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NONFICTION

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Abstract

The following chapter presents a short exploration of Nonfiction: its definition, an outline of its history and development, the issue of whether a literary/artistic form or merely a corpus of books providing useful information. In an attempt to reflect on quality Nonfiction for children, special attention is devoted to its 'pictorial turn' (Merveldt 2018) during the XXI century, and especially to the new nonfiction picturebook. A thriving international publishing phenomenon, the nonfiction picturebook is an imaginative, deviceful, multifaceted product whose aesthetic sophistication is crucial to the communication of knowledge, with the result that Nonfiction is, more clearly than ever today, an integral part of children's 'literature', i.e., an object of beauty as well as an informative tool, a creative as well as instructional endeavor.

Preamble

In the field of Children's Literature, Nonfiction is the term used to define – and arrange on bookstore and library shelves – publications that in North America are usually called 'information' or 'informational' books, and in Great Britain 'topic' books. Historically, this genre can be traced back to the tradition of the so-called 'books of instruction': books containing the kind of information that adults think children should know. What is necessary, important, or appropriate for children to know, of course, changes with the cultural context and from generation to generation. But, besides their content, what has changed and continues to change in these books is also the way in which knowledge is communicated to children, and the role of the child reader in the process of sharing knowledge. Children can either be considered passive recipients of notions, data, and objective, authoritative, and indisputable explanations, to be learnt and memorized, or they can be seen as readers to be actively involved, not just from a cognitive, but also from a sensitive and emotional point of view. Accordingly, books can be planned and designed merely as tools to transmit a specific content/message, or else as dialogical works that try to spark children's curiosity and sense of wonder and are structurally conceived not to provide definitive answers, but to raise questions, doubts, and comparisons, trigger inferences and interpretations, and prompt aesthetic awareness. The figure of the child reader implicit in Nonfiction titles is, however, not always that

sharply distinguishable. Moreover, the distinction between books whose content is presented as 'given' and those that demand the involvement of the reader to produce meaning is not neatly separated by the fault lines of past and present. There have been informational books potentially able to enthrall and engage the child reader in past centuries, as there are dogmatic, non-dialogical books characterized by a unilateral, monolithic transmission of knowledge published today. Scholars with a critical interest in these books, as well as educators who use them with children, should approach and analyze Nonfiction bearing these aspects in mind. It is of course essential to distinguish between information and ideology, but also to ponder on the difference between information and knowledge (Aronson 2011); to recognize the textual and visual strategies (Goga et al. 2021) employed by books to achieve one or the other; to decide whether what we want to share with children is, for example, the results of science or rather the germinal intuitions and procedures that led to those conclusions; to understand whether the focus of a book should be the certainties the author (and a community) consider acquired, or rather the precarious, relative, and reviewable nature of any notion; to realize whether what is offered to children is closed knowledge or knowledge that is open to forms of negotiation (Sanders 2018). In short, it is essential to ask ourselves whether Nonfiction's ultimate role is to transfer a series of pre-established accepted truths about the world, or to develop curiosity, interest, passion, and critical thinking.

Definition and evaluation of Nonfiction

The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature defines 'Nonfiction' as the corpus of books "written to impart information and to treat ideas relating to various topics in the social sciences, sciences, technology, fine arts, recreation, humanities and history" (OECL, vol. 3: 160). Broadly speaking, children's Nonfiction includes textbooks and trade books. The present chapter will deal with the latter, namely, nonfiction books not conceived as schoolbooks, even though they can obviously be used by teachers in the classroom, in addition to textbooks. Nonfiction trade books for children today are of many different types and formats, the issues they cover potentially endless, and their target extremely wide. They encompass 'early-concept books' for toddlers (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2018), conceived to explain an idea, object or activity by pairing a word with an image (through a design that may be extremely linear - a pictured object linked unequivocally to its written label - or may present combinations that are less obvious, more original, and open to interpretation), but also long complex works targeting teenagers on the most diverse range of topics: the idea of death in different cultures; the most famous and strategically important roads in the history of humanity; the many possible zoophobias, etc.

By far the largest category of children's Nonfiction is undoubtedly the science book, particularly natural science titles examining the inexhaustible features of the animal and vegetable kingdom (fossils, dinosaurs and other extinct species, evolution, the most common or the rarest animals and plants, their shapes, characteristics, habits, habitat), geography (maps, mountains, volcanoes, oceans, rivers, landscapes, but also cities and other anthropic dimensions), astronomy (space, planets, solar system), meteorological phenomena, climate and – increasingly frequently – climate change caused by the Anthropocene.

Books on language also form a wide and varied category of Nonfiction. They include titles on the history of writing, alphabet books, books on strange words, or untranslatable words (such as the thought-provoking *What a Wonderful Word. A collection of untranslatable words from around the world*, by Nicola Edwards and Luisa Uribe, Little Tiger Press, 2018). Many particularly creative titles focus on wordplay and the peculiarities of language use (figures of speech, idiomatic expressions, comparisons, homographic terms, synonyms, opposites, etc.).

Mathematics is another large nonfiction category, giving rise to the simplest counting books - often whimsically conceived and illustrated – but also to books on dimensions, measures, distances, lengths, widths, speeds, records, and other numerical concepts concerning the physical world, usually chosen to surprise or impress the reader, and make him/her think.

There are books on human anatomy and physiology, their titles always among the most controversial for what they show and how they show it (see the clever *It Isn't Rude to Be Nude*, by Rosie Haine, Tate, 2020); books on architecture and technology, pioneered by David Macaulay's internationally successful titles in the 1970s and 1980s; books on art, music, sports, religions, philosophical or existential questions. There are books on historical topics, ranging from summaries of the entire history of humanity to specific events, anecdotes, or persons worthy of note. Starting in the 1970s, an increasing number of books on multicultural issues has been published, with titles highlighting the contexts, traditions, and daily habits of people belonging to many different countries, cultures, social classes.

Whatever their focus, in theory these books all have to do with what we call 'reality'. Indeed, another expression often used to indicate the many and various nonfiction publications is 'Literature of Facts', a formulation clearly intended to distinguish this kind of books from Fiction and Poetry on the assumption that Nonfiction provides objective explanations and representations of 'true' things in contrast to narrative or creative publications based on unreality, imagination, whim, and, in any case, the subjectivity of the author. The generally accepted idea of Nonfiction is as a corpus of titles providing children with reliable information on the world, which, as the name suggests and

contrary to Fiction, does not entail invention, fantasy, arbitrariness, originality in the representation of the natural, human, social or cultural universe. If we compare the two publishing realms in terms of their intentions, the aim of Nonfiction is clearly, directly, and explicitly educational: nonfiction books inform, instruct, or introduce children to shared notions, data, rules, knowledge acquisitions. Fiction, on the other hand, pursues different goals altogether: to entertain, delight, thrill, move, unsettle, and maybe subvert official beliefs, and if it does have educational intentions, these are indirect, implicit, concealed within a plot whose narrative mechanisms often appear more powerful than the implied message. Yet, the more we try to reflect and define what distinguishes Nonfiction from Fiction, the more we become aware of the ambiguities, and the fact that these realms, not to mention the intentions behind them, are very easily blurred. For as Milton Meltzer wrote in his famous essay "Where Do All the Prizes Go? The Case for Nonfiction", published in *Horn Book* in 1976, the best Nonfiction always implies "imagination, invention, selection, language, and form", i.e., a quality we should not hesitate to call artistic and which, by its very nature, casts into question the idea of an objective, purely informative literature, somehow different from the 'other' literature (Meltzer 1976). According to Nikola von Merveldt, the term Nonfiction is misleading, because it tends to confuse an author's intention to present some aspect of the real world with the communicative strategies employed to do so. Such strategies could - and indeed often do - include narrative, imaginative, and stylistic devices that are typical of Fiction, alongside logical argument and the stark exposition of facts (von Merveldt 2018). Narrative, imaginative, and stylistic devices are not only legitimate, but crucial for any effective communication. This has led scholars such as Meltzer to claim that Nonfiction, including children's Nonfiction, should be considered rightfully part of the broad category of literature, judged precisely according to the aesthetic value critics systematically search for in children's books but have - until recently - neglected to expect, require, or pay attention to when it comes to informational books.

In 1972, Margery Fisher was the first scholar to complain that "because of an unexpressed feeling that information books were not 'creative', they were far more often reviewed for their content than for their total literary value" (Fisher 1972: 9). As a rule, reviewers generally ascertain that the content is accurate, precise, and 'scientifically' grounded. If it is, the book tends to pass the critical test. According to Fisher, though, when judging Nonfiction as part of children's literature, even the most precise or rigorously informative title should be considered inadequate if it totally fails to engage the reader. A pedantic, dull, boring nonfiction book - and its implicit view of the reader as a passive person asked simply to accept and memorize content – is as grave a mark of failure as factual inaccuracies or approximations. For Fisher, only a book that avoids assertive tones and

definitive explanations, leaves certain questions open, and reveals the unknown as well as the known - in other words, only a book that shows the complexity, stratification, and even mysteriousness of reality - leads the child to speculate, wonder and activate critical thought, which is what literature - all literature - should do. Absorbing information is a predictable and passive process, while acquiring knowledge is an open experience that requires active participation. We need, says Fisher, nonfiction books that offer children knowledge (and the process that goes with it) rather than mere information, books that encourage reasoning and help readers become independent thinkers, not books telling them what to think in a dogmatic way (Fisher 1972). More than twenty years after these first critical reflections on Nonfiction, the British educationalist Margaret Meek wrote: "By itself, information is neither experience nor knowledge" (Meek 1996: 15). For Meek, the best nonfiction books are grounded on a concept of information "that includes uncertainty, probability, hypothesis making" and always "demand interpersonal dialogue" (Meek 1996: 18-19). A nonfiction book that obliterates wonder and speculation, replacing it merely with exact data and notions is not a good nonfiction book. "The best nonfiction books are the books that suggest there is more to be known." (Meek 1996: 102). And yet, the prevailing view of Nonfiction is, and continues to be very different. Returning to this issue in 2018, Joe Sutliff Sanders noted that the consensus view is still that Nonfiction is, and should be, a literature of final answers, in other words, a truth-telling literature, a literature of facts whose most important elements/values are accuracy of information and reliability of content (Sanders 2018). However, considering Nonfiction as a group of books providing 'answers', i.e., a very accurate and merely factual knowledge of the world, devoid of any hint of elusive creativity and interpretative openness, is not only misleading, but groundless. Partly since its beginnings, and especially so starting with the new millennium, children's Nonfiction has taken on the characteristics of literature, and like all literature, it often presents as subjective, aesthetic, and artistic while remaining true to its basic purpose of dealing with the world's most tangible, documentable, 'real' aspects. But these aspects are just not all there is to these books. "Certainly the basic purpose of nonfiction is to inform, to instruct, hopefully to enlighten. But that's not enough. An effective nonfiction book must animate its subject, infuse it with life." (Freeman, Person 1992: 3). According to Jo Carr (1982), good informational books go beyond facts. "Gifted writers work with facts as sculptors work with clay – or artists with paint, composers with melody, poets with words – to give meaningful form to their perception of things" (Carr 1982: 7). Form is as central to Nonfiction as it is to Fiction. "The art of fiction is making up facts; the art of nonfiction is using facts to make up a form." (Freeman, Person 1992: 3). A good Nonfiction author, writes Meltzer, "makes art", where "the verb 'makes' is all-important. Art does not begin when the artist chooses his subject. It is what he does with it, what he makes out of it, that

counts." (Meltzer 1982: 27). A good Nonfiction author is first of all a craftsman, "which means he has a superb technique." (p. 28). "Facts never speak for themselves. They must be selected, marshaled, linked together, given a voice. Fit expression is not a mere frill added to one's accumulation of knowledge. The expression *is* the knowledge." (p. 28). The work of whatever author (of Fiction or Nonfiction) begins to exist only when s/he finds the language/images to express what s/he wants to communicate, only through their craft. "Lacking craft, many books of Nonfiction contain nothing but dead words. A Nonfiction author has to find a form and a voice that will enlarge the reader's experience, deepen it, intensify it." (p. 29)

Calling nonfiction books 'informational' is therefore correct not because they contain notions or information, but especially on account of their author's commitment to 'in-form', i.e., to give knowledge 'a form', offering it to children in a creative manner so that the result is something different from a mere transfer of data. Nonfiction authors should be concerned "not with covering a subject as the curriculum-constructor thinks of it, but with discovering something meaningful in it and finding the language [more in general: the art] to bring the reader to the same moment of recognition." (Meltzer 1982: 31). The author/illustrator must have what Meltzer calls "quality of vision". "Fact is a cold stone, an unarticulated thing, dumb until something happens to it… Fact must be rubbed up in the mind, placed in magnetic juxtaposition with other facts, until it begins to glow, to give off the radiance we call meaning" (Fisher 1972: 302). A nonfiction book can qualify as 'literature' when it revolves around an idea, when there is an authorial approach to the subject matter, and when "the author's style is good enough" (Carr 1982: 7). It is precisely the stylistic choices and the original perspective on any content (as opposed to an impersonal approach) that elicit understanding and knowledge in the reader, encouraging him/her to think and feel deeply, even when the subject matter is rigorously scientific. "A good science book touches the mind, the heart, the imagination" (Freeman 2004: 104). And this is true, of course, not only for strictly scientific publications, but for all kinds of informational books.

'Style' in Nonfiction can concern the writing, when it adopts a narrative or poetic style - as opposed to flatly explanatory, neutral tones. It may revolve around the choice of the topic, when it deals with uncommon, little-known aspects of reality rather than more mainstream and predictable subjects. Style may also concern the point of view from which the topic is presented, when it is deliberately unorthodox or unconventional. Style can involve the material quality of the book (design, format, paper, etc.), the graphic composition of the spread, or the illustrations, when they are conceived not as a mere support to the text but as expressive, forceful, evocative elements in themselves. All these

features offer scope for the author's imaginative insight, which when successfully harnessed make for nonfiction 'literature', a type of communication about the world that is not banal, neutral, objective, or deterministic, aiming at a mere registration/transmission of dry facts, but intends to involve readers emotionally, aesthetically, and critically, prompting intuitions, connections, doubts, and excitement as well as enlightenment. In other words, Nonfiction somehow *needs* to be artistic, creative, and aesthetically sophisticated, not only to elicit the appreciation of experts, but also to more successfully achieve its ultimate function: sharing knowledge with young readers. Nonfiction *does not work*, does not achieve the aim for which it exists – promoting children's understanding of the world – if it is not beautiful, intriguing, able to amaze, attract, launch cognitive, interpretative, and emotional challenges, if it cannot activate forms of involvement and arouse pleasure. When we consider quality in any book for children, we imply that children deserve beautiful writing and art. These are values that are as relevant as accurate data and notions. Form is as important as content in Nonfiction no less than in Fiction if literature is to engage the reader and *mean* something to him/her.

Historical overview

Conventionally, the beginning not just of Nonfiction but of all children's literature is traced back to the publication, in 1658, of *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* by the Czech theologian Johann Amos Comenius (1592-1670). The aim of the book was to teach children to read both in German (the book's original language) and Latin. Yet the work is much more than a reading and translating exercise. It presents as a thorough, compact, illustrated encyclopedia opening with the alphabet and moving forward with the representation of various aspects of the "visible world" that children should know: facts concerning nature, geography, sports, hobbies, moral virtues, etc. The book displays a broad selection of illustrations, considered fundamental for information to be communicated effectively. Indeed, even since children's books were first printed, it was implicitly realized that knowledge cannot be transferred from book to child unless the reader is aesthetically engaged and unless it gives the reader pleasure. Comenius was clearly convinced that alongside any factual content, visual sophistication, i.e., some kind of aesthetic research aspiring to beauty was needed in order to touch the reader's senses, evoked in the title of the book. The idea behind the creation of the *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* is that facets other than the child reader's intellect need to be engaged, otherwise what is taught fails to strike a chord and leave an impression. The sensual appeal of his book, with its 150 illustrations, was crucial to Comenius, who had already understood that arousing readers' senses meant allowing them to 'feel' - and therefore understand - the scene depicted in a more empathic and radical way than any description, explanation, analysis or strictly

logical argumentation could do. Comenius' idea was embraced and strengthened in the XVIII century by philosophers like John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau, who in turn were followed by the greatest pedagogists and developmental psychologists of the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries (Fröebel, Montessori, Piaget, Bruner, etc.). Indeed, their approach has been so assimilated as to sound obvious today. Nevertheless, there have always been, and are still many examples of publishing products for children conceived with an exclusive concern for the notions and messages the authors want to (mechanically) transfer to children, a concern not accompanied by any textual and visual strategies aimed to trigger deeper reader engagement, arouse interest, elicit wonder, fascination, and questions about the aspects of the world dealt with in the books. For although the concept of the very first nonfiction book was very modern - even if still rudimentary in execution - countless authors down the ages have eschewed and continue to eschew Comenius' pioneering aim of reconciling "Instruction and Amusement" (an expression coined later, in 1744, by the English publisher John Newbery). Nor should we understand 'Amusement' as mindless entertainment, but as reader engagement that is not merely rational but also emotional and aesthetic, as active enthusiastic participation in the book's content vs its passive acritical consumption. For Comenius, this kind of incitement and motivation was possible thanks to the images. The technical means available at the time of *Orbis Pictus* were woodcuts of the earliest type, but the grounding idea had already taken hold: the text by itself may not be enough to engage the reader, and this, in children's literature is true for both Nonfiction and Fiction, as is made very clear by the incipit of *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), in which the protagonist expresses her boredom with books without illustrations. Before that, one of the very first novels interested in the child psyche, *Jane Eyre* (1847), had shown how important a book with beautiful illustrations can be for a child. In the household where she is mistreated and humiliated, little Jane finds shelter in *A History of British Birds* (1821) by Thomas Bewick, the English printer who, at the beginning of the Nineteenth century, invented an etching method producing much more refined drawings than previously possible. A magnificently illustrated book can become, for a child, a comfort zone, a beautiful physical and metaphorical realm in which to enter and lose herself. Entranced by Bewick's images - highly sophisticated nonfiction illustrations - Jane can forget her wretched condition for a moment. According to some cognitive scientists, images trigger a specific part of our brain, the right hemisphere, responsible for intuition, emotions, empathy, participation, and deep connection with what we are looking at (McGilchrist 2009; Crago 2014). In this respect, images are different from the verbal code, especially when the verbal code takes the shape of a rigorously logical, objective, detached written text, the kind of text that Nonfiction has traditionally aspired to in order to appear authoritative and believable. The written text, when used to explain, analyze, or define, seems to

activate more directly the left hemisphere, whose job is to rationalize, distinguish, and distinguish us from the rest of the world (McGilchrist 2006). Even if the idea of two separate hemispheres with specific cognitive functions can be misleading and arguable in light of the complexity of the human brain, which seems to normally entail bilateral processing and interhemispheric integration, we can easily assume that an informational book which is full of images, especially when the images are skillfully and creatively illustrated, provides additional stimulation and a more deeply integrated cognitive experience. Combining words and pictures, it instructs us on the things of the world, a process for which some detachment is necessary, yet at the same time makes us feel part of the subject matter, thoroughly involved in its assimilation. As we shall see in the final paragraph of this chapter, it is around these oxymoronic stimuli that the new nonfiction picturebook – an international and coherent 21st century publishing phenomenon – has developed.

Over and above the images, specific qualities of the written text also clearly engage the reader more deeply compared to strictly logical, neutral, or aseptic language (Carr 1982). Poetic forms of speech, with their musicality, assonances, rhymes, onomatopoeias, and ellipsis touch the senses and captivate the reader. And they have been characteristic components of instruction books from the earliest Rhyming Alphabets, for example. The most famous of these Alphabets can be found in *The New England Primer* by Benjamin Harris, published at the end of the XVII century. Their purpose was clearly to teach children to read and, at the same time, to instruct them in religious matters through formulae ("In Adam's fall / We sinned all") that sound pedantic and rigid to us today. Yet, these very simple, didactic texts reveal an understanding that for learning to happen, the book has to have an aesthetic appeal. And perhaps because the words of Alphabet and Concept Books are so few and therefore have to be chosen carefully if one wants to create rhymes, assonances, alliterations, synaesthesias, and other kinds of auditory and semantic frictions, it is this kind of books for very young readers that over the centuries have presented and continue to present a unique poetic quality. In recent years, this quality has reached peaks of extraordinary artistry and creativity. International examples are *Imagier des gens* (Albin Michel 2008) and *Seasons* (Albin Michel 2009), both by the French author Blexbolex. Although seemingly simple and didactic, they do not impose an association between a word and its visual referent in a deterministic way. Each pairing is surprising, dialogical, open to multiple interpretations, and designed to elicit speculation, questions, and doubts as to the accepted naming/classification of the world. Another example is *One Gorilla* (Candlewick Press 2013) by Anthony Browne: apparently a typical, elementary Counting Book, it has an unexpected philosophical twist which makes it unique, as a primer for the very young. Among the Alphabet Books conceived not just to teach the letters, but also to delight and

challenge the reader, *ABCD* by Henry Galeron (Editions des Grandes Personnes 2017) shows objects and living beings beginning with the same letter grouped together in surreal landscapes, while *Hoje sinto-me* by the Portuguese Madalena Moniz (Orfeu Negro 2014) is a surprising Alphabet of feelings with both unusual words and their poetic visual representation. Returning to the musicality, rhymes, and assonances already used in the XVII century – yet with a much higher degree of sophistication – mention should be made of a book such as *Alphabet des plants et des animaux* by Emilie Vast (Memo 2017).

Not only the expressly poetic, but also the narrative style of the text has a power of attraction far greater than the stark exposition of data and notions, explanations, or neutral information. And even very early books of instruction adopted colorful narrative styles. Major examples are Travel Books, particularly the very popular Travel Books of Peter Parley, pen name of the American author Samuel Griswold Goodrich (1793-1860). After the success of *Tales of Peter Parley About America* (1827), many other titles by the same author followed in which the protagonists move to different countries with unfamiliar characteristics. The fictional journey as a frame for descriptions and explanations of various regions of the world has been imitated by countless authors ever since. The voyage as both a real and metaphorical agent of adventure and exploration, as the act of leaving behind what is known to discover something new situates itself perfectly in the space between Fiction and Nonfiction, a space where the knowledge acquired is indiscernible from the emotions, sensations, doubts, and questions it generates. For many scholars, this is what the best Nonfiction is all about. After all, the same space is occupied also by scientific research before results become apparent and data become certain and consolidated. The scientific method is based initially on intuition, uncertainty, openness to the unknown. It is driven by motivation and the emotions stirred by the unintelligible and what has yet to be discovered, two elements that, in the field of literature, dominate Fiction, but that should also belong to nonfictional discourse. Yet, according to several critics, informational books are still mistakenly associated by many with an assertive communicative approach, with an "analytical mode and sometimes pompous certainty" (Carr 1982: 160), with a literature of answers rather than a literature of questions (Sanders 2018).

As well as Travel Books, the field of Biographies has always made ample use of narrative devices, thereby blending information and imagination, Nonfiction and Fiction (Carr 1982). Biographies for children have always mostly dealt with people whose lives were considered exemplary: initially, saints or kings, followed by Greek and Roman heroes (after Plutarch) or national champions, often told from a patriotic perspective. Interestingly, the freedom allowed by the narrative mode is not

necessarily used by authors to portray their characters in a more layered and complex way, for instance imagining their characters' thoughts, moods, inner turmoil, etc. With very few exceptions, authors have mostly conceived Biographies for children as clearly and unmistakably edifying books, inevitably simplifying reality. Even though the spectrum of individuals dealt with has widened enormously compared to titles of the past, and now increasingly includes men and women who are representative of socially marginalized categories, still today Biographies for children are essentially hagiographies, blatant eulogies of their subject, rather than opportunities to ponder on the complexity and discrepancies of their personality. This contrasts with the nuanced approach to Biographies for adults, practiced with increasing sophistication since James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) (Wilms 1982). In Biographies for children, there is no difference in the key intentions of a book like *Famous Girls Who Have Become Illustrious Women: Forming Models for Imitation for the Young Women of England*, by John M. Darton, published in 1864, and *Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls. 100 Stories of Extraordinary Women* by Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo, published in 2017 (if we exclude the fact that the latter became a huge international best-seller). Both books choose exemplary women's lives told in the form of short, mainly anecdotal stories intended to inspire imitation by young girls. It matters little that the first book extols Nineteenth century female virtues of modesty, patience, and mildness while today's exemplary women are independent, enterprising, energetic, and rebellious. In both cases, only one mode of being a woman is presented as right, in line with the cultural trends of the time in which the authors write. Influenced by the legitimate claims of the #metoo movement, the role model of today is imposed upon readers in an assertive, monolithic, indisputable way, sidelining any real investigative study of the lives of the women portrayed in these Biographies. Favilli and Cavallo's book has had countless imitations. Yet, what emerges from this stream of Biographies is a feminine universe that does not allow for any exception to the women held up as role models. Although rejecting the acquiescence expected of women in the past, the gutsy rebellious characters lauded today might well trigger feelings of being somehow 'wrong' in less adventurous types, just as rebellious girls must have felt in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth century. If we consider their communicative style - assertive, oversimplified, unquestioning, non-dialogical with respect to the reader - these new Biographies for children, apparently very innovative for their feminist content, are carbon copies of the most old-fashioned, prescriptive, and ideological (not to mention gender-based) children's books ever written: the so-called Conduct Books, namely, the Conduct Books for Girls. A development of the more ancient Courtesy Books - aiming to instruct the children of aristocratic families on courtly manners in Medieval times - Conduct Books were widespread during the XVII and XVIII centuries to instruct the children of the rising middle classes in the rules of polite

behavior, with a clear distinction made between the sexes. To contemporary mindsets, these books seem extremely out-of-date, no less for their recommendation to distinguish the addressees according to their gender. Yet many recently published women's Biographies aimed at inspiring certain behaviors in girls differ little from their older counterparts.

Leaving aside Biographies and Travel Books - which since the outset have always lain between Nonfiction and Fiction - and Alphabet and Concept Books - which have always included typical poetic elements - narrative/poetic devices can characterize and have recently crept into any type of nonfiction books. When an author of an informational book deliberately chooses to write in a personal style, uses vivid descriptions or metaphors, opts for a conversational first-person narrative, asks the reader direct questions, or when the language of text, content, and title is widely figurative, lyrical, or original, we are in front of strategies that are typical of Fiction even if the book is about the real world. The result is simply 'literature' that should be analyzed and judged for its aesthetic elements as much as for its informational accuracy.

Nonfiction took a great leap forward with the XVIII century as societies became increasingly industrialized, rational, and scientific. Informational books for children focused on the great technological inventions of the day with publications like *The Wonders of the Telescope*, in 1805, and *The Wonders of the Microscope*, in 1806. This kind of book has been successful ever since, exploding during the 1950s, when the launch of the Sputnik by the Russians took the rest of the world - and especially the United States - by surprise and it was decided that the young generation had to have more scientific and technologic knowledge.
Developments in printing methods have progressively allowed more and more formal innovations in nonfiction books, such as the insertion of color illustrations positioned in each page next to the text to which they are related, rather than a block of images on separate pages. The use of photography became very widespread in the Seventies thanks also to the success of the many titles produced by the English publisher Dorling-Kindersley. Focused on various aspects of the natural and artificial world, these publications were among the first to subvert the proportion of text and images in Nonfiction in favor of the latter, using text as little more than simple captions explaining the pictures. It completely revolutionized the use of the visuals, formerly conceived as strictly functional to a book that relied on the written text to convey information and meaning. Dorling-Kindersley's photographic books took a first step in the direction of what at the end of the XX century, and especially since the 2010s, has been defined the 'pictorial turn' of Nonfiction (von Merveldt 2018). With this expression, von Merveldt refers to a reversal not only of the quantitative

but also of the qualitative, conceptual, philosophical, and more specifically gnoseological relationship between text and images. “This turn marks an epistemic shift in the relationship between text and image, fundamentally changing the way in which knowledge is constituted, understood, and communicated” (Von Merveldt 2018: 231). As von Merveldt notes, possibly the most interesting phenomenon of this shift has been the explosion, at an international level, of the production of the nonfiction picturebook. “The privileged status of images in knowledge transmission has led to an exciting convergence of informational literature and the picturebook format in the past three decades, resulting in innovative informational picturebooks that more often than not transcend the boundaries of media, genre, gender and age.” (Von Merveldt 2018: 231).

The nonfiction picturebook

As explained by the flourishing studies on the subject, the ‘picturebook’ is a specific communicative form, a unique multimodal book with its own grammar and rules. The picturebook is anchored on the attribution of meaning to all aspects of the book: within it, content and form are conceived to inextricably contribute to its semantic value. Not only text and images, but also format, cover, paper, endpapers, etc., all participate in the overall significance of the picturebook. It is this richness of elements - considered as important both in themselves and for the orchestration they require - that makes the picturebook such a challenging work, for both its makers and readers. The organization of graphic design, illustrations, and written text within the double spread, along with all the other formal and material elements of the book, requires a careful search for harmony of the various parts, making this kind of book particularly sophisticated, vibrant, and ‘open’ (Eco 1967), in both creative and hermeneutical terms. Any successful picturebook contains multiple levels of meaning and leaves interpretative spaces for the reader to fill in, spaces that may present anew at every new encounter with the same or different readers.

Opting for the picturebook form in Nonfiction over the last couple of decades has meant giving more and more weight to paratextual, illustrative, graphic, and material aspects, which in turn has contributed to radically changing the way knowledge is conceived and shared with the reader. Nonfiction picturebooks share the same ground as narrative picturebooks, their authors work within the same grammatical framework, i.e., they design the book so that the physical elements (format, size, type of paper), the structural elements (title, endpapers, a possible table of contents or appendix, the paratexts), the graphic/pictorial elements (fonts, colors, illustrations, layout of the spreads) - i.e., the aesthetic quality of the book as a whole – are all crucial to the creation of the work and an integral part of the content to be communicated.

In particular, the role of the visual code in the nonfiction picturebook is neither just decorative nor merely aimed at eliciting an aesthetic response in the reader, parallel to the cognitive response supposedly activated by the verbal code. In this kind of book, it is the images that contribute most to organizing and arranging the informational content, and to interpreting it according to their own rules. As Nikola von Merveldt writes when she compares nonfiction picturebooks to more traditional Nonfiction: "illustrations in informational picturebooks not only document or illustrate facts, they also visually organize and interpret them." (von Merveldt 2021: 54). Indeed, the underlying 'visual idea' makes these books become global artistic endeavors whose content is completely revolutionized, compared to traditional Nonfiction. Typically, the nonfiction picturebook is a composite, multilayered project, a creative as well as informative undertaking, in which the aesthetic aspects carry a genuine gnoseological value in themselves and make knowledge a potentially open, dialogical, intuitive dimension, as opposed to a mechanically transmitted set of notions. An emblematic example is *Zooptique*, by the French author and illustrator Guillaume Duprat, published by Gallimard in 2013. The focus of the book is the visual acuity of different animal species, a subject that leads to philosophical reflection on the different ways of seeing the world and the relativity of each specific vision. This sort of subject matter could not be conveyed as effectively and convincingly were the book not designed as a magnificent gallery of animal portraits with flaps on the eyes that can be lifted for the reader to see how each animal sees the world around it. Although displaying the 'same' landscape on every page, that landscape is represented differently on account of each animal's specific vision, one that readers can make their own every time they lift the flaps. Another book revolving around a visual idea is *Zoologique*, by Joëlle Jolivet, published in France by Seuil in 2002. In it, the author and illustrator arbitrarily groups animals from traditionally unrelated taxonomic categories that nonetheless have some common denominator: striped fur, a spotted coat, black and white coloring, a cold, temperate or hot habitat, underground dwelling, aquatic environment, etc. Grouped together according to subjective rather than scientific criteria, the animals are skillfully arranged in surreal double-page spreads that resemble a sort of mesmerizing puzzle, even more impressive because of the book's gigantic format. The author's communicative urgency is clearly perceptual and compositional much more than rigorously classificatory: the animals are matched according to what strikes our senses and how well they fit in a harmonious pattern, and this brings to unexpected and thought-provoking associations/connections among them. Again, *A toute Vitesse!* by the French artist Crushiform (published by Gallimard in 2013) groups humans, animals, and artificial objects that have no apparent connection. Their common feature is the speed at which each moves, from extremely slow to very fast. Yet, what the author/illustrator clearly had in mind when creating her elegant spreads

that hark back to posters of the 1920s was as much an object of beauty as a factual (and in fact extremely accurate) book on different speeds. Another example of this complex and often ingenious mode of communicating knowledge typical of the 'new' nonfiction picturebook is the German *Meister der Tarnung. Überlebenskünstler in der Tierwelt*, by Annika Siems, published by Gestenberg in 2012. As her subject is animal camouflage, the author/artist appropriately 'hides' the explanatory written description of how the various animals conceal themselves in the pictures, blurring the text within the image so that the reader has to look carefully to spot it. In this way, the reader gets first-hand experience of the phenomenon of camouflage. The book design allows understanding through the senses as well as through the intellect, and knowledge is acquired by active reader engagement rather than passive assimilation.

Although nonfiction picturebooks sometimes have a final appendix presenting their subject in a more traditional way, the aesthetic and semantic strength of this kind of books lies in the beauty and inventiveness of their more creative, expressive, evocative pages, deliberately designed to intertwine - and not dissociate - information and sensory solicitation, facts about the world and their creative representation. In other words, nonfiction picturebooks suggest ways of approaching knowledge by fusing the aesthetic dimension with the learning experience, a path that has been tentatively walked since the beginning of children's Nonfiction but is currently being explored and exploited to the full by publishers all over the world. By making creative and stylistic research their expressive characteristic, these books organize information in an original manner that may often be surprising, unsettling and sometimes irreverent yet always aims to engage the child reader, who is invited to look carefully, connect, find, and interpret, i.e., use his/her senses and capacity for marvel in the learning challenges the book presents.

In the last two decades, experimentation combining the communication of knowledge with the picturebook form has filled the shelves with some of the most innovative children's *literature*, mixing languages, blurring boundaries, and blending the very concepts of Fiction/Nonfiction, Science/Art, Instruction/Delight to produce new hybrid works conceived to share knowledge in a way that allows the child reader to think, marvel, wonder, and be actively engaged in the learning process.

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