

AN EDITOR IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS: DENISE JOHNSTONE-BURT IN ANTHONY BROWNE'S INTO THE FOREST

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ABSTRACT:

Denise Johnstone-Burt has been Anthony Browne's editor for many years and she has been by his side in the creative process of many of his picture books. In this article, the work of Johnstone-Burt is examined through the analysis of Browne's *Into the forest*. It explores the concept of a good publisher and it answers the question of what it is a good book and what special features a children's book should include. The iconic and narrative analysis of *Into the forest* will be seconded by Johnstone-Burt's contributions.

KEY WORDS:

Denise Johnstone-Burt, Anthony Browne, Editor, Children's Literature



BEING AN EDITOR BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL CHOICES AND CULTURAL RESPONSIBILITY

A good editor is the one who, when facing an in-depth knowledge of the conditions of the “literature market”, knows how to understand and interpret the readers’ tastes. It is the one who, in the *mare magnum* of a quantitatively high and varied offer of publications, maintains high quality cultural and industrial projects. A good editor is the one who, by intercepting (or stimulating, enhancing, orienting) reading preferences, he or she carries out a significant yet conscientious cultural work, opposing to the laws of a globalized and standardizing market the search for a good book, for a beautiful story, therefore operating in the margins of the publications’ intellectual honesty and literary dignity. Such responsibility is certainly higher if the editor is addressing his/her work mainly to children. In this case the search for an author’s narrative is necessarily confronted with the dimension of the message that the book communicates in its entirety (with its language and its stratified meanings): the child, as a special recipient, while reading performs, in fact, a formative experience of considerable impact not only on the imaginary level.

What do we really mean by *a good book*? Which special features should a children’s book have? Since the Eighties and Nineties in Europe we are witnessing the proliferation of an independent and active micro-publishing research engaged in the publishing of children’s books and picture books of extraordinary quality, in which the artistic elements wonderfully cross the languages and visions of the childhood world.

It should not go unnoticed that the realization of a winning balance between aesthetic-literary sensitivity and attention to the reading needs of the special recipient in the great majority of cases stems from the competent work of enlightened and far-sighted women editors. In Spain, Elena Ramirez is one of the exposures of how the editing task is done. She is the ahead of Seix Barral and Planeta international and is aware of what represents the task of the editor when it comes to the creative process, from promoting culture to commercial purposes:

The editor’s work involves a lot of internal work... How can it be that a profession that starts with a man writing at home alone, that ends with a man reading at home alone, or a lady reading at home alone, in the middle it involves such a mess of people doing all sorts of things, a to promote culture and that mess of people doing all kinds of things has a lot of work in team. (“La Vanguardia”, 2019. The translation from the Spanish interview is by Mireia Canals-Botines).

However, Spain has also many small, young and not so young publishing houses commanded by women who point at quality and modern literature for children.

Ermonautas is leadered by two women editors. Teresa Arias and Eva Clemente launched in 2015 to the publishing market, which already has eight illustrated albums. These two editors are aware of the creative process of the author and how the editor is a key figure in this process:

These illustrated albums are made with love that they deal with topics that interest us and that, in addition, can be useful as a learning tool. We will continue with this bet in which the editor "becomes almost an artisan of the book". (Cordellat, 2018. The translation from the Spanish is by Mireia Canals-Botines).

Nordica is the name of the house that allowed Susana Sánchez to publish the outstanding work of one Nordic author. Some other editors have come to sum up this complementary work of the picture books in Spain: Alice Incontrada of Blackie Books, María Alasia of Patio, the children's literature seal of Plataforma Editorial and Bárbara Serrano of La Casita Roja, among many others.

In Italy it is worth mentioning Rosellina Archinto's contribution: in 1965 she created the pioneering Emme Edizioni, a publishing house engaged in publishing high quality picture books, it is also worth mentioning Loredana Farina, among the founders of the historic publishing house La Coccinella, which was the first ever in Italy to publish toys and board books, and Donatella Ziliotto, refined writer and editor to whom, among other things, goes the merit for having proposed to Italian readers the innovative Nordic literature for boys and girls. In the later years, it is still women who mark quality and value in children publishing. Among others, Patrizia Zerbi of Carthusia, Fausta Orecchio of Orecchio Acerbo, Della Passarelli of Sinnos, Marzia Corraini of Edizioni Corraini and Giovanna Zoboli of Topipittori. And it is from the latter, writer and editor, that we can firmly assume the attitude of editorial work that seems to us to be extremely opportune and desirable in those who promote culture also for commercial purposes:

Book after book, the reflection on the reasons for our work has imposed itself in an equally spontaneous way, when it has gradually become clear that, in a work such like ours, individual choices can gradually have a collective impact, since we know that a book, once it's produced, it comes out of the "domestic" circle of the house that publishes it, no matter how small, to meet a large number of people. In our case, children.

I believe that, on a deep level, it was the concern about the epidemic that Calvino speaks of that pushes us towards the work of editors: that disease that cuts down languages, making reality a shapeless mirage because it has no meaning. The task we set ourselves in our work, in fact, is that of accuracy. Meaning that the focus of the "internal necessity" that words and images should always have in order not to

precipitate in the lack of meaning to which a random, approximate, abstract form is destined. Editors, in this sense, can do a lot, concretely, taking on the responsibility of their choices every day. (Zoboli, 2009: 138. The translation from the Italian is by Chiara Lepri).

Giovanna Zoboli refers to the category of *exactness* as presented to us by Italo Calvino in those inexhaustible and universal *American Lessons* which he wrote in 1984 and never held. Therefore, the conception of a *good book* can tend towards accuracy if it meets at least three criteria, or, to use the words of Calvin himself:

1. a well-defined and well-calculated draft of the work; 2. the evocation of clear, incisive and memorable visual images; [...] 3. a language as precise as possible as a lexicon and as a rendering of the nuances of thought and imagination (Calvino, 2002: 65-66. The translation from the Italian is by Chiara Lepri).

A prudent and responsible editor can, through his cultural commitment, “create antibodies” that contrast a leveled, automatic, anonymous, abstract, imprecise language. In the Anglo-Saxon area, Denise Johnstone-Burt is one of Britain’s leading editors of children’s books with more of twenty-five years’ experience in the industry. *Having worked as Editorial Director of Children’s Books at Simon and Schuster, where she helped to establish the UK company, and as Editorial Director at Andersen Press, Denise joined Walker Books in 1989. As Executive Editorial Director and Publisher, she runs a varied and successful list of authors and illustrators, including twice Carnegie medal winner Patrick Ness, internationally bestselling author Angie Thomas, former Children’s Laureates Michael Morpurgo, Anthony Browne and Michael Rosen and exciting picture book talent Emma Yarlett.* It seems that his contribution is particularly significant not only on a strictly editorial level, but also on the creative front and on the construction of an excellent book for children, which increasingly becomes the product of the fruitful encounter of multiple and multifaceted perspectives and competences.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF ANTHONY BROWNE’S INTO THE FOREST.

Anthony Browne starts one of his most famous books with an acknowledgment to his editor: “To Denise, for all her help with this book” (Browne, 2004). This is Denise Johnstone-Burt, who interviewed Anthony Browne after the release of *Into the forest*. The presentation of the author and his works was in the London Book Fair in 2010, and the frame for it was an interview with his editor, Denise Johnstone-Burt. One scarcely notices the acknowledgments of a book if the book itself is a masterpiece, so the discovery of the working process with the editor was due to the interview and the

disposal of the author, together with the editor, to explain the creative process of the book.

On the other hand, Anthony Browne had an interview for the Argentinian literature magazine "Imaginaria" some months before, and he introduced the editor's duties as follows:

You have to achieve a good relationship between editor, writer and illustrator. But the editor may have a position that allows him to be able to see a little further and balance things; to see it from the outside and to note that the words are not saying the same thing as the images or that the images are repeating the same as the words. The editor has a different vision and can provide a good balance. I know that it is difficult for an author to present the idea of a picture book to an editor because he will want to impress him to get him to accept the idea. Then he will want to write everything. Afterwards, a lot of that text is going to have to be cut. ("Imaginaria", 2010. The translation from the Spanish is by Mireia Canals-Botines).

Some directions in the creative process by his editor are the lighthouse of the book creation. As she states in the interview, there were some key moments in the illustrating and writing process, in which Johnstone-Burt guided the creative process of the author (BookTrust, 2010).

1. It has to be an only book, as a main difference of its counterpart Silly Billy.
2. The character has to change. It cannot be similar in any way with previous characters in Browne's stories.
3. It should be an animal or a boy, so it has to find a way in the writer's mind and create it.
4. The use of black and white together with colours in the story helps the reader to deepen into the forest.

These four elements were the guidelines of Johnstone-Burt to Browne during the process of the book creation. The character has to be a boy in order not to follow the little red riding hood. The story appears to be simple at the beginning. A boy that is alert of the storm and wakes up at night and in the morning he discovers his father is absent. Her mom asks him to take food to his grandma, so suddenly he goes into the forest and finds himself in a universe of traditional tales as *The little red riding hood*. As the feminine protagonist, he chooses the long path in the forest wondering if he might find his father while taking some food to his grandma.

The setting is a forest plenty of characters of other fairy tales, as the head of a wolf, a tower, a pumpkin, a shoe, anthropomorphic trees, among others. These characters,

some of them totally humanized, take us to other classical stories for children, which probably need a revision on the part of the reader and/or teller. Therefore, it is the tale inside the tale. As Persiani de Santamaría and Pirsch point out, they are known if the reader has constructed his/her own intertext proposing new meanings with these classical tales to Browne's tale (Persiani de Santamaría and Pirsch, 2015: 5). Erika Hateley, on the other hand, argues that the author's books are plenty of artistic intertextualities and the circulation of cultural capital that finds to be the author's core work. In this sense, references to fairy tales are continuously appearing in the way to grandma's, so this forces the reader and/or the teller to know an amount of extra information which is not particularly known by contemporary users of Browne's materials. As Hateley asserts,

Doonan acknowledges that Browne's "picture-book texts require his audience to have knowledge of other texts and discourses - folk and fairy tales, classics, and his own works; fine art, cinema, comics, advertisements - the intertextual process is his whole business" (Hateley, 2009: 325).

Characters, visual and narrative structures from different stories are in the same illustration creating a sort of dissemination of the protagonist's reality and objective. This mixture has the benefit of the black and white and colour play. The grey and black and white of the forest and its elements contrasts with the story mainframe of the brightly and warm coloured protagonist and his family. Therefore, as Johnstone-Burt pointed out, the use of black and white together with colours in the story helps the reader to deepen into the forest.

INSIDE THE IMAGES

It is necessary to specify that with *Into the forest* we find ourselves in front of a special narrative form that is the picture book. The picture book belongs to a visual panorama that accompanies the child from early childhood in a phase of life in which images stand out on verbal textuality. Nonetheless, this should not be confused with the illustrated book, in which the illustrations, however suggestive they may be, serve to accompany verbal textuality with decorative/ornamental purposes. The picture book differs from the illustrated book because it is a device endowed with specific morphological and functional characteristics that can develop a complex narrative textuality, with its own expressive mechanisms and resources, whose reading (and comprehension), returned by a harmonious and balanced interdependence between



iconic and verbal language, it requires the reader to acquire a specific grammar that affects not only the simple visual competence (the ability to look at images), but also the ability to grasp the different levels (narrative, aesthetic, content, emotional) that stratify and interpenetrate in the dialectical encounter between word, image, design, book object (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001). Form and content in the picture book do not perfectly coincide in a formal direction, but in the sense that the user will want to grasp at the end of a material and sensorial reading, and the image does not take on the function of mere illustration of the short written text: it becomes narrating language, *meta-narration* able to form gaps (*blanks*) to be filled in relation to the verbal text, to agreements and dissonances, compensations and overlaps (Iser, 1980). In the picture book there is no subordination of one language to the other: the iconic and verbal codes are complementary to each other and allow a global and integrated reading of particular intensity.

Reading a picture book requires a continuous search for meaning that brings the reader's gaze to pass from words to figures and vice versa, exploring a rich in signs level. In particular, the child, who perceives in a preverbal, synthetic and synaesthetic way, is led to understand relationships between the things that will be neglected in the future, when the knowledge systems will be more structured or intellectualized (Cobb, 1998): the reading experience of the picture books urges the young user and constantly challenges him, opens his visual field to a representation of the non-univocal reality, metaphorical, open to all that's possible; but that is not all: the picture book allows a very significant aesthetic experience. It should be noted, however, that this happens only if we have excellent picture books, in which nothing is left to chance.

Anthony Browne is an internationally renowned British author and illustrator for children, winning the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen award in 2000 and many other awards (from 2009 to 2011 he was the Children's Laureate). Through his extraordinary literary production, he allows us to critically reflect on the tool of the picture book, on his *mechanics*, on the creative and intentional project that precedes his conception, which is the result of a virtuous encounter between different specific skills. With Browne's books, in fact, we find ourselves in front of sophisticated *narrative devices* endowed with remarkable expressive resources, capable of narrating through a highly involving sensory experience. The case of *Into the forest*, written and illustrated in 2003 following a trip to Denmark, is particularly representative for the multiplicity of senses and references contained in the book. These do not end with a first superficial reading, but require pauses and repeated transits between the succession of pages (and images), within which we seem to grasp its fleeting yet powerful meanings: it is a book that cleverly weaves an ancient and firmly rooted story in our imagination with a childish postmodern restlessness.

The use of illustrations, for this purpose, is excellent: the picture book opens with a *cult* image, that of a child in his bedroom, awakened with a start by the resounding sound of thunder.

In the morning, the scenario of fear has completely changed: the illustration that follows, while it communicates solitude and anguish, it shows the little protagonist with his mother, both of whom are sitting at the table for breakfast. The room is bare, their faces dark, sorrowful. The absence of the father stands out from the empty chair. We immediately understand the suffering of the child, to which the mother does not seem to answer. Instead, she asks him, as expected, to bring a cake to his sick grandmother. Here the register changes again: to narrate the priority journey that crossing a forest entails (in fiction, at least!), the author leaves the vivid colours of reality to make room for chiaroscuro: the child alone keeps his colours; the forest, on the other hand, is gray-dark within which a winding path enters.

The special iconic strategy used by Browne allows the reader the incursion into a dreamlike, fairy-tale world: the forest, with its ancestral symbolism, is the troubled walk theatre, along which it is necessary to look inside, until you can finally ignore the numerous stresses that come from the outside. Our modern 'Little Red Riding Hood', in fact, will not be able to accommodate the requests for help from the fairy-tale characters (Hansel and Gretel, Goldilocks...) scattered along his path, but only to live thoroughly its own mood of discouragement and abandonment.

The tale ends with the necessary happy ending that offers a compensation to the growing pain that is ripening in the reader page after page: the protagonist arrives safely at his grandmother's house wearing a red coat as a magical element capable of instilling courage. He is afraid, he does not know whom he will find behind the door, and he remembers a fairy tale with an unreliable wolf: the experience tells him to stay alert. However, words and images ensnare the reader, surprise him, and play with him, creating suspense. The climax of anxiety is suspended; the tension dissolves in the best final that one can hope for: beyond the door, there is simply... his grandmother. In addition, with her, his father. Everything is in colour, everything comes together: at the end of a good snack, father and son return home. The enormous and hyper-realistic image of the mother, who receives the two with open arms, smiling, is at the end of the book and transposes us again on a level of reality, finally reassured.

It has been said that the picture book, with its intersection of dialoguing codes, actively involves the reader in an interpretative work. It seems that *Into the forest* is an exemplary book in representing a psycho-emotional process so common throughout the development age as it is ineffable for the complexity. Also, the contradictory nature of the feelings at stake: the brief history, whose plot derives from the fairy tale of the popular tradition, is revisited to narrate the theme of abandonment in a modern key.



Nevertheless, despite the splendid realistic, almost photographic illustrations, nothing appears clear. The images contain numerous clues, visual traces, cultural and artistic quotations that belong to the collective and personal fantasy world of the author himself. On the plot level, moreover, the unsaid does not detract from the message. On the contrary: we do not know the reasons for the absence of the father, perhaps he left, perhaps he quarrelled with his mother; perhaps it is a momentary absence, due to work or care for the grandmother and in any case incomprehensible to the child. We are not interested in knowing the reason for this absence. We are rather interested in the emotions of the protagonist: the reader's gaze is conveyed to the inner world of the child, whose moods take on the contours of a universal and timeless childhood.

The book knows how to grasp the dismay of a child in front of the crucial issues of his existence, however transitory and destined to a resolution, and it does so by activating an aesthetic experience that draws on a shared imagination, to which Browne, together with Denise's Johnstone-Burt contribution, returns its thickness and timeliness.

THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Denise Johnstone-Burt asserted in the interview that the story of *Silly Billy* had to be structured as an only book, as a main difference of the previous collection about a protagonist called *Willy*. It happened just the same when he wrote *Into the forest*, although he had already been through the process of protagonist creation for a stand-alone book. The main structure of the picture book, though, had some initial complications, mostly referring to the inclusion of other fairy tales, according to the author, they were remembered from childhood and were not picture books, so he could at this point of creation, include them in the illustrations (Booktrust, 2010).

The structure of *Into the forest*, therefore, has a unique shape. This analysis distinguishes nine parts: An initial night surprise

1. Dad is not at home
2. Mum is giving him directions for grandma
3. He decides to take the short path
4. He meets some people
5. He is getting cold and finds a best
6. He arrives at grandma's, who is ill
7. He meets his father who is taking care of grandma

8. He goes back home with mum and dad

Tales, in general, have a structure around a story. Silvia Adela Kohan describes the process of structuring stories for children as narrative operations linked to discursive ones. She is of the opinion that fantasy is key in children's discourse (Kohan, 2003). Thus, the protagonist is in some kind of adventure to learn at the end that everything that causes him some impediment to live in peace is gone (Canals-Botines, 2018).

In this case, this is what it is called a *Dramatic response in a causal structure*, in which there is a previous clarification of the situation (points 1, 2 and 3), then there appear a crisis (points 3 and 4). There is another crisis or situation in which the main character suffers a difficulty (points 5 and 6). The ending, which is positive or negative. In this case, it is negative, because the protagonist discovers that grandma is ill (point 7). Then, there is a turning point, which can be positive or negative. In this case, because of the negative ending, it turns positive (points 8 and 9). The *base chain* for this structure is the following: CLARIFICATION+FIRST CRISIS+ENDING+FINAL TURNING POINT (+to – or – to +).

The initial surprise is when the protagonist wakes up in the middle of the night. Action is taking place, and the text does not specify anything else: just superstition, is it a sign of something coming up?

The incident, which develops the action the next day, is that the father is not at home, so the routine for the main character changes. Meanwhile the suspense increases too. His mum gives him a duty to accomplish. He has to carry some goods to his grandma's and he has to take the long path, not the short one that is going through the forest. So far, there are three moments increasing the suspense: The tempest at night waking him up, dad not being at home the morning after and going to his grandma's taking the long path (or not). At this point, dramatic irony is engaged in the action of the protagonist: we, the readers know he is going to take the short path (too tempting being shorter and, on the other hand, he is a child and he is not aware of the dangers an experienced mum knows). He decides to go into the forest and there he finds a boy with a cow, a blonde girl, and two young siblings. This is the repetition (three times, three different people) a children's book requires to be credible for a child. He is getting cold but suddenly he finds a red jacket hanging from the branch of a tree and he puts it on. This passage is unsubstantial unless the reader knows some other classical tales and can link the texts. At this point, intertextuality is at work and requires the expertise of the reader. At the end he gets to his grandma's and finds his grandma ill and his father taking care of her. Therefore, overall, the problem is solved at the end, and the protagonist feels relieved of a panic he started suffering the night before.



One of the main characteristics of Browne's book is that the text and the illustrations are both complementary and reciprocal. The book would not be the same if one of the codes (iconic or linguistic) disappears (Tabernerero, 2011). This characteristic requires that the reader experiences some other readings (in this case with classical tales) and to become aware of the diverse and progressive meanings of the text senses, to detect verbal silences, complete them with the illustrations and expand the interpretation taken from the aesthetics of the author.

Into the forest pretends to show how the writers have been readers and how texts connect with other texts, which are rewritten and generate different connections inside the text itself (Cicarelli and Sion, 2013).

FINAL REFLECTIONS.

Entrusting the creation of an illustrated book to the artistic commitment of an author and to the competence of a publisher with a lot of experience in intellectual literature for children means to give dignity to what the children read. It is true; we face apparently antithetical intentions. On the one hand, it is easy to believe that the author gives substance to an original poetic through the language of art and literature. On the other hand, one is led to see and believe that in editorial work there is adherence to the laws of the market for the pursuit of profit at all costs, even when the final consumers are children. The rampant advertising and poor television content aimed at children seem to confirm this trend, in addition to spreading a stereotyped, homologated and homologating iconosphere, devoid of creativity and deteriorating in every respect (Lepri, 2015).

A certain publishing for children, however, seems to resist this pervasive process, which promotes an overabundant and compliant image (and an imaginary): it is the cleverest publishing, aware of the cultural (and formative) role that it plays, and that operates in compliance with an ethical and aesthetic dimension together.

The illustrated book is one of the first narrative devices that children encounter in their storytelling experience. We easily understand the initiatory importance that this instrument plays, not only in the approach to stories and in the book in general, but also in the formation of an imaginary that is rich, varied and plural. The cooperative work that the picture book produces, in fact, opens up to the numerous possibilities that arise from the encounter of different languages with the personal perspective of the reader as the bearer of instances, intentions, images and emotional experiences. The function of a good book is to feed the cognitive potential of the reader, but also to

generate new ones: this is a quality figure that originates from an idea of a thoughtful and intelligent project.

This article has offered the main work of the woman editor behind the man writer. Denise Johnstone-Burt has been proven the editor that guides the writer to the creative process but without interfering. As she explains in *Silly Billy's* presentation:

We had a long chat whether it had to be a stand-alone picture book and if so, I said, the character has to change. I was too nervous to ask him to make it a boy (the protagonist) because I thought that would be to suggest, sort of, too much of a suggestion, so I suggested very crazy animals that it (the protagonist) could be (Booktrust, 2010).

She *suggests* rather than *say*, she works side-by-side with the author, opening new paths to explore. The intention of this article has been to explore Anthony Browne's creative process in *Into the forest*, and to analyse the involvement of the editor in shaping the finished picture book. As Bajour and Sotelo stated "the editor may have a position that allows him to be able to see a little further and balance things" in terms of "accuracy" as Zoboli explains, to keep everything in order "not to precipitate in the lack of meaning".

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