, in DAFFLON-NOVELLE, Anne (ed.), *Filles-garçons. Socialisation différenciée?*, Grenoble, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 2006, pp. 303-324; DEL GROSSO DESTRERI, Luigi et al. (eds.), *Una galassia rosa. Ricerche sulla letteratura femminile di consumo*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2006.

[7] Cfr., for example, HAMILTON, Mykol et al., «Gender Stereotyping and Under-Representation of Female Characters in 200 Popular Children's Picture Books: A Twenty-First Century Update», in *Sex Roles*, 55, 11-12/2006, pp. 757-765.

[8] Cf. DAFFLON-NOVELLE, Anne, *op. cit.*; BIEMMI, Irene, *op. cit.*; BACCOLINI, Raffaella, PEDERZOLI, Roberta, SPALLACCIA, Beatrice (eds.), *Literature, Gender and Education for Children and Young Adults / Littérature, genre, éducation pour l'enfance et la jeunesse*, Bologna, BUP, 2019.

[9] See CLASEN, Tricia, HASSEL, Holly (eds.), *Gender(ed) Identities: Critical Rereadings of Gender in Children's and*

scholarly research has started to focus also on LGBTQ+ themes in children's books published in English-speaking countries[10]. Studies that have analyzed the diachronic evolution of queer books for young readers have noticed two different trends in YA and children's literature: while since the early 2000s the former has featured more and more queer characters and themes[11], the latter «has been much more resistant to LGBTQ theming, in large measure because of the prohibition against the representation of any sexuality, much less queer sexuality, especially in childhood»[12].

Also in light of these findings, in many Western countries different actors have engaged in a number of initiatives aimed at promoting a stereotype-free children's literature; at educating children of all genders on respect, relationships and feelings; and at preventing violence against women in a variety of contexts, from domestic violence to misogynistic attacks in the cybersphere. This is the case of the several bibliographies of gender-positive books that have been developed in recent years by libraries, research centers and scholars, as well as by associations. Among the most interesting examples we can find the project called *Bold Girls* developed by Children's Books Ireland, which reviews books featuring empowered female protagonists, and the following Italian bibliographies: *Tu, di che genere sei?* (Which gender are you?), issued by the inter-municipal library of Vezzano Padergnone and Terlano, Trento; *Pari opportunità e differenze di genere* (Equal opportunities and gender differences), by the Bari's Municipal Biblioteca dei Ragazzi e delle Ragazze; and *Leggere differenze: storie di varietà, identità, famiglie* (Reading differences: stories about diversity, identities, families), by Bologna's Biblioteca Sala Borsa Ragazzi. Among bibliographies by Italian feminist organizations, there is Scosse's *Leggere senza stereotipi: percorsi educativi 0-6 anni per figurarsi il futuro* (Reading without stereotypes: 0-6 educational itineraries to imagine the future) – a book and its associated website[13]. In most cases, these bibliographies have been developed at

Young Adult Literature, London, Routledge, 2017; MALLAN, Kerry, *Gender Dilemmas in Children's Fiction*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

[10] Cf. EPSTEIN, B. J., «We're Here, We're (not?) Queer: LGBTQ Characters in Children's Books», in *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 8, 3/2012, pp. 287-300; EPSTEIN, B. J., *Are the Kids All Right? The Representation of LGBTQ Characters in Children's and Young Adult Literature*, Bristol, HammerOn Press, 2013. Similar studies have investigated queer representations in books written in other languages and cultural contexts. For a focus on the publishing industry in Francophone countries see, for example, BÉHOTÉGUY, Gilles, *Être gay dans le roman contemporain pour la jeunesse*, in CLERMONT, Philippe, BAZIN, Laurent, HENKY, Danièle (eds.), *Esthétiques de la distinction: gender et mauvais genre en littérature de jeunesse*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2013, pp. 145-159; NOËL-GAUDREAULT, Monique, DE LAUNAY, Caroline, *Représentation de l'homosexualité chez les garçons en littérature jeunesse québécoise*, in CLERMONT, Philippe, BAZIN, Laurent, HENKY, Danièle (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 161-175.

[11] Cfr. CAMPBELL NAIDOO, Jamie, *Rainbow Family Collections: Selecting and Using Children's Books with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Content*, Santa Barbara, Libraries Unlimited, 2012; JENKINS, Christine, CART, Michael, *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

[12] ABATE, Michelle, KIDD, Kenneth, *Introduction*, in ABATE, Michelle, KIDD, Kenneth (eds.) *Over the Rainbow. Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature*, Ann Arbor (MI), University of Michigan Press, 2011, pp. 1-11, p. 6.

[13] CHILDREN'S BOOKS IRELAND, «BOLD GIRLS Reading Guide», in *Children's Books Ireland*, 2018, URL: < https://childrensbooksireland.ie/our-recommendations/bold-girls-reading-guide-2018 > [accessed on 27 July 2024]; BIBLIOTECA DI VEZZANO PADERGNONE AND TERLANO, «Tu, di che genere sei?», in *liberweb*, 2013, URL: < https://www.liberweb.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7381:tu-di-che-genere-

national or local level, the books selected are usually in the language of the country in which the bibliography was issued, and their approach tends to be more or less ideological and militant. Inspired by the inputs and literature reviewed above, the G-BOOK projects have been developed starting in 2017. The following section describes the projects and presents their main objectives and outcomes.

2. The G-BOOK Project(s)

G-BOOK consists in a series of three consecutive European projects, funded within the Creative Europe program, all created by the MeTRa Center (Interdisciplinary Research Centre on Mediation and Translation by and for Children and Young Adults) of the University of Bologna – Forlì Campus, Department of Interpreting and Translation. The projects originated from awareness of the crucial role that children's and YA literature plays in the development of children's and teens' gender identity. Although, as mentioned in the previous section, there has been a growing development of a literary production that is aware of gender issues and seeks to challenge them, such production is distributed unevenly among European countries. Moreover, it is often relegated to a sort of 'niche' and does not reach the majority of children and teens. With their international scope, the G-BOOK projects thus aim to promote gender-positive literature for young readers in terms of roles and models, a literature that is open-minded, free of stereotypes, and that encourages respect and diversity. Each project focuses on a different age range of the audience and has been developed by a consortium of European partners. Table 1 below summarizes the basic information of the three projects and the related consortia.

Table 1. The G-BOOK projects.

Name: G-BOOK 1 (*Gender Identities: Child Readers and Library Collections*)
Age range: 3-10 y.o.
Years covered: 2017-2019

sei&catid=24&Itemid=177 > [accessed on 27 July 2024]; BIBLIOTECA DEI RAGAZZI E DELLE RAGAZZE DEL COMUNE DI BARI, «Pari opportunità e differenze di genere», in *isrn*, 2014, URL: < https://www.isrn.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Bibliografia_pari_opportunit%C3%A0_e_differenze_di_genere_bari.pdf > [accessed on 27 July 2024]; BIBLIOTECA SALA BORSA RAGAZZI BOLOGNA, «Leggere differenze: storie di varietà, identità, famiglie», in *Biblioteca Sala Borsa*, [n.d.], URL: < https://archive.bibliotecasalaborsa.it/ragazzi/bibliografie/24650 > [accessed on 25 July 2024]; SCOSSE, *Leggere senza stereotipi: percorsi educativi 0-6 anni per figurarsi il futuro*, Cagli, Settenove, 2015; SCOSSE, *Leggere senza stereotipi* in *SCOSSE*, [n.d.], URL: < https://www.scosse.org/leggere-senza-stereotipi/ > [accessed on 27 July 2024].

Type of fund: Creative Europe – Culture Consortium: MeTRa Center (UniBO, Italy) – project leader University Library "Livres au Trésor" and Research Centre "Pléiade" (University Sorbonne Paris Nord, France) Research Centre Anilij – National Association for Research in Children and Youth Literature (University of Vigo, Spain) Dublin City University (Ireland) Regional Public Library "Petko Rachev Slaveikov" (Bulgaria) Biblioteka Sarajeva (Bosnia Herzegovina)
Name: G-BOOK 2 (*European Teens as Readers and Creators of Gender-Positive Narratives*) Age range: 11-14 y.o. Years covered: 2020-2022 Type of fund: Creative Europe – Culture Consortium: Centro MeTRa (UniBO, Italy) – project leader University Library "Livres au Trésor" and Research Centre "Pléiade" (University Sorbonne Paris Nord, France) Research Centre Anilij – National Association for Research in Children and Youth Literature (University of Vigo, Spain) Dublin City University (Ireland) Regional Public Library "Petko Rachev Slaveikov" (Bulgaria) Ljubljana City Library (Slovenia)
Name: G-BOOK 3 (*Audience Engagement Activities for the Social and Emotional Education of EU Teens through Gender-Positive Literature and Digital Technology*) Age range: 15-18 y.o. Years covered: 2024-2027 Type of fund: CREA-CULT-2024-COOP

Consortium:
Centro MeTRa (UniBO, Italy) – project leader
University Library "Livres au Trésor" and Research Centre "Pléiade" (University Sorbonne Paris Nord, France)
Research Centre Anilij – National Association for Research in Children and Youth Literature (University of Vigo, Spain)
Dublin City University (Ireland)
Regional Public Library "Petko Rachev Slaveikov" (Bulgaria)
Ljubljana City Library (Slovenia)
The Finnish Institute for Children's Literature (Finland)
Library "Lucio Craveiro Da Silva" (Portugal)
University of Cologne (Germany)
Goethe University Frankfurt (Germany)
Gender studies, o.p.s. (Czechia)
Observatory for Children and Youth Rights (Albania)
Tadeusz Różewicz Municipal Public Library in Wrocław (Poland)

The projects thus seek to encompass both children's and YA literature, with a number of objectives that place them in continuity with each other. All three projects share two main aims, that is, to create the first online European bibliography of books for children and YAs that is gender positive in terms of roles and models that they present, and to implement the first multilingual website, hosting the bibliography along with educational materials on gender issues and results of the projects' activities of audience development[14]. Each project, then, comes with different objectives that are specific to the age range and target audience it addresses. Given the focus of this contribution on children's literature, in the remainder of this paper we will focus primarily on G-BOOK 1. This first project included the creation of two multilingual collections of books on the themes of gender equality that circulated among the partner countries, as well as the realization of multiple activities for audience development addressed to children, teachers, and parents, held in the associated libraries.

2.1. The G-BOOK Bibliography

The originality of the project lies therefore in the European dimension of its bibliography, available, as of 2024, in eight European languages (Bulgarian, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, English, French, German, Italian, Slovenian, and Spanish). It also contains books published both in their original language and in translation when available. Books originally published in languages other than the eight European partner languages are also included, and their records are available in English and/or in the partner languages. In particular, the project focused on identifying a core set of texts (fiction, non-fiction, and poetry) that promote inclusivity, respect, and the value of people's

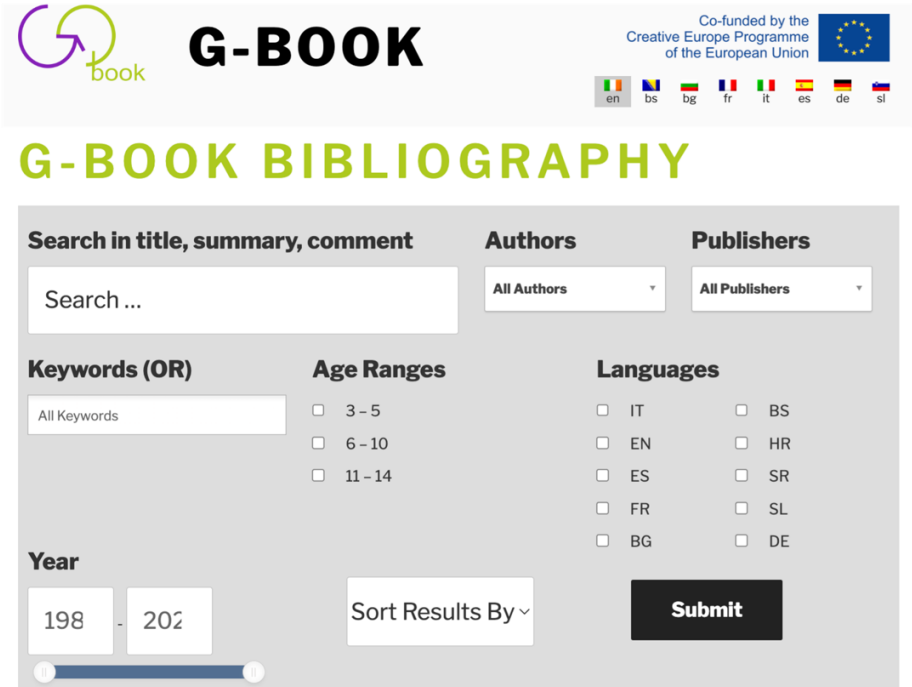
[14] All information available on the website of the G-BOOK projects: < www.g-book.eu >.

diversity and individuality; emphasize self-fulfillment; and give girls and boys a variety of alternative, non-conventional models and portrayals dealing directly and without prejudice with gender issues. We made a special effort to choose books that cover a wide range of subjects that are essential to both boys' and girls' education, including identities, schools, careers, families and (diverse) family models, LGBTQ+ issues, emotions and feelings, interests and hobbies, bodies, interculturality, and inclusion. Finally, we chose to include books that reflect both positions in the debate that distinguishes between an engaged literature – produced by independent and militant publishers who are frequently accused of neglecting the literary and artistic aspects – and a less engaged literature, produced by mainstream publishers.

The books included in the bibliography were predominantly published between 1982 and 2021, with a focus on the last two decades. The bibliography contains synopses, commentaries, and bibliographical data of (so far) 945 books (age 3-10, including translated editions) and 360 books (age 11-14, including translations)[15].

Users can browse the G-BOOK bibliography through an intuitive interface, which allows them to search for books from a drop-down menu, listing the authors, publishers, and keywords. In addition, users can refine their search by selecting an age range, a publishing period, and one or more languages. A search using words that might be included in titles, summaries or comments is also possible, as shown in Figure 1 below[16]:

Figure 1. Browsing the G-BOOK bibliography



[15] As of July 2024.
[16] Taken from < https://g-book.eu/bibliography-search > [accessed 20 July 2024].

Keywords were selected based on the topics, themes, and vocabulary of the books listed in the bibliography. This selection process involved collaboration among all partners, who discussed the books in relation to the project goals and evaluated and prioritized keywords based on their collective disciplinary expertise. Additionally, the chosen keywords reflect themes and literary tropes specific to different age ranges: for instance, *princess/prince* is mainly found in the 3-10 age group (66 instances, with only one in the 11-14 age group), whereas *coming of age* is relevant to the 11-14 age group (all 49 instances). Some keywords directly address gender issues across all age ranges, such as *LGBTQ+* (134), *masculinities* (23), and *body image* (56).

As for the 3-10 age range, among the most common keywords there are: *animals* (66), *diversity* (117), *empowerment* (142), *equality* (97), *families* (123), *feelings* (96), *female characters* (137), *identity* (113), *LGBTQ+* (73), *male characters* (57), *parentality* (64), *positive role model* (111), *princess/prince* (65), *relationships* (67), *respect* (73), *self-acceptance* (58). These data show that often stories employ animals to convey messages of empowerment, respect, and acceptance of oneself and diversity. Stories are also used to show the existence of different types of families. Moreover, in gender-positive literature girls are provided with new models of femininity more than their male peers are offered new models of masculinity[17]. Two examples of these trends are the books *The Paper Bag Princess* and *The Sissy Duckling*, respectively authored by Robert Munsch in 1980 and Harvey Fierstein in 2002, and both translated into Italian. The former addresses issues of female empowerment by rewriting the classic prince-princess-dragon story, while the latter offers positive role models of queer identities and the overcoming of family conflicts by rewriting Hans Christian Andersen's *The Ugly Duckling*.

3. Tackling Gender Role Stereotypes in New Tales for Girls and Boys

Picture books are an important resource for children due to both their format and content. They can enhance children's visual literacy, thus underscoring their literary importance, but they are also aesthetic, artistic, educational, and social products. Additionally, the combination of texts and images significantly influences children's conceptual literacy development. Although the representation of female and male characters has greatly improved since Gianini Belotti's remarks, gender stereotypes can still be present in children's literature. As gender role stereotypes affect how children perceive themselves, children's books are therefore crucial to boys' and girls' sense of themselves.

Traditional fairy tales offer binary role models that «prepare females to become passive, self-denying, obedient, and self-sacrificial [...] as well as nurturing, caring, and responsible in personal

[17] Cfr. DIEKMAN, Amanda B., MURNEN, Sarah K., «Learning to Be Little Women and Little Men: The Inequitable Gender Equality of Nonsexist Children's Literature», in *Sex Roles*, 50, 5-6/2004, pp. 373-385.

situations» and males «to become competitive, authoritarian, and power-hungry as well as rational, abstract, and principled»[18]. Although «fairy tales themselves are not responsible for the creation of these roles[,] they are the symbolical forms which reinforce self-destructive social and psychological patterns of behavior in our daily lives»[19].

One strategy that writers of children's literature have employed to overturn the sexist messages of traditional fairy tales is re-vision[20]. Adrienne Rich's concept of "re-vision" refers to the process of reinterpreting traditional texts and perspectives from a new, feminist viewpoint. It involves critically examining past literature and ideas to understand and challenge underlying assumptions, allowing for the creation of new, more inclusive narratives:

> Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical tradition – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. [...] A change in the concept of sexual identity is essential if we are not going to see the old political order reassert itself in every new revolution. We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us[21].

Such tampering with traditional fairy tales has provided «alternatives to the destructive [...] processes in American and British child rearing and socialization» that cut across age, gender, "race", and social class[22].

As mentioned above, two such books from the G-BOOK bibliography are Robert Munsch's *The Paper Bag Princess* and Harvey Fierstein's *The Sissy Duckling*[23]. Both texts can be considered re-visions and rewritings of children's classics. But while Fierstein's rewrites Andersen's tale of the ugly duckling, Munsch does not have a specific text in mind – it offers a variation on the many tales about princes, princesses, and dragons. However, both are examples of how children's literature can offer new models of femininity and masculinity and, thus, help young readers face the challenges of growing up.

[18] ZIPES, Jack, *Introduction*, in ZIPES, Jack (ed.) *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*, New York, Routledge, 1989, pp. 1-36, p. 3.
[19] *Ibidem*, p. 8.
[20] In the G-BOOK bibliography, the keyword *rewriting* applies to 49 books.
[21] RICH, Adrienne, «"When we dead awaken": Writing as Re-Vision», in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*, New York, Norton, 1979 [ed. or.: 1973], pp. 33-49, p. 35.
[22] ZIPES, Jack, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
[23] MUNSCH, Robert, *The Paper Bag Princess, Illustrated by Michael Martchenko*, Toronto - New York, Annick Press, 1995 [ed. or. 1980]; FIERSTEIN, Harvey, *The Sissy Duckling, Illustrated by Henry Cole*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2002.

3.1. Of Dragons, Princes, and (Paper Bag) Princesses

As stated by its author, *The Paper Bag Princess* «was first told at the Bay Area Childcare Center in Coos Bay Oregon» where Munsch held a job with his wife in 1973 and 1974[24]. As he had been telling lots of «fairly regular dragon stories where the prince saves the princess from the dragon», his wife one day challenged him to think about the pattern of such stories: «How come you always have the prince save the princess? Why can't the princess save the prince?»[25]. He therefore thought about it and changed the ending of one of his dragon stories – a choice, the author ironically comments upon, that «made the adults a lot happier, and the kids did not mind»[26].

The Paper Bag Princess, then, reverts the traditional "prince-saves-damsel-in-distress" trope and tells the story of Elizabeth, a princess who is engaged to a prince named Ronald. But when a dragon destroys her castle and takes Ronald hostage, Elizabeth is left with just a paper bag to wear. To rescue Ronald, she courageously pursues the dragon and outsmarts him. However, when Ronald criticizes her appearance, Elizabeth realizes that he is superficial and decides not to marry him. Since «fairy tales are not just entertaining fantasies, but powerful transmitters of romantic myths which encourage women to internalize only aspirations deemed appropriate to our 'real' sexual functions within a patriarchy», Munsch's choice to revert the stifling message of so many of these stories becomes an empowering gesture for young readers[27]. Against tales that tend to «glorify passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a heroine's cardinal virtues [suggesting] that culture's very survival depends upon a woman's acceptance of roles which relegate her to motherhood and domesticity», Munsch's version celebrates instead Elizabeth's independence and strength and offers a positive role model for girls[28].

In fact, traditional fairy tales tend to «establish a dichotomy between those women who are gentle, passive, and fair, and those who are active, wicked, and ugly», where women who are powerful are seldom human and those who have power are «nearly always portrayed as repulsive»[29]. Such stories expect female children to identify with passive heroines and distance themselves from independent characters. Furthermore, the refusal to get married on a woman's part is considered a threat to the good of society.

Munsch's story, on the other hand, does not present such a dichotomy and creates a very interesting model for children. Although Michael Martchenko's illustrations portray Elizabeth as a

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[24] MUNSCH, Robert, «The Paper Bag Princess», in *Robert Munsch*, [n.d.], URL: < https://robertmunsch.com/book/the-paper-bag-princess > [accessed on 30 July 2024].
[25] *Ibidem*.
[26] *Ibidem*. An extremely prolific children author, Munsch does not have a recurring single character in his stories; instead, the characters are based on the children to whom he first told the story, including his own children.
[27] ROWE, Karen *Feminism and Fairy Tales*, in ZIPES, Jack (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 209-226, p. 211.
[28] *Ibidem*, p. 210.
[29] LIEBERMAN, Marcia K., *"Someday my prince will come": Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale*, in ZIPES, Jack (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 185-200, p. 197.

prepubescent girl, she is set to marry Ronald and lives in her castle without the presence of adults. Marriage is initially portrayed as one of Elizabeth's aspirations. While the first illustration presents Ronald as somewhat cold and detached, it shows Elizabeth clearly in love with him. In fact, while Ronald holds a tennis racket, closes his eyes, and stands with his back to the girl, Elizabeth looks at him and her expression is one of love, symbolized by the ten hearts around her head and her joined hands[30]. Elizabeth's feelings of love are replaced by anger as she decides to pursue the dragon, but while traditional prince-dragon stories tend to end with the slaying of the beast, Munsch's heroine resorts to her wits to defeat the dragon. Elizabeth repeatedly asks the dragon to show his strength and speed. In so doing, she wears him down: once the dragon falls asleep, she can rescue Ronald. But Ronald's reaction is rather shallow: «Elizabeth, you are a mess! You smell like ashes, your hair is all tangled and you are wearing a dirty old paper bag. Come back when you are dressed like a real princess»[31]. Elizabeth thus discovers that Ronald may be a prince in appearance but is rather superficial: «your clothes are really pretty and your hair is very neat. You look like a real prince, but you are a bum»[32]. Instead of the traditional "they lived happily ever after", Munsch's story ends with Elizabeth refusing to marry Ronald: «They didn't get married after all»[33].

Originally, Munsch ended the story with Elizabeth punching Ronald in the nose, but when Martchenko drew a picture of the scene it looked too violent. The ending was then changed to Elizabeth calling Ronald a «bum», a word that worked for the North American public but was considered unusual for British and Australian audiences[34]. Thus, the British edition has Elizabeth calling Ronald a «toad», adding yet another reversal to the story. Unlike traditional fairy tales where, because of a spell, a toad is in fact a prince, here Ronald is a prince, but his behavior is far from being princely. By reversing the traditional prince-dragon-princess plot, Munsch's story then offers different messages. First, being is more important than appearing, and it pertains both characters: while Elizabeth looks ragged but behaves courageously and kindly, Ronald looks refined but is shallow with narcissistic traits, just like the dragon. Second, one must be proactive and decide the course of one's life. This message is particularly relevant for girls whose traditional fairy tales have taught them to wait passively and expect to be saved by a prince and marry him. Here marriage is not the only option for the female protagonist. Finally, female empowerment is conveyed also through illustrations. Elizabeth's prepubescent body avoids the sexualization of the traditional Barbie model and of other heroines, such as the popular Winx. An example of this is the last picture of Elizabeth happily jumping toward the setting sun, instead of the couple getting married and riding in a carriage into the sunset.

[30] MUNSCH, Robert, «The Paper Bag Princess», cit.
[31] *Ibidem*.
[32] *Ibidem*.
[33] *Ibidem*.
[34] *Ibidem*.

3.2. Of Ugly and Sissy Ducklings

Originally published in New York by Simon & Schuster in 2002, Fierstein's book rewrites Hans Christian Andersen's *The Ugly Duckling*, a fairy tale about a young bird who is ridiculed and shunned because of his unattractive appearance[35]. After a difficult and lonely journey through various hardships, he eventually matures into a beautiful swan, discovering his true identity and beauty. As stated by the author, the book is inspired not only by Andersen's story, but also by the children of New York City's Gramercy House:

> A lot of this was inspired by Gramercy House in New York, which is a safe home for kids that have been thrown out of their own homes for being gay. They're funny and creative and inventive and smart, and they have a way of looking at the world unlike anybody else. When I met these kids, I thought, their story has to be told. And this was my way of doing it[36].

Given the topics addressed by the story, it became very controversial and has often been listed among the most challenged and banned books in the United States. For example, American theologian, ethicist, and preacher Russell D. Moore denounced the dangerous impact of such stories in his review of the book:

> Children's literature is no trifling matter. It shapes the future of our sons and daughters. Evangelical Christians should seek out great stories that will model for our children what it means to be male and female – what it means to be creatures of a great, mysterious, and adventuresome God. Little boys need to hear the roar of Aslan. They need to taste the salt air of Captain Hook's pirate ship. They need to feel the heart-pounding danger of the exploits of Jack the Giant Killer[37].

In Moore's opinion, thus, the education of boys must be based exclusively on hyper-traditional, toxic models of masculinity, and there should be no space for the appreciation of diversity in children's literature.

Fierstein's *The Sissy Duckling* tells the story of Elmer who is different from other ducks. Unlike his peers, Elmer enjoys activities like baking, painting, and theater. He does not like sports, and one day skips away from a baseball game. The other ducks call him a sissy, which infuriates his father

[35] ANDERSEN, Hans Christian, *The Ugly Duckling*, 1949 [ed. or.: 1843], made available by the H.C. Andersen Centret at URL: < https://andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheUglyDuckling_e.html > [accessed on 20 July 2024].
[36] OP DE BEECK, Nathalie, «PW Talks with Harvey Fierstein», in *Publishers Weekly*, 2002, URL: < https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/40277-pw-talks-with-harvey-fierstein.html > [accessed on 20 July 2024].
[37] MOORE, Russell D. (2004), «Bad Books for Kids», in *Touchstone. A Journal of Mere Christianity*, URL: < https://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=17-06-014-v > [accessed on 21 July 2024].

who says some hateful things that cause Elmer to run away. But, despite the bullying, Elmer stays true to himself. When the flock is ready to fly south to escape the winter, his father is injured during a hunters' attack. Elmer comes to his aid, and thanks to his unique skills takes care of him. Through his bravery and kindness, Elmer earns the respect of the other ducks and teaches them the value of individuality and acceptance.

Both Andersen's and Fierstein's stories highlight the theme of outward diversity, and the superficiality of judging others based on their appearance. But, while traditional fairy tales, such as *Beauty and the Beast*, concern the transformation of the physically ugly protagonist into a prince, in Fierstein's rewriting the main character remains true to himself and his community learns to appreciate and respect him.

In Andersen's story, the protagonist, who was originally considered a «clumsy, dirty, gray bird, ugly and offensive»[38], discovers his 'true' swan identity and finds happiness among his peers. Conversely, in Fierstein's rewriting the journey of transformation pertains to Elmer's community and does not entail accepting physical beauty but embracing inner beauty and diversity. While Andersen's duckling is physically bullied for his exterior appearance, Fierstein's Elmer is emotionally and psychologically abused because of his identity. While the paternal figure is absent in Andersen, in Fierstein's story Elmer is rejected by his father whose traditional model of masculinity is overbearing: «Elmer is a sissy! [...] He's no son of mine!»[39]. Both Elmer's father and the bully Drake have internalized the norms that Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell has attributed to hegemonic masculinity, that is, «the social arrangements that give a particular kind of masculinity a hegemonic position in sexual politics and that marginalize others»[40]. Such a model forces all men to define themselves in relation to it, while also justifying the subordination of women to men[41]. It is, therefore, heteronormative and it reinforces and sustains the patriarchal system.

Mothers, on the other hand, offer comfort in both stories, but their support is different. Andersen's mother tries to protect her son but at the same time she reaffirms gender stereotypes: «He isn't so handsome, but he's as good as can be [...] I hope his looks will improve with age [...] Moreover, he's a drake, so it won't matter so much»[42]. In this view, beauty is not important for a male duck. Conversely, Elmer's mother stands up for him in front of his father and the community. When he asks her the meaning of *sissy*, she tells him: «*Sissy* is a cruel way of saying that you don't do things the way others think you should. [...] You are special, Elmer, and being special sometimes

[38] ANDERSEN, Hans Christian, *op. cit.*, n.p.
[39] FIERSTEIN, Harvey, *op. cit.*, n.p.
[40] CONNELL, Raewyn, *Gender and Power*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1987, 58.
[41] See also CONNELL, Raewyn, MESSERSCHMIDT, James, «Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept», in *Gender and Society*, 19.6/2005, pp. 829-859.
[42] ANDERSEN, Hans Christian, *op. cit.*, n.p.

scares those who are not»[43]. Therefore, she openly challenges the homophobia of their community, and breaks the stereotypes.

This also has an important impact on the protagonists' self-acceptance. On the one hand, in the ending paragraph of Andersen's tale, young readers are reminded that happiness should not come with pride, in line with the moral of the time: «He felt so very happy, but he wasn't at all proud, for a good heart never grows proud»[44]. On the other, Fierstein celebrates pride through his protagonist's words: «I want to make one thing perfectly clear: I am the same duck I have always been. I have not changed. I am a BIG SISSY and PROUD of it!»[45]. The answers to Elmer's words are a testimony of the radical changes that occurred in his community: his father proclaims that «if Elmer is a sissy, I wish I were a sissy too!», and the former-bully Drake tells Elmer, «*You* haven't changed, but maybe *I* have»[46]. Although both stories highlight the theme of self-discovery, *The Sissy Duckling* openly challenges heteronormative prejudice and discrimination and presents diversity as a value, in particular by showing a change in the community rather than in the individual.

4. Conclusion

Both Munsch's and Fierstein's books present stories that challenge gender stereotypes by rewriting classic tropes of children's literature. They provide young readers with positive values, in particular self-discovery and acceptance and respect of diversities, and they warn them against judging others based on appearance. In addition, care characterizes both Elizabeth and Elmer. If care is traditionally expected from the female gender, it is less commonly associated with boys and men for whom it becomes a sign of weakness. However, both authors avoid a romanticization of caring, and move toward a *politicization* of caring through gender lens. In their stories there is no room for sexist notions about women's place in society and they do not celebrate «women's caring for people and the planet without condemning its implication in oppressive political economic systems»[47]. Both protagonists are caring for another character without reaffirming gender-based stereotypes: Elizabeth saves Ronald and defeats the dragon by outsmarting him, not through violence. And yet caring does not equate with passivity, as she is resolute and independent. Elmer saves his father and takes care of him, remaining true to himself. In a society that is ruled by individualism and selfishness, Elmer's actions appear incomprehensible to his father who pleads

[43] *Ibidem*.
[44] ANDERSEN, Hans Christian, *op. cit.*
[45] FIERSTEIN, Harvey, *op. cit.*
[46] *Ibidem*.
[47] MACGREGOR, Sherilyn, «Earthcare or Feminist Ecological Citizenship?», in *Femina Politica*, 1/2010, pp. 22-31, p. 22.

him to «act like a normal duck» for once and let him die[48]. But Elmer's caring is a sign of bravery and ingenuity, and thus it is not associated with weakness.

Experts have shown that gender stereotyping in children's literature has detrimental effects on children's perception of women's and men's roles in society. Therefore, books that present gender roles positively can be used to eliminate stereotypes. Our case studies exemplify some of the strategies employed in gender-positive narratives. The G-BOOK projects contribute to tackling gender discrimination and inequality in line with the recommendations of documents like the Education 2030 Agenda. They have the «inherent potential for the disruption of established hierarchies» due to their reach and the online space they inhabit[49]. Gender-positive education has the power to transform lives in multiple ways; to unlock the potential of learners in all their diversity; to contribute to ending harmful gender norms, attitudes and practices; and to achieve just, equal, and inclusive societies.

[48] FIERSTEIN, Harvey, *op. cit.*

[49] WHYTE, Pádraic, O'SULLIVAN, Keith, «Beyond Traditional Hierarchies: Creating Space for Children's Literature Collections», in *Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für Kinder- und Jugendliteraturforschung*, 2022, pp. 165-174, p. 169.

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