

Introduction | Introduzione

## Frames for the Body. Spaces and Places in Children's Literature

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### ABSTRACT

*Over the last forty years, spatiality has attracted increasing academic interest as a means to investigate children's literature, its history and its underlying theory, both in Italy and abroad. It is a field intersected by exciting pedagogical ideas and categories which are being used to conduct research into children's literature; they include lived-in space, interior geography, educational materiality, and the building of identity starting from lived spaces. Each of the five essays in this monograph takes its own perspective to investigate the spaces and places of children's literature, both real and symbolic, as they hang suspended between history and the modern day. The various theoretical approaches and original interweaving of disciplines reveal the multi-faceted world of children's literature that orbits around spatiality.*

**Keywords:** *Spatiality – Materiality – Educational places – History and Theory of Children's literature*

### ***Le cornici del corpo. Spazi e luoghi nella Letteratura per l'infanzia***

*Negli ultimi quarant'anni sia in Italia che all'estero la letteratura per l'infanzia ha registrato un crescente interesse scientifico per il tema della spazialità tanto a livello teorico quanto a livello storiografico. Intorno a questa tematica si intersecano idee e categorie pedagogiche di grande vitalità per lo studio di questa disciplina (lo spazio vissuto, le geografie d'interni, la materialità educativa, la costruzione dell'identità a partire dagli spazi abitati). In questo focus, gli spazi e i luoghi (reali e simbolici) della letteratura per l'infanzia, sospesi fra storia e contemporaneità, sono indagati da cinque diverse prospettive, che mettono in evidenza, grazie a differenti approcci teorici ed originali intrecci disciplinari, l'universo polimorfo della letteratura per l'infanzia intorno al tema della spazialità.*

**Parole chiave:** *Spazialità – Materialità - Luoghi educativi – Storia e Teoria della Letteratura per l'infanzia*

In the 1970s, when Einaudi published its first edition of Gianni Rodari's *Grammatica della Fantasia* (1973), the Italian writer's groundbreaking narrative models contributed to reviving interest in fantasy in children's literature and beyond. Fantasy became an important and exciting means to stimulate children's imagination and creativity, as well as to inject new life into classroom teaching. Principally, however, it spotlighted the democratic, liberating value that creative use of the written word can play in childhood. Re-adaptations, hybridisations and creative revampings of fairy-tales were central to these new ideas. Even more crucial, however, were children's bold and impertinent encounters with every-day life, especially that within the home. In his opening observations on "the wonderful world of home", Rodari states that household spaces and their objects are "the stuff of the first observations and emotions that [children] need to build their vocabulary and use as clues about the world in which they are growing up" (1973/1997, p. 111). A child's journey around the home forges "awareness and fantasy-building, experience and symbolisation" (ibid., p. 110). The 1970s were also the decade of Armand Frémont, head of the French geographical school of thought; Frémont was a scholar of "the geography of daily-life" and coined the phrase *espace vécu* [lived-in space] (1976). "Place" became the foundation on which the space within human daily experience was built; it was linked to

a reduced but clearly defined space, but one not without extension: homes, fields, streets, squares. [...] It brought together small yet tight-knit groups: the same family, the same profession and the same daily encounters. (Frémont, 1978, p. 95)

Frémont's vision has much in common with research by humanist geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan and Anne Buttimer, who strove to interpret and understand the values, symbols and meanings that societies have given to or impressed upon the places in which they live. Analysis switched from how humans experienced "lived-in space" and onto how they saw and perceived it. Focus was now being placed on the relationships they forged with their surrounding spaces, including invisible and unexplored ones. According to humanist geographers,

art in general, and literature in particular, with the evocative way they represent personal geography, are able to bestow order upon the chaotic way we see and perceive reality. (Lando, 2012, p. 280)

In the 1990s, Emma Beseghi's "Quaderni di Letteratura per l'infanzia" (1995) gave form and thought to the question of interior geography in children's literature. It defined the role of "story-telling homes", i.e. homes that

provide [...] precious information on reality [...], contain clues to historical and geographical places, social classes, status symbols, generational and epochal cycles, family transformations [...], 'states of mind'. (1995, p. 71)

In 1996, Nuova Italia published *Lo spazio vissuto: luoghi educativi e soggettività* by pedagogist Vanna Iori, a book which, with great foresight, focused on the role and the function of spaces-places in educational events. The objective and measurable domains of physical-geometric space were still present, but beside them now stood the subjective and lived domain of space, one that changed with state of mind and injected fresh life into education and teaching. According to Iori, homes, classrooms, squares and cities embody the way that space becomes educational. The year 1996 also saw Laterza publish a major work entitled *Storia dell'infanzia*, a stunning historical portrait of how childhood has evolved in Europe, from ancient Rome to the modern day. It explains children's relationships with adults, the role of the family and schools, child labour, social protection networks, play, science, religion, iconography and literature. This voluminous work emphasises the importance of spaces in "educational materiality", be they open or closed, urban or rural, school or domestic, elite or popular.

In 2016, "International Research in Children's Literature" published an article by Cambridge University's Maria Nikolajeva (2016) in which she reconstructed the contemporary panorama of research into children's literature. Her work pinpointed a tangible change within the approach of contemporary research and she did not hesitate to call it a "material turn" (p. 133). This return to the body becomes clear on seeing the emergence and consolidation of the characteristic themes of modern research within children's literature: ecocriticism, place-related identity, animals, disability, place-mapping and maps within children's books, as well as the physicality of landscape, objects and artefacts, such as dolls' houses. Nikolajeva's interpretation confirmed a trend that had already established itself in a number of countries, including Italy, where a prime example was a 2014 monograph in "Rivista di storia dell'educazione – RSE". It was edited by Carmela Covato and devoted to the past and modern history of educational materiality.

Over the last forty years, spatiality has attracted increasing academic interest as a means to investigate children's literature, its history and its underlying theory. A positive move, indeed. Equally positive is that children's literature is able to observe and draw from the thought of other disciplines: some similar, others less so. This is certainly the notion that transpires from this monograph, which is devoted to the spaces and places, both real and symbolic, of children's literature, as they hang suspended between history and the modern day. Its five essays discuss the aforementioned ideas, tie them to the history and the theory behind children's literature, and then put them forward in a stimulating new light, seamlessly interweaving them with other disciplines.

The monograph is organised diachronically. It begins with the representations of domestic settings in classic fairy-tales, which are not as atemporal and ahistorical as traditionally believed, and culminates with the representations of today's modern urban spaces, which attempt to raise children's awareness of eco-sustainability. The five essays highlight the wealth of theoretical approaches within children's literature, from fields such as historiography, hermeneutics, cognitive narratology and ecocriticism; they also cover means and sources, including literature, architecture, furniture, human geography, art and outdoor education, as well as the literary genres which fuel contemporary studies on children's literature: from the canonical axis of Basile-Perrault-Grimm to the Golden Age of the late 19th and early 20th centuries classics; and from contemporary novels for young adults to the visual space of modern picturebooks.

The monograph maps the complex multi-faceted universe of children's literature around spatiality, a theme that is proving to be increasingly topical and capable of opening multiple lines of research.

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