

SAGGI – ESSAYS

BECOMING HUMAN. FROM CULTURAL MEMORY TO  
NEW SENSES OF BELONGING: STORIES OF MIGRA-  
TION IN CONTEMPORARY PICTURE BOOKS

DIVENTARE UMANI. DALLA MEMORIA CULTURALE A  
NUOVI SENSI DI APPARTENENZA: STORIE DI MIGRA-  
ZIONI NEGLI ATTUALI ALBI ILLUSTRATI

*di Ilaria Filograsso (Università di Chieti-Pescara)*

This contribution aims to investigate the complex, transformative role children’s literature can play in today’s socio-cultural context, offering a creative platform, not only in terms of plot or contexts, but also in terms of stylistic research and the book as a *medium*, on which to build new ways of thinking about and designing reality.

The work focuses specifically on one of the most significant picture books on the topic of (real or metaphoric) migration, refugees, migrants’ difficult and controversial path to integration. The very rich production in recent years has, with different registers each time, emblematically interpreted the political vocation of contemporary children’s literature, formulating relations with otherness, encouraging the deconstruction of cultural stereotypes and preventing emotional anaesthesia in the face of issues that demand the precise assumption of human and civil responsibility. In formal terms, it investigates the narrative strategies adopted by the authors and illustrators to guide the empathic involvement of the reader, aiming to foster reflexive and pro-social attitudes. In the picture books examined, the representation of the refugee, the stateless, the «destined to death», to quote Hanna Arendt, for whom the loss of citizenship equals the denial of the most basic human rights, challenges the “danger of a single history”.

Il presente contributo intende indagare sul complesso ruolo trasformativo che la letteratura per l'infanzia può rivestire nell'attuale contesto socio-culturale, offrendo, non solo al livello di plot o di contenuto, ma anche sul piano della ricerca stilistica e del libro come *medium*, una piattaforma creativa dalla quale costruire nuovi modi di pensare e progettare la realtà.

Saranno oggetto di specifica attenzione alcuni tra i più significativi albi illustrati dedicati al tema delle migrazioni (reali o metaforiche), dei rifugiati, del difficile e controverso percorso di integrazione dei migranti: una produzione molto ricca negli ultimi anni, che interpreta in modo emblematico, con registri di volta in volta diversi, la vocazione politica della letteratura per l'infanzia contemporanea, tematizzando il rapporto con l'alterità, incoraggiando la decostruzione di stereotipi culturali e scongiurando l'anestesia emotiva di fronte a questioni che chiamano in causa precise assunzioni di responsabilità umana e civile. Sul piano formale saranno indagate le strategie narrative messe in atto dagli autori e dagli illustratori per orientare il coinvolgimento empatico del lettore, finalizzato alla promozione di atteggiamenti riflessivi e pro-sociali. La rappresentazione del profugo, del rifugiato, dell'apolide, del «votato alla morte», per usare un'espressione di Hannah Arendt, per il quale la perdita della cittadinanza equivale alla negazione dei più fondamentali diritti umani, sfida, negli albi illustrati che si prenderanno in esame, "il pericolo di un'unica storia".

### 1. *Children's literature and civil commitment*

In an article published in *L'Espresso* in 2020, Roberto Saviano defines *The Arrival* (2016), a popular wordless book by Shaun Tan, as one of those books that «like a cornerstone, should be in every home, in every bookshop, on every bedside table». Hard to narrow down to a specific reader target or a particular narrative genre, with its happy alchemy of documentary realism and symbolism, alternating irony, lyricism, surrealism, the book uses only images to communicate to the reader the sense of bewilderment which, in

every era, accompanies migrants, political refugees and asylum seekers forced to leave their home countries, on their journeys (Negri, 2019). The work of the Australian illustrator of Malaysian origins offers an intense and multi-faceted sample of the emotional experiences of seeking one's place in the world, the solitude, destruction and reconstruction of the self always bring, leading us to think about the universal concepts of otherness, belonging and reception. The story shows readers of every age that «life is made of departures, separations dictated by a need which in many cases coincides with defending life. You either leave or die». The images not only «become the container of the unspeakable», a tool for identifying and processing trauma for those who have experienced migration, but also offer living metaphors of every process of interior change and resilience.

In *The origins of Totalitarianism*, in the introduction to the chapter *The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man*, Hannah Arendt lucidly described a highly significant phenomenon between the two World Wars, anticipating – with far-sighted vision – a condition that is still very current today for thousands of migrants (1996, p. 372). The experiences of refugees, the “stateless” and “Europe’s undesirables” showed the limits of the State of Law, powerful enough to decree that an individual was no longer one of its citizens, and at the same time incapable of assigning them a different statute that in any case confirmed the inalienability of human rights. While it is true that a person is a citizen as long as they live in the nation state, protected by the law by which they are such, the expulsion from that state and consequent suspension of the law reduced them to mere human beings, with no sacredness, destined to death. Once lost, the homeland marks the exclusion from any other community, the impossibility of finding a new one, consequently losing all legal status in any country. The greatest misfortune of the stateless is therefore that of no longer existing politically, of being so innocent, so pure, no longer responsible, yet capable of language – the foundation of human relations – and action. Thus, the idea of “nature” as an assumption of human rights,

as a category which includes the human essence, is lost. It is therefore from man, as a human being, that we have to restart in order to think of their political survival. In 1959, when awarded the Lessing Prize, continuing to think of the space of politics, Arendt wondered how the idea of humanity was possible in dark times (2006, pp. 70-72). Returning to the body-double of politics, to the refugee and the stateless, Arendt identifies a potential anchor in friendship, the possible form of the political survival of mankind: friendship understood not as the intimacy of those who have withdrawn or been expelled from the world, but as a free, horizontal relationship that through dialogue does not lose sight of the world, does not replace the world with the tight space of the private, anonymity, the self-referentiality of the individual or the group. Friendship, in the Latin meaning of *ambition*, to walk, *ambitus*, to go around, terms that identify the semantic field of politics, closely linked to that all-Roman idea of *humanitas* and, partly, the Greek idea of *philantropia*. Pliny the Elder identified *humanitas* as that which distinguishes humans from all other living beings and which makes man *humanus* and *politus*, capable of discourse on the world and on life, as opposed to *indocti et agrestes*. It is this political background, this dealing with the world and humanising it, making it the subject of discourse between people which can, even today, change the approach towards migrants and refugees: dealing with them in terms of friendship cannot be limited to reception merely for biological survival, but demands the definition of a political space of actions and common discourses, respecting differences and pluralism.

Politics, where understood as that practice working to create what we hope, belongs to everyone, it is the inevitable dimension for creating a human world, as the essence of the human condition is plurality, the fact that «men, and not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world» (Arendt, 1989, p. 7). The possibility to give meaning to existence is closely linked to the possibility to give expression to the plural consistency of the human being, taking care of the social world, restoring the public dimension of living, the matrix of social and political formation (Bertolini, 2003; Mortari, 2008).

How can literature, from childhood onwards, contribute to forming a dialogic thought, capable of inter-subjective debate, leaving the asphyxia of the private sphere without cancelling it out, and of understanding the common space of meeting and negotiation?

In the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, literature for children and adolescents has offered numerous contributions to the social and cultural debate on migration, in different national contexts, assuming, more or less consciously, a political role, which today can be considered the fundamental identifying code of the discipline. The picture books mentioned in this essay, among the many produced in recent years, are representative of the ability of children's literature to tackle difficult, even "unpronounceable" topics, and express the silence that accompanies grief and desperation, at the same time giving a voice to those who have none in the real world. And the authentically political role played by these stories never lies in the mere choice of topic, but in the form and aesthetic choices of the authors and illustrators, the importance given specifically to visual design, the relationship of dialogue established with the reader, involved and driven to take the risk of interpreting and negotiating meanings, activating cultural and inter-textual resources needed to explore the multi-modal complexity of highly challenging texts (Arizpe, 2015; Arizpe, Colomer & Martinez-Roldan, 2014; Campagnaro & Dallari, 2013; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). These books help to build links between past and present, reprocessing the memory of national cultures and affiliations, at the same time relaunching the meaning of bonds which go beyond the ethnic dimension, but which are linked to universal principles such as responsibility, caring for others, solidarity, human respect. The way in which the reader's gaze is caught or provoked can foster the recognition of the self and of others, the judgement of ethical actions of individuals or groups, thought on the opportunity for that "human flourishing" which migrants are denied. In this direction, children's literature can become a precious space for young readers to find a voice, find agency, the right to active relationships with otherness, in both its individual and collective meaning; a voice, therefore, which establishes and claims

its own presence, the need for personal growth and self-realisation, but which is also committed to understanding and changing the structures of “living together”, in the active exercise of citizenship (Sutherland, 1985).

In recent years, Clementine Beauvais (2014; 2015) has explored the political potential of contemporary children’s literature on several occasions, beyond the mere thematic dimension and focusing on the purpose of social transformations suggested in the works analysed (mainly picture books), identifying a hiatus between books encouraging young readers to undertake a political action at local and “microscopic” level, characterised by a form of existentialist reflexivity, and books that support the full, macroscopic restructuring of reality, trusting in the potential of all of humanity and children exposed to educational ideals linked to emancipation, responsibility and solidarity. The scholar links this second type of children’s literature to critical pedagogy and the 21<sup>st</sup> century heterological theories of power. The role of the text lies in the possibility to generate a critical mass able to contrast the established order and design a meaningful future. Reintegrating hope as an educational principle, utopic thought rejects fatalism and moves towards a transforming action without abandoning the awareness of the limits set by reality.

In this direction, the words and images offered by children’s literature can represent a stimulus for a deep-down, not superficial or stereotyped understanding of what exists, looking beyond what is visible and accredited, upturning ideologies and common sense (Mickenberg, 2006; Reynolds, 2007): an essential contribution therefore to forming critical thought and, together, the disposition of the mind which we define empathy, “civil” emotion that reawakens the ability to live others’ experiences within ourselves. Indeed, it is empathy that makes it possible to break down indifference and the tendency to distance ourselves from anything that disturbs the consciousness, to activate a responsible sensitivity towards all that is contrary to the ethical principle of a good life for all human beings (Baron-Cohen, 2011).

## 2. *The narration of migration in pictures, blending empathy and compassion*

According to Martha Nussbaum, emotions involve judgements about important things, judgements in which, appraising an external object as salient for our own well-being, we acknowledge our own neediness and incompleteness before parts of the world that we do not fully control (2001, p. 19). This perspective is defined as a «modified version of the ancient vision of the stoics, according to which emotions are value judgements which ascribe to things and people outside our own control great importance for our own *flourishing*» (realisation, *eudaimonia*, fullness) (p. 22). Compassion is an emotion of this kind, so filled with intentional, cognitive and eudemonistic contents. Compared to equally known emotions like sadness, fear, love, joy, hope, rage, etc., compassion has an extra characteristic of being a *socially very important* emotion, a rational emotion not only in descriptive but also in normative terms, as it is suitable for guiding resolution in adulthood, capable of «extending the boundaries of the self» (p. 297), positively responding to the central dilemma of the human condition: the search for a non-suffocating or destructive balance between exposure to fate and control, between activity and passivity, between the self and others. According to this perspective, for compassion to be present, people must consider others' suffering as a significant part of their framework of purposes. To feel compassion, it would therefore be enough to feel the suffering of others as an injury in one's own life project, a blow against one's own vulnerability (Costa, 2003, pp. 131-148).

The main obstacles to compassion are inappropriate social institutions and the failure to leave that pathological condition of egoism/narcissism that a normal process of maturation and education should allow us to overcome. The recognition of one's own lack of self-sufficiency starts in childhood, when in the relationship with our parents we learn to develop the feelings of love and care and learn to process losses and grief in a non-destructive manner and, finally, we learn to see things from other people's point of view. For this purpose, from the earliest years of life art and, in

particular, literature, play an essential part, fuelling our ability to see the human finitude with pleasure (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 351).

The ability of literature to promote pro-social emotions such as empathy has been long investigated: from Richard Rorty (2007) to Martha Nussbaum (1997, 2001) and Suzanne Keen (2007), readerly empathy has been analysed as an affective transaction able to encourage altruistic behaviour and extend the sense of humanity shared by the readers. This is one of the intrinsic powers of fiction, investigated also by many scholars within the field of cognitive narratology, a field which, according to John Stephens, offers «some powerful approaches to literature as a form of human cognition and communication with a specific potential for responding to social reality» (2011, p. 12). While for Keen, literary empathy means feeling with fictional characters, triggered by strong character identification, especially identification with the emotional plight of a particular literacy persona, Dominick LaCapra prefers to talk of «empathic unsettlement» (2001, p. 41): we can be responsive to the traumatic experience of others however resisting the full identification and appropriation of the experience represented. LaCapra emphasises the need to maintain a critical distance between readers/spectators and the fictional characters: reading or seeing the reconstruction of the stories of others through memory and other narrative instruments allows readers to become secondary witnesses of their difficulties and thus develop an empathic response to them. The immersive identification with the lead character of the stories and the fictional world does not necessarily encourage sophisticated interpretations, at times denying the reader freedom and agency. Not by chance, Nikolajeva (2011) finds that this compulsion for identification in reading narrative stories is a «perplexing phenomenon», and indeed speaks of «identification fallacy».

The picture books in question uses different strategies to engage readers, focusing mainly on the power of the images to stimulate emotions: «images transcend language and geographical region, and they are often able to strike instantly at the very heart of the viewer» (Pizzarro et al., 2006, p. 91). The visual grammar has a wide range of compositional resources to create different textual

meanings. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) suggest that «interpersonal meaning in visual texts may be identified through the representation of relations between viewer and image content» (p. 114). Different visual strategies guide the interpretation and the assumption of different roles by the reader, with significant ethical and aesthetic consequences.

*Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker*, published in Mexican in 2011 with the title *Migrar*, written by José Manuel Mateo and illustrated by Javier Martínez Pedro, tells the story of migration of a Mexican family, with all its hazards and difficulties told image after image in a *leporello* that composes a single image, readable from the top downwards. The choice of format refers to the political involvement of the authors, which expresses the emotional connotation of the events not only in terms of words and images, but also the material elements of book design. The narrating first person of the child protagonist shows full awareness of the experience. The consistent use of dark colours seems to suggest an affinity between past and future; the path of the reader following the narration of the *leporello* reminds us of the descent into an unknown and threatening world, alluding to the emotional drama of forced migration and ironically upturning the actual geographical position of Mexico and the United States. A column on the left is occupied by the brief text; on the right, a single illustration developed vertically, containing innumerable micro-stories corresponding to the various stages of the journey, which follow on without interruption. The reader is forced to look for them in the density of the black and white drawings: half way down the illustration, the page is cut diagonally by the “beast”, the train that symbolises the journey. Among the many effectively evoked aspects, particularly emblematic is the invisibility of the migrants, during their journey and once they reach their destination. The accordion-pleats and the artist’s aesthetic choices allude to the form of pre-Colombian Mesoamerican codices, which were often single folded sheets. The note on the book informs the readers that the illustrations are painted on local Mexican Amate paper, traditionally used by priests and the

Aztec authorities for sacred and political purposes. After the Spanish Conquest, this paper lost its value, as it was associated with indigenous religion and thus banned as it was suspected of having connections with magic beliefs; many of the indigenous codices were destroyed, and much of the cultural memory and native history with them. The book therefore re-activates the memory of pre-Colonial Mexico, giving symbolic value to the materials chosen, associating the painful history of colonisation with today's struggles of the descendants of the Mesoamericans, along with the clear stylistic analogies with Diego Riviera's murals. The shape of the book imitates the structure of the codex and incarnates a metaphor that speaks of the trauma of the refugees.

By activating the readers' different senses – visual, but also tactile, kinaesthetic, even olfactory (amate paper has a special smell) – the artists try to evoke affective engagement and initiate an active interrogation of the commonplaceness of violence and abuse towards those who are poor and homeless (Smoczynska, 2018, p. 225).

Migratory mobility today means the continuous crossing of material, physical, geographical, socio-cultural and symbolic borders. Like any crossing of boundaries, this is a transgressive move, often perceived as such, above all by the states and societies where the migrants arrive. Not by chance, states and societies tend to react by attempting to strengthen their borders: just think of the construction of barriers on the frontiers, or the mistrust of migrants, seen as those who put the privileges and certainties of citizens of wealthy societies at risk (Romeri, 2017). This is the subject of *The Island* (2007) by Armin Greder, one of the most famous books on migration, a philosophical fable representing the individual and group reactions to the arrival of a foreigner. The book pushes the readers to feel compassion, in the terms illustrated by Nussbaum, for a human being who is defenceless and condemned, because he is foreign, for having reached the coast after his raft is wrecked at sea during a storm, first to isolation and then to certain death, recognising themselves in the vicissitudes of another person. The protagonist, represented as a small, naked character compared to the

large, grotesque islanders that take him in, is initially relegated to a remote part of the island, abandoned in indifference as the islanders go back to their normal lives. When he is seen in the streets on the island, driven by hunger or solitude, he is rejected by the inhabitants who are terrified, acting on the fear that goes beyond the rational reading of reality and slips into prejudice, the construction of stigma and the demonisation of the other. Even though the story does not explicitly describe this, the foreigner is chased off back into the sea, while a very high wall is built around the island, preventing even the birds from entering, expressing complete closure to all forms of contact with anything that exists outside of the boundary of a suffocating and self-centred community. Only one dissenting voice can be heard, that of a fisherman, calling the reader to a sense of reception and collective responsibility. According to Nussbaum, two constituent elements of compassion, the judgement of *sizze* (a serious, bad event has befallen someone) and the judgement of *non desert* (this person, or creature, is a significant element in my scheme of goals and projects, an end whose good is to be promoted) (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 321), can already be found in the first two pages of the book (Dudek, 2011): the foreigner is quite the opposite of dangerous, having been deprived of all his belongings in the ocean and the currents that swept away his raft, sentencing him to a grave and unfair fate, that of certain death. In the same page, the crowd looks straight at the reader, who takes on the point of view of the foreigner, who is made an object, observed with hatred and diffidence, as the reader's gaze shares the same perspective as the castaway in the initial image, when the raft floats on the sea in the storm. The man right in the foreground holds a pitchfork, which seems to push the defenceless foreigner out of the page, where the reader is waiting for him. In this scene, the reader is invited to formulate a "eudemonic judgement" on the importance of the foreigner, because the reader is also a foreigner, or could be, and because, as the fisherman explains, he cannot wish to have his death on his conscience. A double page follows, representing from left to right the group of islanders united

with their pitchforks and, alone on the right-hand page, the foreigner, driven towards his place of detention. These and the two pages immediately afterwards make the reader a “compassionate” observer: divided into three horizontal sections, the first with a text describing the choice of the community to shut the foreigner away in an abandoned place, returning to their usual business as if nothing had happened. The second, with just pictures, in the style of the sequences of a graphic novel, shows moments of the everyday life of the community, with activities marked strongly by gender differences: the women are at home, cooking, serving their men, who then enjoy an evening at the pub. But the third strip at the bottom counteracts the appearance of normality of the one above: three children play with wooden pitchforks, imitating the adults with their threatening behaviour towards the foreigner, who this time is portrayed as another child, covering his face with his hands. You can belong to a group and be outside it, therefore, you can live a condition of *similar possibility* even without being a foreigner, experimenting prejudice and unmotivated exclusion. The fisherman, the only alternative voice to the terror and violence of the islanders, is never shown in the pictures, he is not an active character. His role is played by the reader, forced in the final sequences to be a spectator of the cruel fate of the foreigner, bound and forced off the island, and the fisherman, whose boat is set on fire in the middle of the sea, alluding to the disappearance of all possible human flourishing, all hope of authentic reception. Through a clever, provoking game of points of view, activating different levels of interpretation, the dynamic relationship between words and pictures and the many gaps between the visual and verbal, “committed” picture books like *The Island* invite the implicit reader to assume a problematic view of otherness, both observing it and feeling a part of it, assigning different complementary roles. The young reader is both the subject who looks and analyses, the scrutinised and alienated object and, finally, the project looking to the future, with critical and transformational energy to promote a fairer and more sustainable social and ecological coexistence (Beauvais, 2015).

### *3. The silences of wordless books*

In many recently published books, the dialogic potential of the wordless picture book meets the ethical purpose of children's literature of creating complex affective representations of a phenomenon of global proportions, transcending linguistic and cultural differences, and inviting readers to actively question texts that intentionally demand the integration of what is missing, using words to give voice that what is told and represented, assuming the risk of the personal construction of meaning (Terrusi, 2017; 2020). Wordless stories invite the reader to verbally propose solutions and conclusions to the trauma of migration, pushing the implicit non-migrant reader to take a standpoint towards the represented voiceless migrant. These books may therefore be used as tools to study the intercultural dialogue between refugees and non-refugees, migrant and non-migrant children, stating, according to the aesthetic choices of authors and illustrators, lamentations or affirmations of the migrants' identities. In the perspective of heteronormative critique, Philip Nel (2018) underlines how children's literature is able to draw attention to "the fiction of statehood" and the arbitrary nature of the concept of border. Indeed, the infringement of borders draws attention to their arbitrariness: the safety of those inside the border is preserved, to the detriment of those left outside. As Zoe Jacques and Gabriel Duckels (2019) explain, the most commonly used space-time by narrators in wordless picture books emphasises the liminal dimension of the journey, focusing on the dramatic imperative of escaping from an unsafe situation. Through sophisticated visual strategies, the reader's gaze is guided through a transition in which the migrant negotiates a border space, a possible crossing, the outcome of which may end tragically or be a haven which, with all its uncertainties and difficulties, can mark the first step towards integration and new ties. According to scholars, the effectiveness of the telling of this space-time depends on the ability of each book to establish a dialogue with readers, forced to give voice to the refugees, deprived of their own voice not so much in books as in reality. In this direction, the wordless picture book

underlines the importance of language in the formation of both the refugee's and the non-refugee's identity.

Their aesthetic composition nears the sublime as wordless evocation of preverbal sensation; it demands that the reader take a leap from the Imaginary (the affective, preverbal value of the wholly visual narrative) to the Symbolic (the verbal narrative imposed upon the preverbal visual sequence) in the meaning-making process (Duckels & Jacques, 2019, p. 133).

Through this formal peculiarity, the reader experiments, studies and temporarily inhabits a certain subjectivity that emerges from the narration.

While in books such as *Horizons* by Paola Formica (2015) the escape from the homeland is filtered through the eyes of the lead character, the child migrant, by the physicality of emotions and feelings rendered effectively by just a few incisive details, in *The Mediterranean* (2017) by Armin Greder it is framed completely from the perspective of the adult characters, and the story develops with an unsentimental tone, suited to the mourning of that tragic fate that awaits thousands of migrants attempting to cross the natural border of the sea. A cold atmosphere prevails, anticipated by the blue and grey colours portraying a man falling into the depths of the sea, his lifeless body destined to be eaten by the fish. The aesthetics of despair told in the pages of this book is based on a temporal circularity that is hard to break: the fish are sold at the local market and eaten by characters who immediately after are shown involved in arms trafficking, the accomplices of Western politicians and demagogues fomenting war and destruction. From left to right, in the following page, the threatening stance of the soldiers make way for the desolate representation of villages in flames and the terrified faces of the inhabitants, forced to flee and crowded in boats of fortune, set sail across the border of an inhospitable sea, where they meet their death and, again and again, are left for the fish. As Alessandro Leogrande explains in the afterword, the narration focuses on the attempt to restore humanity to bodies that are often objectified, reduced to numbers and statistics, deprived of the consistency of a life, of stories, voices and emotions. The

narrative strategy that drives the reader to play an active and reflexive role is precisely that of the investigation of the causes and authentic motivations of the journey, which are political more than economic and social. When migration is confined to a timeless, a-historical dimension, what motivates and comes before disappears, just as what remains, the nameless corpses, vanish into nothing, never having the possibility to speak. The reader has the task of restoring dignity and consistency to their silences, finding the necessary agreement between compassion and a responsible commitment to testimony.

In conclusion, a wordless book that, with some peaks of strong lyricism and in a rarefied and engrossed atmosphere, is able to blend darkness and light, shadow and colours, death and hope. Issa Watanabe, born in Peru in 1980, the daughter of a poet and an illustrator, in turn migrants from Japan and Switzerland, has lived in Mallorca since 2000. Talking about the birth of *Migrants* (2020), her latest, powerful, wordless picture book, the authoress states that she was inspired by Magnus Wennman's photographs of Syrian children, *Where the children sleep*. The vision of those children's faces drove her to draw, placing one image next to another initially without any precise plan. The authoress explains:

I think this book is about empathy. Being moved by a character in the story helps us empathise with the human beings who are going through such a challenging experience. It has always surprised me how empathy can start a conversation with children and adolescents, and generate further reflection (<https://geckopress.com/migrants-qa-with-issa-watanabe>).

The story, which tells of the migration of a group of humanised animals, can only be a sad story, as the subject demands the dignity of being analysed seriously, without hypocrisy. However, right from the start, the story of the painful and tiring journey undertaken by the animals offers an idea of hope. This is represented especially by the strong bond between the members of the group, underlining solidarity and the ability to share, by the use of colour contrasting the very dark background, the strength that pushes

them to continue their journey despite all their difficulties, and the end of the story, which alludes not only to a new beginning but also to the responsibility of those who welcome them. The animals are used to tell the story in a different, immediately empathic and at the same time more universal way, without the need to connote the characters in terms of culture, race or ethnic group. The various animals are also strongly characterised, by the clothes they wear, their facial expression and posture. Depersonalisation, which prevents identification, is avoided. At the beginning of the story, a blue ibis, the symbol of life and death, past and present, joins the only character with human features, death, an attentive and silent companion of this absorbed convoy. A book in which tragedy, darkness, violated and flouted rights, can become solidarity, personal and collective hope: in spite their differences, the animal characters in the book do not only share a sad fate, but together they find the strength to act and fight, implicitly giving a political meaning to their journey towards new belongings.

### *Bibliography*

- Arendt H. (1989). *Vita activa*. Milano: Bompiani.
- Arendt H. (1996). *Le origini del totalitarismo*. Milano: Edizioni di Comunità.
- Arendt H. (2006). *L'umanità in tempi bui*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore.
- Arizpe E. (2015). *Children Reading Picturebooks: Interpreting visual texts*. London-New York: Routledge.
- Arizpe E., Colomer T., & Martinez-Roldan C. (2014). *Visual Journeys Through Wordless Narratives: An International Inquiry with Immigrant Children and The Arrival*. London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Baron-Cohen S. (2011). *Zero degrees of empathy. A new theory of human cruelty*. London: Allen Lane.
- Beauvais C. (2014). Little tweaks and fundamental changes: two aspects of sociopolitical transformation in children's literature. In M.T. Keyes & A. McGillicuddy (Eds), *Politics and Ideology in Children's Literature* (20-31). Dublin: Fourt Court Press.
- Beauvais C. (2015). *The Mighty Child: Time and Power in Children's Literature*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

- Bertolini P. (2003). *Educazione e politica*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore.
- Campagnaro M. & Dallari M. (2013). *Incanto e racconto nel labirinto delle figure. Albi illustrati e relazione educativa*. Trento: Erickson.
- Costa P., & Nussbaum M. (2003). La compassione entro i limiti della ragione. *La società degli individui*, 18, IV, 3, 131-148.
- Duckens G., & Jaques Z. (2019). Visualizing the Voiceless and Seeing the Unspeakable: Understanding International Wordless Picturebooks about Refugees. *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, 11, 2, 124-150.
- Dudek D. (2011). Disturbing Thoughts: Respresentations of Compassion in Two Picture Books Entitled The Island. *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, 3, 2, 11-29.
- Formica P. (2015). *Horizons*. Milano: Carthusia.
- Greder A. (2007). *The Island*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.
- Greder A. (2017). *The Mediterranean*. Roma: Orecchio Acerbo.
- Keen S. (2007). *Empathy and the novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kress G.R., & Van Leeuwen T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. New York: Routledge.
- LaCapra D. (2001). *Writing history, writing trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Mateo M.J., Martinez Pedro J. (2014). *Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- Mickenberg J. (2006). *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mortari L. (2008). *Educare alla cittadinanza partecipata*. Milano: Bruno Mondadori.
- Negri M. (2019). Fiabe di periferia. Le molte vie del racconto nei libri di Shaun Tan. In A. Antoniazzi (Ed.) *Scrivere, leggere, raccontare... La letteratura per l'infanzia tra passato e futuro* (199-214). Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Nel P. (2018). Introduction: Migration, Refugees, and Diaspora in Children's Literature. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 43, 4, 357-362.
- Nikolajeva M., & Scott C. (2006). *How picturebooks work*. New York: Routledge.
- Nikolajeva M. (2011). The identification fallacy: Perspective and subjectivity in children's literature. In M. Cadden (Ed.), *Telling children's stories: Narrative theory and children's literature* (187-208). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Nussbaum M. (1997). *Cultivating humanity: A classical defense of reform in liberal education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nussbaum M. (2001). *Upheavals of Thought. The intelligence of emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Pizzarro D.A., Detweiler-Bedell B., & Bloom P. (2006). The creativity of everyday moral reasoning: Empathy, disgust, and moral persuasion. In J.C. Kaufman & J. Baer (Eds.), *Creativity and reason in cognitive development* (81-98). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Reynolds K. (2007). *Radical Children's Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Romeri G. (2017). Sconfinamenti e connessioni tra mobilità migratoria, pedagogia e letteratura per l'infanzia. *Formazione Lavoro Persona*, VII, 22, 209-219.
- Rorty R. (2007). *Philosophy as cultural politics, volume 4: Philosophical papers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Saviano R. (2020). Nell'anima di chi parte per sempre. *L'Espresso* 17 (02).
- Smczynska K. (2018). "We Refugees": (Un)othering in visual narratives on displacement. *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 17 (1), 217-236.
- Stephens J. (2011). Schemas and scripts: Cognitive instruments and the representation of cultural diversity in children's literature. In K. Mallan & C. Bradford (Eds.), *Contemporary children's literature and film: Engaging with theory* (12-35). New York, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sutherland R.D. (1985). Hidden persuaders: political ideologies in literature for children. *Children's Literature in Education*, 16, 3, 143-157.
- Tan S. (2006). *The Arrival*. London & Sydney: Hodder Children's Books.
- Terrusi M. (2017). *Meraviglie mute. Silent books e letteratura per l'infanzia*. Roma: Carocci.
- Terrusi M. (2020). Albi illustrati senza parole per l'inclusione. Riflessioni di metodo sulla lettura, fra forma e metafora. In E.A. Emili & V. Macchia (Eds.), *Leggere l'inclusione. Albi illustrati e libri per tutti e per ciascuno* (pp. 77-88). Pisa: ETS.
- Watanabe I. (2020). *Migrants*, Wellington: Gecko (in press).