

NON-FICTION PICTUREBOOKS

Sharing Knowledge as an Aesthetic Experience

edited by
Giorgia Grilli

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Even for us adults, literature for children and young adults is one of the most surprising sectors for its ability to involve, inspire and go straight to the hearts and minds of readers.

Children's books encourage the men and women of tomorrow reflect on life's important issues; they explain the laws of nature and the principles of science in ways that arouse fascination, transforming the learning process into a passion for knowledge, and prompting a curiosity that in turn will become a desire to know.

In more than 50 years of organising the Bologna Children's Book Fair, we have had a privileged vantage point from which to observe the full spectrum of world publishing. We have witnessed the increasingly important role of non-fiction books and the development of the genre, but also how the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction have become more blurred as the quality of the offering has grown.

Science learning books for young readers have enlisted great artists whose aesthetic, graphic and illustration excellence have been harnessed to help explain complex subjects.

We therefore enthusiastically accepted the proposal some three years ago of the Department of Education, under its former Director, Prof Guerra, to be part of an interdisciplinary research project on non-fiction publications. As hosts of the vast range of publications presented each year by sector specialists, and as promoters of an intense and wide-ranging cultural programme, our Fair was a natural partner of this initiative.

We were sure that the project would lead to reflection and analysis by renowned world experts and that their individual contributions would be of major importance to education professionals.

We are proud that this seminal research has led to the publication of a volume as well as an exhibition of books from all over the world able to transmit knowledge and arouse curiosity and fascination in young readers. As such, they deserve to be made widely available to young readers in classrooms everywhere.

My personal thanks go to all those who collaborated so enthusiastically on a project that has given us the opportunity to appreciate the commitment of many to ensuring that education and learning become an increasingly fascinating process.

GIANPIERO CALZOLARI
President, BolognaFiere

In 2017, Bologna University invited tenders for a series of grants to be allocated to particularly innovative and interdisciplinary research projects. All university departments were invited to participate. The group of scholars making up the Children's Literature Research Centre of the Department of Education developed a project including colleagues outside the specific field of Children's Literature. Together with History of Education and History of Science scholars, they submitted the research project entitled From Orbis Pictus to the latest Learning Picturebooks for Children. Teaching about the World through Beauty and Marvel. The project was ranked third out of almost 200 submissions from all academic disciplines. It was also enthusiastically received by Bologna Children's Book Fair with which the Department of Education has a longstanding and successful partnership through BolognaFiere. The Book Fair has helped make this volume possible and been instrumental in the organization of the large exhibition of the best learning picturebooks for children from all over the world, curated by Giorgia Grilli, lecturer in Children's Literature at the Department of Education and the research project's Principal Investigator.

Numerous scholars from various parts of the world with a particular interest in non-fiction literature for children were asked to contribute on a range of pertinent topics. As a result, this book is today the first systematic international collection of critical essays on non-fiction picturebooks. Its preparation has also led to the creation of an active 'network' of scholars with particular interest in an editorial phenomenon of epic proportions, which has, however, so far received little attention from the academic world.

The research conducted for this book has particular relevance for the world of education. Investigation into learning books for children that are carved out as true works of art – for their aesthetic excellence, graphic design, illustrations and overall creative verve – is a first step towards conceiving and then planning innovative teaching methods to be experimented in schools. Our hope is that the books examined in this, and similar publications will enter the classroom as examples of volumes able to combine the transmission of knowledge with beauty and a sense of marvel. Their vibrant and at times even daring interdisciplinary approach would be a means of going beyond our current compartmentalized division of knowledge.

This volume marks the latest in a long series of collaborative initiatives around the study and promotion of children's literature between our University Department and Bologna Children's Book Fair, an editorial event that is not only a 'trade' show, thanks to its active policy of encompassing the 'cultural' aspects underpinning books for children. Together with the University, the Book Fair has always supported sophisticated and even long-term research projects like this in-depth look into publications for children, which makes Bologna a reference point in the field.

ROBERTA CALDIN
Director, Department of Education
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INTRODUCTION

Giorgia Grilli

At the start of the new century, and more specifically since 2010, we have witnessed an exponential increase worldwide in the number of non-fiction books for children. Not only has the number of non-fiction publications increased, the books themselves have completely changed in nature compared to the traditional children's learning books of the past. Increasingly released in the form of a picturebook – very often large format picturebooks – non-fiction publications have recently offered and continue to offer ample space for far-reaching experimentation using a range of original, surprising and previously unthinkable ways of combining transmission of knowledge and artistic research, description of the world and a poetic approach, especially achieved by means of a well-meditated and skilfully designed visual code. Indeed, the new non-fiction picturebook is today entrusted to the greats of illustration: their names appear on the cover alongside the book's author, or, even more cogently, the books revolve entirely around their 'visual ideas', neutralizing the distinction between author and illustrator, as in the work of Steve Jenkins, Guillaume Duprat, Britta Teckentrup, Crushiform, Ramstein and Aréguí, Gervais and Pittau, Blexbolex, to name but a few protagonists of this wave of informational but also aesthetically inventive and generally creative books. The images of the new non-fiction picturebook are not only striking; they are often the dominant feature. And they have their own way of describing the world: a complementary, alternative, less direct, more elusive, and of course more 'figurative' way than the written text. This new approach invites us to reconsider non-fiction books altogether, re-examine their particular features and full potential, a potential undoubtedly wider than we were aware of when more traditional learning books were the rule, with their manner of transmitting a largely pre-defined knowledge intended to be memorized and stored in the most linear way possible. As a multimodal means of communication, the 'picturebook' format calls for a different, more complex, response on the part of the reader, because the very nature of the message is influenced and made more ambiguous by the presence of multiple codes. This applies also when the message has to do with what is considered 'reality', or the factual world, which ceases to be univocal, and becomes at least dialogical in a non-fiction picturebook. It is even more so when the illustrations no longer aim to present things of this world in a supposedly

neutral manner but adopt a deliberately ‘artistic’ approach, a subjective view that is the result of a specific mental and/or stylistic exercise, as is the case with many new non-fiction picturebooks.

After years during which the surge of new kinds of non-fiction picturebooks strangely failed to attract theoretical, analytical and critical attention, we are now beginning to see the formation of a scientific community proper not only interested in but clearly passionate about this publishing phenomenon. This volume is an attempt to bring together some of the scholars who in the past, often in isolation, pioneered investigation into non-fiction books for children. Today more than ever enquiry must be directed at understanding why books dealing with the real-world (and largely the natural world) are key features of the catalogues and overall investment outlay of children’s publishers at a global level. We also need to understand the characteristics of these new picturebooks and the visual/textual strategies used to communicate knowledge no longer in an essentially descriptive, explicative, authoritative, objective and unquestionable way, but in a deliberately open-ended, innovative, creative, subjective and revisable manner.

In the field, scholars today are for the most part looking to develop an analysis model that encompasses and is applicable to virtually all the non-fiction picture-book titles. Proposals include models appropriately adapted from semiotics or from studies into multimodal communication, but also from the more specific picture-book scholarship now available, reformulated to analyse products – the non-fiction picturebooks – in which the divide between fictional and factual, intellectual and sensorial, cognitive and emotional would seem even more pertinent than it is for narrative picturebooks and yet presents itself as increasingly inadequate, fragile, meaningless, even somewhat outdated, given the tendency of many of the new titles to defy established categories. The new non-fiction picturebooks are often hybrid products, dialogical books in a Bakhtinian sense; they prove oxymoronic and even paradoxical in front of the above-mentioned distinctions. Which prompts some reflections.

Although it is all important to design models that attempt to ‘capture’ and critically analyse how knowledge is presented in new non-fiction picturebooks, the search for very precise analytical schemes risks to become a sort of mission impossible before the whimsicality, originality, exuberance and creative impertinence of an increasing number of titles on the market. It is quite an exciting fact that the products made available to children today are much more complex and well in advance of the tools scholars have finetuned to analyse them. The fact that children have available highly creative sources of learning that prove more complex and less definable than we are capable of explaining speaks of a society and culture that place trust in childhood and in children’s ability to understand; of a system that although concerned with looking for a frame in which things can be named, is not obsessed by rigid forms of control.

With so many innovative and often unpredictable books now available, we perhaps need new, as yet unestablished, categories. Or perhaps we need discourse that does not claim to be 'categoric', that while critical, remains fluid, ductile and 'poetic'. If factual and even science books for children can be artistic, metaphorical, informative but also ineffable, truthful but also elusive, shouldn't we as scholars be equally capable of leaving behind our insistence on exclusively 'scientific' criteria of analysis? Shouldn't we find an interpretative path able to explore and reveal the unique complexity of these books without necessarily having to refer to definitions, concepts, or classifications taken from other investigative fields?

The question remains unanswered, pointing to the arguable need to forge a new approach to the critical appraisal of children's books, not only in the learning-book segment. In any case, this volume comprises essays that speak to scholars and readers seeking solid bases on which to understand/classify books according to fairly precise criteria, but also essays whose discourse provides an opportunity for an experience that is more like a walk in the woods, echoing Baudelaire's idea of enlightening correspondences, inferences and symbols. This too is a form of knowledge, no less profound and valid, especially since the object of enquiry is a book designed to produce enchantment and marvel. We have also included articles suggesting ways of using these books with children and in the classroom. Our hope is indeed that these new-generation non-fiction picturebooks will find their way into the classroom in large numbers. Profoundly interdisciplinary, multimodal, and polysemic as they are, they can inspire a kind of teaching most likely to be open, experimental and innovative.

This collection of ongoing trends in the study of non-fiction children's books is one of the two outcomes of a research project into non-fiction picturebooks launched by Bologna University and involving scholars from other countries who were asked to provide critical contributions and illustrate the direction of their research in this sector. The contributions received provide an overview of what is being studied in the field at international level. The other project outcome, made possible by the Bologna University/ Bologna Children's Book Fair partnership, has been the mapping, analysis and collection of the non-fiction picturebooks our research group considered the most interesting, innovative and original publications in various countries over the last decade. The initiative has led to the first wide-ranging international exhibition on this type of children's book. One of the events to be held during the 2020 Bologna Children's Book Fair, the exhibition showcases what, according to a far-reaching survey lasting more than two years, are considered the most sophisticated, special or surprising non-fiction picturebooks of the last decade for their approach to communicating knowledge. The list forms a sort of ideal international bibliography of publications which, both in terms of content and visual and graphic experimentation, seem to have something new, diverse, stimulating and enlightening to say about the world. The biological, anthropological, social, linguistic, mathematical, technological, geographical, meteorological,

historical, philosophical: i.e. ‘the real’ world, which the picturebooks represent on the basis of unapologetic stylistic choices, in other words, in a proudly creative, artistic and subjective way.

While often spectacular in a visual and material sense, the new generation non-fiction picturebooks perform their task of providing information about the world in a ‘humble’ way. They seem aware that they are always inevitably re-presenting an idea of the world, and that the world, with any new reading and any new book about it, can constantly be revised, re-thought, re-defined, much more than it can be definitively or objectively explained or learned. New non-fiction picturebooks provide information, yet they are also open to dialogue; they invite the reader to ask questions, and even to question what is considered known of the real world, undoubtedly a whole new approach in the field of non-fiction books for children. Today non-fiction, especially in picturebook form, clearly cares not only about triggering an intellectual but also an emotional, affective and aesthetic reaction in children before the world, considering this not a secondary or alternative aspect, but a necessary part of the learning process.

We of the scientific community are at the beginning of our research and investigation into this new type of children’s book, which for the publishing industry is proving an incredible market success. Indeed, as we scholars struggle to grasp and decipher the many communication strategies deployed by these books, new publications are being released that follow a yet another unexpected, innovative, unforeseen way of re-presenting the world. The creative freedom of many of the new non-fiction titles is surprising, as is somehow surprising the fact that this creative freedom today seems more the province of non-fiction than of fiction books for children. It is a phenomenon we were unprepared for, calling for our attention and an adequate critical approach. This book aims to be a step in that direction.

Since the aesthetic of these new non-fiction picturebooks is such a fundamental part of their ‘novelty’, we thought it fitting to include the voice of the artists who illustrated or both conceived and designed some of the most remarkable titles on the market today. We asked five internationally acclaimed author/illustrators to explain their poetic, how they saw the transmission of knowledge, the role of beauty in their work, their vision, and the difference – if it exists – between illustrating fiction and illustrating non-fiction. The answers are enlightening, with profound links to the critical analyses of the scholars included. As a result, this volume, enriched with many full-coloured illustrations, provides a broad overview of the current children’s non-fiction picturebook scene, and can be hopefully useful to scholars, students but also to creatives, publishers and lovers of children’s books, be they fiction or non-fiction.