

GIORGIA GRILLI

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN THAT CAUSE NO HARM TO ADULTS/BOOKS FOR  
ADULTS THAT CAUSE NO HARM TO CHILDREN.  
ORECCHIO ACERBO: A PIONEERING PUBLISHING EXPERIENCE IN ITALY

LIBRI PER BAMBINI CHE NON PROVOCANO DANNI AGLI ADULTI/LIBRI  
PER ADULTI CHE NON PROVOCANO DANNI AI BAMBINI.  
ORECCHIO ACERBO: UNA PIONERISTICA ESPERIENZA EDITORIALE  
IN ITALIA

*An analysis of the activity and politics of one of the most radical ground-breaking picturebook publishers in Italy prompts reflection on what publishing books for children actually means, or should mean, how to strike the fine balance between saleability and research, standardization and experimentation, how to consider children and what is 'right' or 'suitable' for them, and what is the role and responsibility of a small, independent children's publishing house on the global scene.*

Un'analisi dell'attività e della politica editoriale di una delle più innovative e radicali case editrici per l'infanzia italiane come punto di partenza per riflettere su cosa significhi davvero – o cosa dovrebbe significare – pubblicare libri per bambini, su come sia possibile trovare un equilibrio tra vendibilità e ricerca, esigenze del mercato e sperimentazione, su come considerare l'infanzia e ciò che è 'giusto' o 'adatto' a quella età e sul ruolo e la responsabilità culturale di un piccolo editore indipendente nella scena globale.

*Key words:* Orecchio Acerbo; children's publishing; picturebooks; visual research; innovation.

Parole chiave: Orecchio Acerbo; editoria per l'infanzia; picturebooks; ricerca visiva; innovazione.

### *Best Publisher for Children*

Orecchio Acerbo (literally: Unripe Ear) is a very small independent Italian publishing house. Founded in 2001, it has consistently published only picturebooks and illustrated books. In April 2017, the year of its two-hundredth title, Orecchio Acerbo won the prestigious award of Best Publisher for Children in Europe (BOP), a yearly Bologna Children's Book Fair prize whose winner is selected – by secret ballot – by fellow publishers. The fact of being chosen as the best in children's publishing by other publishers is a definite plus, a vote of recognition and admiration by people who know very well what doing this job implies and means.

### *Some background*

Award aside, Orecchio Acerbo will be remembered in the history of Italian children's books as the publishing house that, in some respects, marked a new departure in Italian children's publishing and especially in what has become a public attention



to it. Before Orecchio Acerbo, picturebooks, considered in a very specific sense – not just illustrated books, but books characterised by a well-aware and inescapable relationship between images and text, for example – were practically not part of the Italian tradition, apart, of course, for authors like Bruno Munari or Iela Mari (Terrusi 2012). The experience of Emme Edizioni during the Sixties was surely important, but it was mostly devoted to import famous foreign books and did not prompt the creation, right then, of memorable Italian picturebooks. Although there were a few sporadic ventures during the 1980s and 1990s (Fatatrac, Arka, C'era una volta, La Coccinella), they had little awareness of belonging to a genre, and of the picturebook as a 'thing' in itself. The picturebook as a specific kind of book and as a book able to arouse a wide interest both in the audience and at a critical level, burst onto the scene with Orecchio Acerbo. So much so that the last ten-fifteen years have seen an explosion of small publishing houses specialized in picturebooks. In addition, many of the bigger older traditional publishers have had to come to terms with the innovations brought about by this small yet powerful publishing phenomenon and have tried to devote one or more sections of their catalogue to books that follow in the wake of Orecchio Acerbo. Today, all bookstores have a wall filled with shelves of picturebooks in the kids' section while a plethora of small new independent bookstores specialized in children's books, especially picturebooks, has appeared all over the country – many of them after their owners attended training courses or even academies offering practical knowledge in the field. This would have been unthinkable only fifteen years ago. And it would have been impossible had it not been for the 'awakening' prompted by Orecchio Acerbo. Today everyone in Italy seems interested in picturebooks: the number of bloggers giving online suggestions or commenting the new titles is countless, as are the courses promising attendees will become picturebook experts and/or creators. To understand how this has happened, we have to go back to the days when the concept of picturebook as a medium unto itself was something new in Italy, something that was starting to take shape in a small graphics studio in Rome.

### *Orecchio Acerbo: beginnings*

Orecchio Acerbo was named after a poem by the great Italian children's author Gianni Rodari entitled *Un signore maturo con un orecchio Acerbo*<sup>1</sup>, about a mature man with an unripe ear: a ear that has stayed 'green', young, like the ear of a child, which makes him able to hear things grown-ups no longer can or want to hear. The name is aptly chosen and alludes to the publisher's intention to create books that say things not usually heard, listened to, or told, by 'common' adults. Also, the life and soul of Orecchio Acerbo is a woman, Fausta, whose last name, as it happens, is Orecchio.

The publishing house is in fact a twosome: graphic designer Fausta Orecchio and Simone Tonucci, a couple in life as in work. Although there are a few co-workers, it is

<sup>1</sup> Gianni Rodari. 1979. 'Un signore maturo con un orecchio Acerbo', in *Parole per giocare*, Manzuoli: Firenze.

a small family business where everyone is involved in the whole process of choosing, designing, producing and promoting the books.

Already well-established graphic designers on the Italian scene, winners of many national awards, Fausta Orecchio and Simone Tonucci had become increasingly frustrated by the overweening power exerted by the sales departments of the big publishing firms they worked for, which tended to shy away from bold refined sophisticated graphics. Hence their decision to start a business of their own where, as graphic designers, they could strike their own balance between saleability and research, communication and visual experimentation. It was also a means of giving pivotal importance to illustration, a medium for which less and less public spaces are left. Fausta Orecchio had worked as a graphic designer with many internationally well-known illustrators on several promotional campaigns and had developed a real passion for it. So, with Simone Tonucci, she decided to become a publisher of illustrated and/or picturebooks, which in Italy means almost exclusively children's books. This led to an acute realization of her cultural responsibility over and above any personal desire to keep experimenting in the visual field. Orecchio Acerbo was thus born as a publishing house aimed also at creating books that imply a specific cultural choice and attitude towards children. In sharp contrast to the sales policies of the large firms, this publishing house determined to create books that do not consider young readers as a market segment but rather as young persons with their own unpredictable non-standardized tastes and needs<sup>2</sup>.

### *Thinking beyond the market*

Orecchio Acerbo's books stand distinctly above any preoccupation for the market. They do not latch on to passing trends, current requirements or constraints; their production is not grounded in market surveys. The challenge taken up by Orecchio Acerbo has been to investigate whether books can be created and produced not because they sell well, but because – and if – they are beautiful and unordinary, and able, as such, to help children develop a critical sense. Aesthetics and ethics are closely linked in the Orecchio Acerbo philosophy. The underlying idea is that beautiful objects educate visual appreciation, and that if we learn to recognize the beautiful, and to be touched by it, we may begin revolting against the ugly, of which there is plenty in contemporary life and societies. For Fausta Orecchio, beauty can trigger a whole revolution. This is, of course, not just an aesthetic statement; it is a political manifesto. Orecchio Acerbo's books are devised as a possible antidote to standardized vision and taste, against the dissemination of repetitive images and the risk of a univocal visual universe – a very real risk, especially in the field of children's books where the

<sup>2</sup> All references to Orecchio Acerbo's policy, intentions, premises, and all data concerning sales and other economic considerations were given to the author of this article by Fausta Orecchio herself, interviewed on her publishing experience.

oversimplified content and forms of best-selling productions for television or other screens are all too easily imitated and transferred to hardcopy works. From the outset, Orecchio Acerbo was determined to try and demonstrate that another way of conceiving and making children's books is possible and that a publisher can create non-standardized books. Indeed, all their books differ widely in terms of format, paper, trimmings, design, visual style and production. In contrast to other publishers who tend to produce series where all the titles look the same, Orecchio Acerbo's books come in all shapes and sizes – something that has left many booksellers bewildered as to how to display or group them. At some point, after the first titles, Orecchio Acerbo refused to attach an age label to their books, again disconcerting booksellers and buyers alike, used as they were (and still are) to considering children's books as designed for specific age ranges. If they are beautiful, Art Director Fausta Orecchio says, picturebooks are for everyone. And her publishing house constantly seeks to blur the distinction between books for children and books for adults, in the belief that especially picturebooks can become the bridge between the two, usually distant, phases of child- and adulthood, one of the few things that can really connect these different age groups and allow them to communicate (Beckett 2013). At the same time, a picturebook is a book that even a very young child can try and figure out completely for him/herself, a book that provides an autonomous interpretative moment – and all children need and have the right to this sort of independent explorative adventure (Arizpe and Styles 2002).

In keeping with their distaste for all labels, Orecchio Acerbo has a habit of asking all manner of illustrators to work on books for them. They have used illustrators from the world of advertising, posters, newspapers and magazines, not just artists specialized in children's books, who may, they say, have an established way of representing the world in line with the prevailing discourse on how children should be shown the world. Lorenzo Mattotti, Brad Holland, Spider, Arnal Ballester, Fabian Negrin and many more with experience as illustrators in other fields have happily worked with Orecchio Acerbo on one or many books. Indeed, the publishers embrace the idea that their books, designed for children, will also be bought by adults for themselves.

### *Three languages in each book*

For Fausta Orecchio, the challenge has always been to make the three aspects of an illustrated book – text, illustration and graphics – clearly stand out and not be taken for granted. Here lies the essence of the innovation she has brought to the sector. Before Fausta Orecchio, no one else in Italy had paid so much attention to the multiplicity of codes of the picturebook (Nikolajeva and Scott 2000) and the need to harmonize all these factors to achieve a well-balanced effective and successful work. Before Orecchio Acerbo – and in many other cases still today – picturebooks for children were assembled somewhat randomly, or in any case, without this Art Director's deep awareness of the potential of what may seem formal aspects, but which, if well

studied, serve and strengthen the content. For Fausta Orecchio, designing the book, working as the graphic designer side by side with illustrator and author on every phase of the process, studying the best possible storyboard, pace, layout and composition are the most important part of the publishing job. She is totally dedicated to this material aspect of bookmaking. For her, the many languages of an illustrated book must work together, not just smoothly, but creatively and powerfully to convey the story with all its possible undertones, ambiguities and complexities in the best possible way (Nikolajeva and Scott 2000). Especially the graphics – her own domain<sup>3</sup> – can, if used accurately, serve as a ‘moderator’ between text and illustrations, weave a relationship between them, deliver order, untangle misunderstandings, create parallel narrative threads and translate from one language to the other. All too often in the arbitrary distinction between text and images, we forget that words themselves are images; they can take on a different emotional significance if written in one way or another in terms of font, size, position on the page etc. Graphics can be used to create the right atmosphere, serve as a visual notation and make words become images in themselves. Graphics can function as a visual translation of the text, and it can replace images altogether when words say more than any illustration<sup>4</sup>. But like the illustrations, a book’s graphics shall not be ‘gratuitous’: it serves to strengthen the meaning of the story, make it more incisive and powerful, which is how Orecchio Acerbo skilfully uses it.

### *What to tell*

The story is indeed very important for this publishing house, which is careful not to fall into the category of publishers who design beautiful – even ‘art’ – books that are paper objects with nothing to say. When choosing portfolios and styles, Orecchio Acerbo tries to avoid simply decorative, purely stylistic exercises, but rather seeks out the narrative quality of images. The stories they privilege – told with the triple contribution of text, illustrations and graphics – are stories that help jolt or change the reader’s point of view or her common perspective on things, be they simple, everyday ideas, widespread beliefs, or the official take on historical facts and events. For Orecchio Acerbo, everything can (and should) be seen in a fresh, different way. Examples include the fairy-tale of Little Red Riding Hood, retold in the book *In bocca al lupo* by the Argentinian-Italian Fabian Negrin by the wolf himself in a very unusual and surprising way; the story of Pinocchio, again by Negrin, told backwards as its title *Occhiopin* suggests, whose main character is a normal boy in the beginning who slowly turns into a puppet and finally into a piece of wood; the intense book *L’isola*, by the Australian Armin Greder, an implacably sincere, very politically incorrect insight into how naturally unwilling we all are, despite all rhetorical proclamations, to accept and

3 The discourse on graphics summed up here is taken from several interviews to Fausta Orecchio, all of them reported in orecchio Acerbo’s website, under the entry ‘Interventi’.

4 To see examples of these different situations (all of them kindly provided by Fausta Orecchio), go to the GRAPHICS section of images.

welcome the ‘foreigner’ into our midst; the nearly wordless books by French artist Blex Bolex (see *Immaginario* and *Stagioni*, for instance), in which objects and persons we usually associate with a specific idea and word are positioned on the ‘wrong’ page, in the ‘wrong’ group or situation, making us rethink that whole categorization; and many more. Running through all Orecchio Acerbo books is the conviction that putting children in front of an illustrated story or page is already a way of helping them learn to see from another perspective, the artist’s perspective, to begin with, who can choose to represent the world in many different ways, registers and tones. Indeed, several artists have stressed the fact that they really begin to see something only when they draw it, and that to draw a thing (or to look at its illustrated version) is to start to really see it (Glaser 2008; Berger 2003). Art is, in this perspective, interpretation, it has a hermeneutic value, it provides a deeper enlightening gaze on reality. A gaze that can only be beneficial, especially if offered children from a very early age. Getting them used to thinking that a given object, or indeed the world, can be seen from many angles, providing them with no big truths but rather small uncertainties is what Orecchio Acerbo thinks a children’s publisher’s duty should be. This can be achieved in the subtlest of ways, even just by juxtaposing a text and illustrations that don’t quite ‘say’ the same thing, but contradict each other at some level, offering multiple layers of interpretation. It is not necessary, according to this perspective, to present the big themes, the pressing issues or topics at the centre of the public debate, a very common trend in children’s literature since it helps make books appear ‘useful’ for some educative purpose. But if a publisher does tackle the ‘big issues’, says Fausta Orecchio, then commonplaces, empty rhetoric and too explicit a ‘lesson’ must be avoided. Sarcasm, irony, the grotesque and other forms of laughter may help keep stereotypes at a distance, for instance. Indeed, the comic register is often to be found in Orecchio Acerbo’s books. As is the tragic, the sad, the bleak, the pensive... Children feel the whole range of emotions felt by adults, a fact that adults fail to acknowledge, unable to deal with children who are not simply, ideally, fictionally happy. So, usually – and notwithstanding the lesson of Maurice Sendak, who since the 1960s has only partly changed the landscape of children’s literature (Sendak 1963) – children’s books, and especially picturebooks (conventionally considered for the very young), tend to be comforting, reassuring and mainstream, both in terms of text and illustrations. Not so Orecchio Acerbo’s books, which dare tell children stories that are not necessarily happy or soothing, and whose illustrations are not softened to avoid frightening or troubling children<sup>5</sup> (or adults, for are we really sure we know what frightens or troubles children? And are all children frightened or troubled by the same things? Aren’t some things taboo, and therefore disturbing when shown or mentioned, only for us adults? (Evans 2015))

<sup>5</sup> For examples, go to the TROUBLESOME ILLUSTRATIONS section at the end, in which some spreads are shown – of picturebooks published by Orecchio Acerbo – that, by normal standards, could be considered upsetting for small children.

*Problems*

In any case, the choice not to exclude themes or images conventional wisdom considers unsuitable or troubling to children, has not helped Orecchio Acerbo's books gain wide circulation or acceptance, especially in the beginning, when they were seen as alien objects on the Italian publishing scene. It is apparently not easy to welcome books that go against the grain, both as for their content and form. Orecchio Acerbo's books do not simply want to entertain, as is the case with many children's products, but rather elicit emotions, instil doubt, help readers think divergently, ponder. They do not provide answers but encourage questions. As if this wasn't enough, they are not made in series, they are each different from the other, they are not conceived to be read once and then cast aside or thrown away, every aspect of them being so meticulously finished. As books that do not follow the current trends but stand alone in their originality, they don't fit easily in the mass market scene. Orecchio Acerbo's books have never become bestsellers, they have never even made sufficient revenue to put the publishers in a financial comfort zone at least for a time. As a result, the publishing house lives in 'survival' mode. When asked about the main goal of their publishing house, Fausta Orecchio and Simone Tonucci often reply: to be still here next year. And yet, even during the worst moments of crisis, they have never let economic considerations influence the selection of their titles, their real concern being rather how to promote each book they consider 'necessary' (rather than sellable), how to get it out to the public, and how to make sure it will eventually reach the child who might need it. Their books' greatest risk is, in fact, to go unnoticed, not to circulate widely enough. Judged 'difficult', or too 'equivocal' by generalist and chain booksellers who are used to customers typically looking for either the current bestseller or a book expressly 'about' something; considered 'too beautiful', 'too refined', 'too different' to make it into the supermarkets where many books are sold at cheaper prices, Orecchio Acerbo's books are often 'hidden', or certainly not overexposed. As a result, for this publishing house the relationship with small, independent booksellers, specialist librarians and attentive journalists becomes fundamental. They invest a lot of time and energy in communication (a blog, Facebook page), travelling – as they also ask their authors to do – all over the country to meet people and real children, organizing readings, events, presentations and activities. In fact, says Simone Tonucci, their books sell much more thanks to small, specialist, independent book and toy stores and a few attentive, motivated teachers with whom they have a personal relationship, and by attending national book events, fairs and trade shows – where their booth attracts literally crowds of people – than in any other traditional way. In other words, the current publishing landscape is such that refined, well-finished, original books wind up being out of place in what should be their obvious 'home': regular bookstores, in many areas the only bookstores to be found. Luckily, as underlined in the beginning, very recently, and largely due to the increased following enjoyed by picturebooks – especially thanks to Orecchio Acerbo and a few other independent publishing houses created in its wake, such as Topipittori for instance – a good number of small, new,

independent children bookstores have opened and offer a different choice of titles to more demanding readers, be they adults interested in illustration or parents and other adults buying and reading books with children. Like the small publishing houses whose books they take, these independent specialist bookstores struggle to survive. Interestingly, however, they keep springing up, testifying perhaps that, as with food, there is an increasingly widespread resistance to the globalized culture supply.

### *Compromises*

Orecchio Acerbo has come close to giving up several times but has managed to hang on. However, they have progressively had to come to terms with at least some of the rules of the market, imposed by distributors – those intermediary figures who present new titles to booksellers every three months, and who take charge of a publisher only if the company can guarantee a certain number of releases – or by the current onerous system of book returns, whereby if new titles remain on their shelves for some months, bookstores are entitled to return their unsold stock and demand their money back. The only way to postpone payment is for the publisher to exchange the returned copies with new titles it is therefore obliged to produce in order to somehow balance the books. So, if the original idea of a publishing house like Orecchio Acerbo was to publish each year only those books they found really convincing, whatever their number, they have been slowly forced to adapt to a production system that requires a minimum of one book a month. The problem, of course, is that it is obviously impossible to always find as many new good books, or book projects.

### *The very old and the very new*

Orecchio Acerbo has overcome the impasse of not finding at least 12, 13 new projects a year able to meet its standards by ‘rediscovering’ and republishing (very often publishing for the first time in Italy) old illustrated classics from all over the world. As a result, their catalogue today boasts old, precious, sometimes almost forgotten, international picturebooks (by Peter Newell, Leonard Weisgard, Jim Flora, Dahlov Ipcar, Remy Charlip, Shel Silverstein, Mark Alan Stamaty etc.) and completely new books, a good many by debuting authors and/or illustrators – mostly, but not only, Italian. Another way Orecchio Acerbo achieves the number of titles required to avoid being kicked out of the publishing system, yet maintain high standards, is to select a text – mostly short stories – by a ‘classic’ author and ask an illustrator to illustrate it, either for the first time, or in a new, unusual way. Needless to say, the text does not have to be an original children’s text (see the recent series ‘Le pulci nell’orecchio’, for example). But once illustrated and ‘packaged’ in Orecchio Acerbo style, it can, and does, become a crossover book (Beckett 2013). Having the whole narrative tradition to tap into, it is undoubtedly to the illustration sphere that Orecchio Acerbo



devotes much of its 'research'. It is in this field that it likes to experiment the most. Fausta Orecchio is constantly on the look out for new and interesting illustrators to somehow train in the bookmaking process. Indeed, Orecchio Acerbo has become a reference point also as a 'scouting' publishing house, one that systematically looks for and often discovers new or promising talents. Many excellent young illustrators have had their breakthrough as a result. It is a pity that this has only been the case for the visual dimension and that no new remarkable Italian writer of picturebooks has yet emerged or stood out, despite the huge effort to finally introduce this medium and get it accepted as a meditated, self-aware, non-random means of expression. In Italy, writing for picturebooks is still an undeveloped, poorly understood and inadequately studied area. While diploma and Master courses in children's illustration abound, as do practical handbooks on the subject (Castagnoli 2017), there is scant awareness or debate – let alone specific training – when it comes to writing skills: how to write a text that works well with pictures, uses the right twists, has elliptical characteristics, introduces unobvious endings as well as have a certain poetical quality, and the fundamental ability to attract children. This may be one of the possible reasons why children's picturebooks generally continue to be seen as 'lesser' products. And why they quite often are. Superficially entertaining or too explicitly educational, but very seldom deeply meditated in terms of pace, sound, construction and story, picturebooks in Italy struggle to become and be considered as literary creations, a form of literature in themselves, with their own specific, aesthetic, artful, and possibly eye-opening characteristics. (A traditional and prestigious Italian literary award, the Premio Strega, having recently opened a special children's section, has refused to take picturebooks into consideration, for example).

### *Are beautiful books bad for children?*

Paradoxically, when picturebooks are indeed produced to the highest aesthetic (if mostly visual) quality, as is the case with Orecchio Acerbo's production, they still face disapproval by those critics who are suspicious of the different and unconventional, attached as they are to the idea that children's books must be 'useful' products that are educational in a very specific, controllable way. As if helping children to develop a critical mind, think divergently, question received views and truths weren't a highly educational goal in itself. Or as if offering them sophisticated, complex, original images as opposed to standardized, oversimplified, dull pictures weren't crucial for their development and thus educational in the broadest sense. When, after their first years of activity, Orecchio Acerbo started becoming well-known in Italy and national newspapers and magazines began writing rave reviews of their innovative strength as the 'think-different' publishing house, a more complex, highly polemical article appeared in LIBER, an important Italian journal specialized in children's literature. One of the oldest non-academic journals in the field, with a regularly updated bibliographic review, LIBER focuses on specific themes, comments on current trends, hosts contribu-

tions by international critics and is widely read by librarians, teachers, booksellers and people interested in children's books in general, and is considered a practical and professional reference point by the industry. The article – by Angela Dal Gobbo, a regular contributor with a special interest in picturebooks – started by criticizing Kveta Packovska's famous idea that an illustrated book is the first art gallery for a child. Books, even picturebooks, wrote Dal Gobbo, should not be an introduction to art. Art is too distant and too difficult for a child, not something s/he can be interested in. «When they are very young», the article continued, «children don't seem to show any specific interest for the beautiful in itself, if unconnected to a concrete experience».

And again:

In our opinion it is therefore useless and counter-productive to offer books characterized by formal research that sets itself too far away from any concreteness, from the child's own experience. It is an operation grounded more in visual self-gratification than in children's real skills and abilities. We feel we can say that until a child is at least 5 years old, it is not appropriate for a book to contain too many complex visual references, references that are difficult to decode, gratuitously sophisticated, assuming a strong expertise and knowledge of iconic elements. We therefore consider [...] illustrations rich in visual prompts [...], and too misaligned from the text as fruitless and idle. After all, children are not able to appreciate the references to art that some illustrators – like Anthony Browne for instance – propose. (Dal Gobbo 2008, 52)

The risk of a complex and sophisticated use of the communicative codes is, according to Dal Gobbo, «to exclude children from the pleasure of reading with the undesirable result of suffocating their love for books.»

In the wake of this special interest for illustration, some small publishing houses have recently been founded, including the French Editions du Rouergue, Être [...] and the Italian Orecchio Acerbo. They boast they publish quality books, innovative books, books characterized by graphic experimentation. Even though they do have some very good titles, they don't seem concerned about the fact that the audience they address is (and remains) very narrow. Rather, they wish to disseminate the picturebook also among adults, probably the only ones able to appreciate such sophisticated and complex works. (Dal Gobbo 2008, 53)

An open letter written by an independent bookseller criticising the article started a forum discussion in a very popular blog devoted to picturebooks ([www.lefigure-deilibri.com](http://www.lefigure-deilibri.com)). Almost everyone involved stood up to defend independent publishers' beautiful, non-standardized books and oppose Dal Gobbo's vision of children as readers or observers unable to appreciate beauty, complexity and sophistication even when it is not necessarily part of their concrete everyday experience. In many people's opinion, this kind of books is increasingly necessary and of value.

And yet, for some reason, notwithstanding all the prestigious awards Orecchio Acerbo keeps receiving – the BOP is just the latest – its books don't sell much. They continue to struggle to survive as a publishing house. Even if life would be easier, they refuse to surrender to the market and a narrow-minded vision of childhood and its potential. If anything, their resolve is stronger than ever. For if for a moment in

the past Fausta Orecchio and Simone Tonucci had at least considered finding a balance between their high standards and staying afloat in a system imposed by the big publishers, they are now convinced that the increasingly dumbing down of the market makes it more necessary than ever to make a stand. They have chosen the cultural role they want to play.

In response to the controversy about their picturebooks being or not being 'counter-productive', possibly even harmful for children, they decided to insert a leaflet in each of their books. Similar to the instruction leaflets in a medicine package, it reads: "Pharmaceutical category: Books for children that cause no harm to adults / Books for adults that cause no harm to children. Composition: Paper 75%, cardboard 4.8%, glue 0.2%, typographical ink 5%, bookbinding yarn 0.3%, plastic 0.1%, sweat 14.6%. Therapeutic indications: State of serious television bulimia. Acute imaginative failure syndrome. Intoxication from videogame overdose. Apathetic state due to excess of conformism. Damage of the visual field...". Irony in the face of serious matters is a typical Orecchio Acerbo weapon.

Undoubtedly, much must still be done to involve a wider public in the children's book debate, and in a deeper reflection about its function, meaning, value, reaching out to parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and all those who buy the books. What is a book for children (be it a picturebook, illustrated book, or picture-less book)? What should it be; what could it be? Does it have to be of just one kind? Does it have to please adults? Can it be troubling for them, and still be considered important for children? Can a book for children be loved by sophisticated adults who may find in it smart references, yet still make children happy, for other reasons maybe? Or, in other cases, can it make children sad? Thoughtful? Moved? Can it (shouldn't it) make children divergent and independent, as opposed to educated strictly the way we want to?

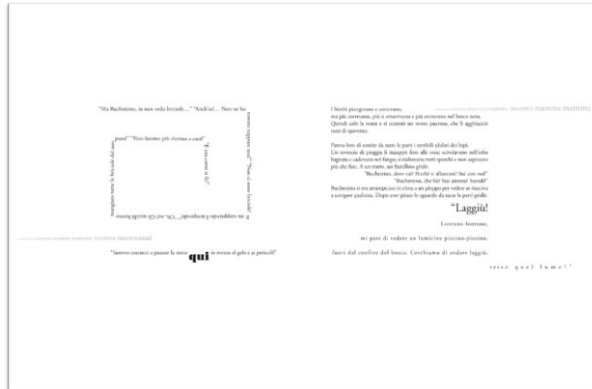
These rhetorical questions may sound outdated, the international debate on children's literature and its artistic (and therefore often provocative) value having become more and more sophisticated and mature, over the last decades, but this is true, in fact, at least in Italy, only among scholars, not always among critics writing for newspapers and magazines, and very rarely for the adults involved in education (teachers and parents alike). Lecturing at the University to future kindergarten and primary school teachers, I cannot but notice how hard it is to dismantle the idea that children's books make sense only if a clear and acceptable 'lesson' is at stake, and that unconventional, uncomfortable, not exactly 'cute' pictures – and so of course picturebooks – are inappropriate or too upsetting for children. If the situation is slowly changing, we owe it, in great part, to the courage and insistence of a small, independent publishing house like Orecchio acerbo, which, by creating unexpected books for children, has systematically been trying to change the perspective on what can be offered to them as a literary-aesthetic experience, and has become inspirational for many other Italian publishers.

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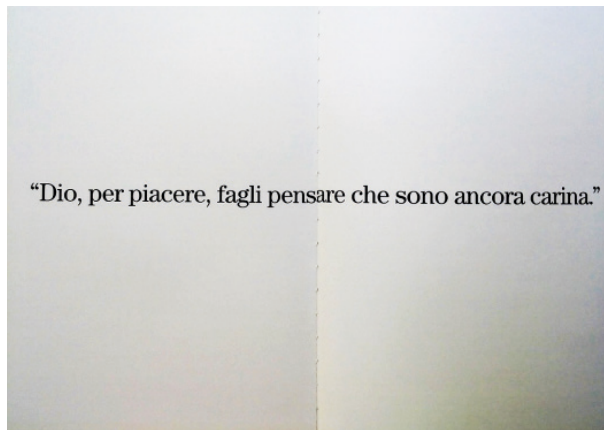
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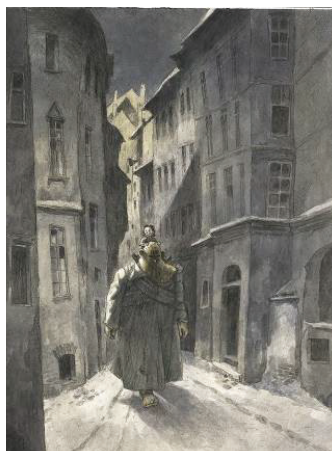
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