

# The Green Ship: Reading through Branches and Waves. Growing Outdoors with Contemporary Children's Picturebooks

Marcella Terrusi

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## Abstract

The strong relationship between children and nature is represented in many children's picturebooks published in Italy in the last decades. In the array of picturebooks and wordless books the relationship between detail and the big picture is also displayed, as an invitation to discover connections between distant elements. In contemporary reflections about outdoor education practices, children's picturebook appear as a useful tool to involve teachers and parents in a reflection about respect of "natural rights" of children, as Zavalloni called it, such as moving around, experiencing contacts with natural elements and animals, take time to observe and feel, take risks of adventures. Nurturing a real contact with the "anima mundi" and natural rhythms is an urgent issue and challenge today, and it requires attention to life and a responsibility for collective imagination. In children's picturebooks there are places, events and symbols that can establish new paths to raise "cosmic" citizens of our planet.

La relazione fra bambini e natura viene rappresentata frequentemente negli albi illustrati contemporanei. Lo scaffale editoriale per ragazzi svela autentici inviti al guardare con attenzione, al riconoscimento dei rapporti fra il piccolo e il grande, all'osservazione delle interconnessioni fra elementi distanti. Nelle recenti riflessioni pedagogiche che riguardano l'OE o educazione all'aperto i libri illustrati si mostrano come alleati educativi capaci di coinvolgere educatori, insegnanti e genitori e di suscitare ragionamenti e pratiche attorno ai "diritti naturali" dei bambini, come li chiama Zavalloni, cioè le esperienze di movimento, contatto diretto con la natura, tempo lento per osservare e sentire, rischio e avventura. La sfida pedagogica urgente del recupero di un rapporto vitale con "l'anima mundi", i ritmi naturali e il contatto con l'ambiente richiama a una responsabilità che riguarda l'immaginario collettivo: negli albi illustrati per bambini ci sono luoghi, storie e simboli che possono mostrare direzioni utili per crescere cittadini "cosmici".

**Keywords:** Children literature; Outdoor education; Nature; Illustration; Picturebook

**Marcella Terrusi:** Department for Life Quality Studies, University of Bologna (Italy)

Contact: [marcella.terrusi@unibo.it](mailto:marcella.terrusi@unibo.it)

Marcella Terrusi is grant research at Department of Quality Life Studies, University of Bologna, where she collaborates with Roberto Farnè. Her field of research includes children's literature, outdoor education, illustration, wordless books. She is author of *Albi illustrati. Leggere, guardare, nominare il mondo nei libri per l'infanzia* (Carocci, 2012) and *Meraviglie mute. Silent book e letteratura per l'infanzia* (Carocci 2017).

*Uh-uh! Grass! Long wavy grass. We can't go over it. We can't go under it. Oh no! We've got to go through it!*

(Rosen & Oxenbury, 1995, p. 7)

Puddles, clouds, trees, animals, stones, seas, shelters, windows, hidden footpaths, flowers, sounds, signs and shapes to recognise, magnifying glasses used to discover the infinitely small, frames for capturing the eye, signs and woods to get lost in and to find yourself again: these are chapters of an ideal international literary anthology where the art of picturebook can talk to educators and scholars offering a repertory of narrative possibilities, displayed in visual and textual narratives, that can suggest and inspire proposals of natural education, ecological perspectives, and *outdoor education*.

As in the pages of children's classic novels, also in the pages of contemporary picturebooks (meaning those published in the second half of the twentieth century), from Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* to Rosen's and Oxenbury's *Going on a Bear Hunt* (1995) the authors know how to skilfully represent children in close connection with nature and offer them new perspectives of outdoor wellbeing and growing up through visual narratives.

From the Italian wordless picturebooks of the 1960's, that have become classics (cf. Beckett, 2012; Terrusi, 2017) and that use pictures to tell stories about the nature's circular life cycles and metamorphosis, such as the moth becoming a butterfly in the *La mela e la farfalla* (1960) by Iela and Enzo Mari, through other wordless picturebooks devoted to seasons, trees (Mari, 1975), chickens and eggs (Mari, 1969), to the more recent picturebooks, such as the award winning *Là fora*, an illustrated guide to discovering nature (Peixe Dias, do Rosário & Carvalho, 2016) also illustrated narratives collaborate to create visions of happy outdoor experiences in childhood.

In this paper we consider the narrative theme of childhood in nature and the experiences of growing up outdoor as represented in contemporary picturebooks. On the one hand, our reflections are based on the theory of picturebook, as it has been developed internationally in the last decades in different contributions bringing interdisciplinary perspectives that consider it as a form of art, an historical and social document, an educational object, a complex visual narrative constantly referring to other text, a crossover and postmodern contribution in the field of children's literature (Bader, 1978; Nodelmann, 1988; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001; Arizpe & Style, 2004; Pantaleo, 2008; Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008; Sipe, 2009; Beckett, 2012; Terrusi, 2012, 2017). On the other hand, the paper refers to the widespread ecocritical thought that has devoted its attention to children's picturebooks and to the connection between nature, childhood and storytelling (Kriesberg, 1999; Pretty, 2009).

This paper especially aims to reflect about the role of picturebooks in the formation of teachers and parents and on the daylife time in schools; it considers this link between picturebook and outdoor education in reference to a project that involved nursery school teachers of the cooperative Millepiedi in Rimini and the Department of Quality Life Studies of the University of Bologna. The choice of some international picturebooks was suggested by the author of this paper, a researcher involved in the abovementioned project, to a group of teachers as a starting point for discussion about the relationship between children and nature; in particular the group worked with picturebooks being published in Italy after 1967, the year of children's picturebook publishing revolution induced by Rosellina Archinto Editore, who started translating and publishing modern picturebooks like Sendak's or Lionni's (cf. Giannino Stoppioni, 2005). The entire project was based on the assumption that children books, and visual narratives, can be seen as a space of expression where authors are able to convey dreams and hopes to the new generations and think of the future, also from the point of view of environment awareness or outdoor education; the picturebooks that were used in the investigation proposed a representation of childhood that is not idealized, but conveys diverse narratives of life styles and portrays possible experiences of happiness and meaning (Contini, 1999).

Our perspective is not strictly linked to teaching of science, even though there are also studies discussing scientific foundations of some representations in the pictures found in children's books (Marriott, 2002) and also the great value of books as mediators for the construction of meanings and understanding contexts when reading about science (Monhardt & Monhardt, 2006). In contrast, we are here interested in the role of contemporary narrative picturebooks in training and connecting teachers, parents and children on a wide and interdisciplinary range. This can be a key role of some picturebooks when we consider outdoor education practices, and when we want to "open the windows" of the classrooms, literally and metaphorically, with no fear of cold, distraction or other invisible risks. The aim of this study on reading picturebooks

with natural settings is to help teachers and parents in balancing children's lifetime activities between outdoor and indoor experiences, in order to guarantee their opportunities to grow up exploring, sharing, and actively learning also outside the classroom or the house.

The title of this paper, *The Green Ship*, is the title of the project conducted in Rimini, and it is originally the title of the children's picturebook created by Quentin Blake (1998) in which this great British author and illustrator tells an evocative story which is set entirely outdoors. In this picturebook, a boy and his sister in the summertime, after many days spent with their aunt in the country, driven by boredom, leave the house, climb over the wall of the garden and discover a life-size ship made out of bushes and trees, steered by two eccentric adults: their extraordinary voyage will take them into a fantastic and inspirational make-believe adventure in a imaginary and at the same time real green environment. A lady and an old man, the captain, will have the kids for tea. The crew must also go through a storm: there is something melancholic in this book, the feeling that Blake's dynamic illustrations contain a modern warning of the importance of a dynamic relationship between well-being, nature and education, outdoor experiences, elements that play a role-key in the quality of life. *The Green Ship* is a metaphor of every possible discovery that happens in the outdoor space, and it brings with it an element of risk; it is also the opportunity to travel through time and space using the natural and cultural faculty of make-believe, it is a narrative representation not only of the pairing of childhood and nature, but also of the relationship between the environment and people of different generations, of the centrality of the body and space, and of the extraordinary importance of that quality time spent in natural surroundings that seem to be empty and slow. In fact, it is in such surroundings that it is possible to process ever-new forms that the imagination can bring although an inattentive glance may see them, for instance, as useless bushes. The topic of memory is also present in *The Green Ship*: when the summer ends, the two children go back to their city. They come back to the same place only the next summer: they have visibly grown, and the same happened with the bushes; the green ship is less noticeable, and, as the future summers come one after another, it will become impossible to spot the green ship shape anymore. The green ship will remain unchanged only in the children's memory, forever remembered as an experience of a place where time, nature, play and make-believe created a magic chance to explore narrative possibilities of imagination.

*The Green Ship* can be conceived as a strong and poetical metaphor of an active connection between nature and children that needs never to be forgotten by adults, teachers, educators, parents, or policy makers. Today this memory can be strategic in reflections on outdoor education, because children, especially in urban contexts, live in different ways the privilege of a free access to nature. Considering the educational practices of outdoor education, as elaborated by a group of researchers from the University of Bologna lead by Roberto Farnè, an alarm bell can be heard, triggered by the condition of an almost "imprisoned childhood" of children who spend most of their days indoors (Farnè & Agostini, 2014). These considerations refer to the conditions of childhood in Italy in the last 30 years, mainly regarding children living in urban contexts. Monica Guerra<sup>1</sup> has also initiated an interdisciplinary and international discussion on the subject of outdoor education based on the same assumptions; as expressed by Cheryl Charles: "People worldwide need to reconnect to nature, and we need to start from children" (Guerra, 2015, p. 10).

Monica Guerra gathered authors with many different disciplinary perspectives (biologist, writers, teachers, educators and scholars) in a volume of collected papers she edited (2015). The keywords she proposed are inspiring also in the study of picturebooks connected to the outdoor subject: roots, beauty, evolution, risk, play, silence, contemplation, seeds, slowness and wilderness are just a few of them, naming the chapter of Guerra's essay.

Allowing children to activate wilderness (Sampson, 2015; Guerra, 2015) means to encourage direct observation, proposing the sensitive experience of things, ambivalence of emotional aspects, guaranteeing the right to adventure, risk, the exercise of their own physical talents and limits and also educating towards environmental sustainability, that is to say the responsibility of their own interaction with the earth: today these are both educational and cultural emergencies. In the past few years, the work of research and experimentation that has been done in Italy encouraged the development of schools in the wood and other outdoor educational practices. Since 2014 annual national congresses in Bologna have been organised, devoted to Outdoor Education, and supported by the University and the Municipality. Thus Italian re-

<sup>1</sup> Monica Guerra, the University of Milano, is the founder of Bambini & Natura, born as an online community of families, scholars, teachers, inspired by the Children & Nature Network founded by Richard Louv in 2006.

searches and practitioners have an opportunity to regularly meet and share their thoughts and experiences. These activities have been supported and promoted by Roberto Farnè's group of researchers (Bortolotti 2015; Bortolotti & Schenetti, 2015; Bortolotti, Crudeli & Ritscher, 2014; Schenetti, Salvaterra & Rossini, 2015). Experimental results became more structured with the foundation of the first national coordination of the outdoor education oriented schools in 2016, a network that provides a model and a platform where experts and interested individuals can express themselves as actively involved in practices and reflections of outdoor education: parents, educators, sponsors, different institutions and schools.<sup>2</sup>

The interdisciplinary work on Outdoor education embraces a focus on cultural aspects with a special attention to children literature (Terrusi, 2014). These thoughts are further elaborated at the Department of Quality Life Studies in Bologna which combines motor sciences, environmental education, medicine, natural sciences and psychology, in a precious, multi-faceted dialogue aiming to recover the total well-being of childhood, combating the development of anxiety disorders within the interrupted relationship between man and nature. Richard Louv coined the expression *children's nature-deficit disorder* to define the set of these disorders (Louv, 2005). He refers to different elements such as lack of contact with nature, less free time for the children, less free outdoor playtime, to exploration experiences in nature compared with experiences of previous generations, fear of nature and animals, obesity and lack of movement, lack of knowledge of natural world and vocabulary connected with the experience in nature, lack of vitamin D and other indicators of sedentary lifestyle. The issue of the deprivation of free outdoor playtime has also been addressed by Gray (2015). Regarding the cultural aspects, it is necessary to involve the sphere of imagination while working with children. Children's book can be a useful instrument for reflecting about the representation of childhood relations with nature and awake memories of adults on the subject. An initiative of the British National Trust in 2012<sup>3</sup> listed 50 items, outdoor experiences, worthy of doing before being 11 ¾. The activities were listed based on a survey; the researchers interviewed volunteers of all ages (they were asked about their favourite activities when they were children). They recorded an unsatisfactory situation also among British children, and sent them an emergency call: learn new skills outdoors, enjoy the pleasure of playing and moving in contact with a natural environment, climb a tree — to do what their parents had frequently had the chance to do in their own childhood.

The narrative elements and settings of the chosen contemporary picturebooks of the “outdoor shelf,” as the ones of the 50 things list, are almost always *outdoor* — woods, gardens, rooftops, trees, animals — and constitute the real and ideal existential geography where childhood can experiment on the encounter *with otherness* — animals, places, natural elements — and the possibility to learn to understand themselves by playing with animals (Ratelle, 2015), places and spaces (Cecire, Field, Finn & Roy, 2016), as well as the characteristics of flexibility, empathy, an inclination for play, curiosity, intelligence, imagination, creativity and relations with the world which we call neotenic, and which characterize the human race (Montagu, 1992).

## 1 The right to belong. Picturebooks for being outside, being slow, searching for beauty, enjoying the silence

*If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are.*

(Wendell Berry cit. in Wattchow & Brown, 2011, p. IX)

Picturebooks and *wordless books* can be, in this framework, precious allies in the education of adults and educators, with effects on the education of the imagination and the everyday experiences of children, also due to their “crossover” nature that is to say their power to include readers of all age together in the same experience (Beckett, 2012; Terrusi, 2012). This happens mostly because books reactivate childhood memories and imagination and also because they give opportunities, and perhaps validate, reflection and authentic conversation time about outdoor practices, avoiding the risk of opposing teachers and parents when facing educational choices. As stated by educators involved in a reading promotion training on the

<sup>2</sup> <https://scuoleallaperto.wordpress.com/progetto/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/50-things-to-do>

subject of nature and outdoor representations in narratives, picturebooks help establish communication between educators and parents. These educators participated in the two-year project in Rimini, conducted by the author of this paper and involving teachers, educators and parents of the children attending the nursery schools of the Cooperative Millepiedi network. The teachers of the nursery schools and other participants reported, in one of the first meeting devoted to the subject of outdoor education at school, that the greatest obstacles to improving the times and quality of practical outdoor education came from psychological causes such as the fear of the reactions of parents (as reported by teachers), an excessive anxiety of control (of both teachers and parents), an incorrect idea of risk and hygiene by parents, educators and also city policy makers (for example related to the maintenance of the school garden). In this framework, working on the imaginary and cultural aspect of the motivations of educational practices through the use of children's picturebooks meant acting transversally to stimulate autobiographical contents, imagination and contact with nature, first and foremost in adults and to re-think with a lateral perspective to the same problems.

Some picturebooks show, for example, representations of a child's moment of happiness, like Suzy Lee's *The wave*, a poetic wordless picturebook where a little girl is playing with the sea, the space, with only a few seagulls like witnesses. This poetic view on a specific moment of a silent experience between a child and a natural element recalls in grown-ups autobiographical memories and this recalling can connect them, or reconnect them, with needs and wishes of real children: an example can also be found in an Italian series of picturebooks for small readers where the main character, Tutino is a toddler dressed in a romper (the child's name means "a little romper"). In one book he merrily jumps into a puddle (Clerici, 2014a), in another book he looks at a tree (Clerici, 2014b) and its little tiniest mysteries, in another he plays with the wind (Clerici, 2015). Those are minimal stories of early childhood, and little picturebooks, where the pictures themselves, together with very short texts, tell the story of a wonderful and surprising natural experiences and discovery to the very young. Those are beloved stories because they show, through synthetically presented images, readable by very small children and grown-ups, the joy of the contact with nature, and the importance for a child to have the right to experience the time and the freedom needed in this contact. This picturebooks also state that a child's natural discovery, however small, is worthy of being retold in a book.

When we proposed this type of reflection through picturebooks to teachers and parents we also proposed them to read a completely different book, not a book for children but a powerful text on the subject of the visual contact with nature; a book written by an American scientist, the biologist David George Haskell, and originally titled *The Forest Unseen* (2014). Interdependence and interconnections between all things are the central topic of this narrative essay. Haskell observes and describes in details a square metre of primary forest in Tennessee over a period of a year, devoting a few hours to this almost every day and describing in details what does he sees. It is the classic and ancient topic of the relationship between that which is small and that which is great, present in both western and eastern traditions, exemplified by the circular symbol called *mandala* which represents a portion of the world and at the same time a living community, referring to the outside world to which it belongs. In his book, chapter after chapter, the scientist Haskell describes the *mandala* of land demarcated by him, offering brief, precise and profound observations and explanations of what he sees, telling of the relationships between things, from the mosquito to man, from lichen to birds, from snails to chlorophyll, from minerals to earthquakes. The lexicon is that of science, rigorous, rich and specific, but the author adopts different registers including similarities between the observed worlds; the plant world, the microscopic world of chemistry and physics, the world of human behaviour, the mineral, animal, molecular and human worlds. The brief chapters themselves can be very inspiring for teachers who wish to design a reading experience and activities with children about nature and outdoor education. For example, there are chapters devoted to the theme of water, the life of the snail or of trees, and teachers could choose international masterpieces of picturebooks and wordless books on the subject and combine them with the scientific explanations. There are many picturebooks appropriate for such activities from the Leo Lionni's snail of *The biggest house in the world* (1973) to Iela Mari's *Lalbero* (1975).

So why do we combine a study in biology to children's picturebooks and wordless books in a training program for teachers focusing on Outdoor education issues? Because every page of every picturebook can be seen as a *mandala*, an unseen portion of the world that the whole world continuously refers to; not

only because an illustration, like a literary text, refers continuously to what is not said, to what is outside the frame, due to that intrinsic characteristic of “incompleteness” found in every literary text (Gardini, 2014), but also because the eye of the scientist and that of the children’s book author share some characteristics, such as the obsession for what is very small and for metamorphosis. Giorgia Grilli specifically investigated the relationship between the scientific history of Charles Darwin and the children’s literature of the same period, effectively demonstrating (Grilli, 2011) these poetic relationships of perspective. From the founding experiences of Lewis Carroll and James M. Barrie onwards, or the 19<sup>th</sup> century *fairy tales*, scientists and children’s literature have been interested in metamorphic and intermediate forms, the different relationships and interdependencies between that which is infinitely small and that which is big. This perspective can also be found in contemporary picturebooks and especially in the titles chosen to develop the methodology for the outdoor education motivational reading program. In the array of picturebooks and wordless picturebooks (Terrusi, 2017) we can find the relationship between the *detail* and the *big picture*, as an invitation to discover the detail or find connections between distant elements: something that is also characteristic of (and activated in) an active relationship with the outdoor space.

The American wordless book *Inside Outside* by Lizzy Boyd (2013) can be considered a manifesto of the continuity between indoor and outdoor space in children’s lives. The die-cuts in a page offer an alternation between a double page set inside the house and a double page set in the garden. Through the windows we can see the shapes, and when we go back indoors, the drawings complete the shape of what could be seen from outside; there is no interruption, there is no perceptive barrier for the child, the house and the world communicate, the garden, the sky, the trees and the snow are the house. Culture, drawing, books and architecture are ways by which humans act and involve themselves in the environment, they are not dimensions that undermine the dialogue with nature. Another US author won the BolognaRagazzi Award with another wordless book set at night, entitled *Flashlight* (Boyd, 2014). The child is on a campsite, outside the tent are the wood and the dark. Using his torch, he can explore the details of a world that appears shapeless in the dark, but which reveals itself in all its colours, shapes and possible encounters. While the night-time setting is frequent in children’s picturebooks dealing with the moment of sleep or dreamtime, and though the dark is one of the most fascinating elements in childhood, it is not frequent for children who live in cities, where electric light has mostly replaced sunlight and all its gradations, to share the actual and direct experience of night-time outdoor, except for while camping or during holiday time, an experience that we could consider in itself a necessary and fundamental natural experience, a right of every child.

Talking of the experience of the dark as right we refer to a pedagogical manifesto of natural rights of the children stated by the Italian master Zavalloni in his text (2013) entitled *La pedagogia della lumaca* (The Pedagogy of the Snail) which refers to the relationship with the outside environment and slowness as children’s rights and invitations to reflect about contemporary educational practices and issues. In this internationally appreciated volume Zavalloni collects reflections and practical proposals for a new school and education system that respects the times of nature and children and he composes an illustrated text called *Manifesto for the Natural Rights of Boys and Girls*, ten indispensable “natural rights” that education and school system of the second half of the twentieth century should not forget to fulfill and which have also been translated online:

- 1) The right to be idle. To live moments in time not planned by adults.
- 2) The right to get dirty. To play with the sand, soil, grass, leaves, water and pebbles, stones and little branches.
- 3) The right to be exposed to variety of smells. To perceive tastes and to recognize natural perfumes offered by nature.
- 4) The right to dialogue. To listen and to be listened, to make contributions and start a conversation.
- 5) The right to be hands-on. Drive nails into wood, saw and cut wood, use sandpaper, glue, mould clay, tie or knot ropes and light a fire.
- 6) The right to good start in life. From birth on, eat healthy foods, drink pure water and breathe fresh air.

- 7) The right to the road. To play freely in the city centre and walk the streets safely.
- 8) The right of the wild. To build a shelter or a fort in the woods, to hide-out in reeds, to climb the trees.
- 9) The right to the sound of silence. To hear the wind, birdsong, splashing water.

The tenth is precisely “The right to the shades of light. To see the sunrise and sunset, admire the night, the moon and the stars.” Boyd’s book looks like setting it all to print.

Some picturebooks can incarnate Zavalloni’s rights in many figures and adventures. In the picturebook *Kubbe fa un museo* (Johnsen, 2013) for example, the small metamorphical main character Kubbe has the form of a tree trunk, he goes into the garden and into the woods to collect pretty things, unique objects like pine cones, stones, flowers, small treasures, and then returns home, catalogues them all and creates his very own personal museum, in a time that is never interrupted or planned by adults. Here Kubbe acts as an artist and art becomes an extension of the natural wonder for children; his artistic play is the possibility of organising the sensitive experience of the world in a meaningful way, common to the view of scientists, artists and children. Kubbe represents the children’s and human need for order, by narrating that which is not possible to explain otherwise. The picturebook invites readers into the pages, just as Kubbe invites some visitors into his museum, just before he dismantles it completely, as Buddhist monks compose mandalas with sand and natural elements and then let them be carried away by the tide, because everything is metamorphic and continues to belong despite changing shape. *The right to be idle, alone and in silence* is fundamental for experimenting this kind of active and creative relationship with the real elements of the natural world.

In the already quoted Italian series of *Tutino* (Clerici, 2014; 2015) we find a simple and beautiful form of *the right to get dirty*. The protagonist, a toddler, jumps into puddles, watches the leaves falling, dressed in a playsuit similar to those used in Finnish nurseries, where outdoor education is practiced right from very early childhood. In Italy, where much is being done to raise the awareness of parents and educators of the need of children to spend time outdoors, get dirty, move around, perspire, a book like this overcomes censorship and breaks down the barriers of adult prejudice to restore contact with childhood and declares, through the joy of reading, the right to contact with things. Here, as in other books, the central dimension is that of play as a tool for children to be in contact with and learn about the world (Gray, 2015).

In the Rimini project both parents and teachers reported that reading pictures together with children was for them a similar experience to walking out with them in gardens, especially talking about wordless books that invite readers to look at and compare shapes, colours, images, like in the French wordless books entitled “open your eyes” (Dé, 2011) when the reader sees just a detail of a picture in one page, framed by a die cut, and the entire image only in the next page; the game is just contemplating the organic beauty of those nature-based pictures and this process requires time, slowness, silence and openness to the unexpected, as it is required from a natural exploration by a scientist. It also offered the possibility for the readers to get to know each other better, when, for example, children show a better skill to spot details in the illustrations compared to grown-up observers, more puzzled by the absence of written text, or when children show their unknown fan of knowledge (from a motor education point of view or as competences coming from autobiographical experiences) or when they understand connection between different elements faster than adults.

Nature representation also brings possibilities of new communication on important matters between children and adults in times of climate changes and ecological emergency. Nourishing the bond between the childhood and the natural world can be an important key for building and preserving love for the environment which can also fight off the worries of these pessimistic forecasts of the fate of the planet: nature is also able to offer hope, which is indispensable for acting positively and constructing our own existence (Phoebe, 2013).

## 2 Childhood and nature

*Jane had a stuffed toy chimpanzee named Jubilee. She cherished Jubilee and took him everywhere she went. And Jane loved to be outside.*

(McDonnell, 2012, p. 3)

Rampant, flowery tree children, man cubs growing with other animals, discoverers of minute details and unknown islands, explorers and castaways living side by side with natural elements: children's literature is filled with characters portrayed in contact with the "anima mundi" in the platonic sense of the natural connection among all living creatures.

In the contact with nature, collective and individual destinies are developed and celebrated. For example, Patrick McDonnell in *Me... Jane* (2012) tells the true story of a girl, who, reading of animals and a distant country, begins to dream of what she would do when she grows up: go to Africa to study animals, in particular chimpanzees. This is the thrilling story of the scientist Jane Goodall, narrated and illustrated irresistibly for readers aged three upwards, a true story of the passion for science and nature and especially animals, which tells how journeys are born first of all inside, through education, and not only *indoors*, but in reading and culture, and then go *outside* and *outdoors* to invent and create experiences which can broaden the world not only of individuals but of the whole human culture.

As for the presence of the narrative theme of animals in children's fiction, it is not the focus of this paper but would need a much wider space, one irrevocable reference being the work of American environmental historian Harriet Ritvo (1985) and her reflections about the role of the animal in history and in stories and the embedding of natural philosophy also in children's literature. Her work connects her mostly to what we would call today non-fiction publications for middle class small readers children in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, like *The Natural History of Four-footed Beasts*, published by Newbery in 1769 (Ritvo, 1985).

Animal and imaginary beasts offer chances to understand human behaviour better and to grow up designing one's own destiny: to quote some picturebook masterpieces: Sendak's Max in *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) is not the only one to escape from a closed bedroom transformed into an infinite forest through dreams and imagination. Many other travellers have indeed conquered open spaces through their own efforts in the pages of a book, such as the classic *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (Johnson, 1955), where a toddler opens worlds and makes spaces with his own crayon; going back in history. Finally, *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905) is a sort of ancestor of every illustrated modern child, who sets out to explore open wide spaces, falling, flying, running, meeting strange creatures, all in his dreams.

The most classic book that talks of outdoor adventure, and maybe the most beloved by teachers and children, is the famous and prize-winning *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury (1995), where a whole family sets out on an adventure which is identified in the very experience of walking, aiming for the final encounter with the wild, represented by the bear. The alternation between black and white and colour pages confirms the passage from the domestic dimension of family relations to that of the outdoor adventure, in the environment filled with different shades, sensations and consistencies: they wade through rivers, cross meadows, mud and wood, and there is never any other path to follow than that which they are faced with: "We can't go over it. / We can't go under it. / Oh no! / We've got to go through it!" (Rosen, Oxenbury, 1995), The element of fear and adventure is very important here, and chant and music are ancient ways to deal with it and to accompany the journey. In this book the family members do all that together, measuring the path with their steps.

In children's books we find not only illustrated portraits related to *outdoor* pedagogy and natural education, but also examples of what we call "Pedagogy of Place" (Wattchow & Brown, 2011): in *My valley* by French author Claude Ponti (2001), the lead character is a creature called Tuim and his home is in the trunk of a large tree; he looks rather like a squirrel, and he describes its world and tells his personal story focusing on many details of its physical and poetic geography, because childhood has the right and the need to be *place-based* (Wells & Zeece, 2007). Tuim's world is described in the unique combination of figures and words with geographical, botanical and toponomastic precision by Claude Ponti (Van der Linden, 2000). It is a made up yet perfectly consistent world, rich in artistic references, an autobiography of childhood linked to great French literary tradition, with recognizable references to artist like Okusai or Ingres, writers like Perec, Queneau, Rabelais, (Chenouf, 2006). It is a world that comes with a cemetery, a theatre, a wood, islands and gardens, as well as the tree-house. The picturebook by Claude Ponti is a visual essay on the theme of outdoor education and at the same time the right to children's storytelling (Terrusi, 2012). A vital relationship with the outdoor environment also here defines a salvific, existential possibility, described by James Hillman as a cosmic belonging, against that of "parental superstition," the condition



in which we consider ourselves determined solely by the fate of our parents (Hillman, 2009; Grilli, 2011): Tuim considers himself a cosmic creature, belonging to a much wider family connected with the sky.

In this dimension of self-determination and belonging to the natural world, we can include the work of the young Hawaiian illustrator, who published an inspiring picturebook that proposes an even more radical image of emancipation. The protagonist is a girl who has grown up in the woods, she learns to talk from birds, to eat from bears, to play from foxes, her hair is wavy like branches and her name, and the title of the book, is *Wild* (Hughes, 2013).

Pan-like, she is surrounded by the love of the animals and nature, which welcome her and bring her up: she lives in total happiness. If on the one hand *Wild* belongs to the stories of feral children growing up in the wilderness tradition (the books that are represented in the pictures explicitly refer to that context) it doesn't offer a stereotypical images but a more controversial and ambivalent portrait of a female character who determines her own destiny. This is a way in which Emily Hughes takes and overturns the traditional representation of marginality of children and women, related to their "wilderness" seen as a sign of being non-civilized creatures, that in history and in literature representation, has been a negative stigma for ages. Hughes' illustrations, compared to the paintings by Paul Gauguin's or Henri Rousseau's, rich in botanical details, guide the reader's gaze to distinguish between the texture and curls of leaves, hair, feathers, beaks, lianas which all look alike, to recognise the naked body of the girl in the tangled undergrowth where the foxes are play-fighting, or the contemplation of the silent night-time idyll of the tree trunk-shelter, where the wild girl sleeps wrapped in her hair, like a young fairy-tale Eve, watched over by owls and rabbits. And from these totally immersing lessons, she understands everything and is happy. Then the men come. "One day she met a new animal in the forest" the text says, but does not mention one visible decisive detail in the picture: the girl is captured in a trap and her wild hair, now similar to the tale of a mermaid, is caught in the metal trap, freedom and movement are both lost in violence. The city becomes the new scene, the indoor space of a study — home becomes the horizon that replaces the animated nature. The psychiatrist's room where the girl is observed has attributes linked to exoticism (African masks), an unhappy cat with a cloth bib, a few books on the floor, which all play with her in the wrong way. Her green hair is not tamed by a style but rather seems to grow like unstoppable climbing plants. The dog and the cat share the chaos of her discomfort: on the floor, in the untidiness of the room, there are books titled *Creative crochet* and *The happy cat* (they even want to humanize and normalise the cat). The girl, the text says, does not understand, and is not happy, so she leaves. She acts and chooses her own fate. She returns to being wild, she blends with the beauty of nature, she hangs from a branch like an arboreal appendage, she shines in the beauty of all that is alive. In the pages of her mute refusal, there is no space for words, but only for the recovery of the profound freedom and the relationship between feminine and wilderness which today is so crucial for our health and for that of our community.

### 3 Conclusions

Literature has always known and portrayed the profound and necessary relationship that exists between the childhood and nature; children's literature offers icons and narratives in some picturebooks that are immediately capable of reawakening that sense of belonging to the platonic concept of *anima mundi*.

There will always be children who are mesmerised when they see an ant, the miracle of the wings of a ladybird or the dusty pistil of a flower, standing still and enraptured as they watch the wisdom of a moving tortoise or snail, quivering in that moment before they jump to grab a tail, a snowdrop on the tongue, a clod of earth in their little hand, their gaze alert and watching to see the wild animal escaping. In children's literature, we grow often and above all *outdoors*: the rites of passage can only take place in the woods, in the dark, far from the controlling gaze of adults, in contact with the world soul, wild, damp and ancestral, and certainly female, like the main character of *Wild* by Emily Hughes, a picturebook that had an enormous international success (published in more than 12 languages) due also to its representation of a non-conventional female character so much that in Italy it was printed by Settenove, a publishing house, that declares its cultural program against gender violence, stereotypes and discriminations. It looks like a stronger feminine identity needs a stronger relationship with nature, as the psychoanalyst Pinkola Estés stated in the 1990's (2008). Thus we defend the archetypal lightness of the *puer* — those invisible or visible wings in the representations of flying, timeless children like Peter Pan — and that constituting metamor-

phosis which all living beings share, like the Darwinian lesson: children's picturebook authors can educate our way of seeing (Grilli, 2012). We need to train ourselves in order to be capable of respecting and still spotting child-insects, fairies, the metamorphic lightness of literary children, the aerial substance of the classical archetype of the Puer Aeternus (Hillmann, 1999). The child that, as the poet Wordsworth stated "is The Father of the Man" also from an ecological point of view, because the child will inherit the planet in the future.

Picturebooks were precious allies for strengthening the motivation of adults working in education in the project *The Green Ship*, and helped the discussion about the "natural rights" expressed by the Italian expert Zavalloni. They are windows for going outdoors together, for inhabiting that enchanted path which from *indoors*, from the classroom, for example, or from the home, leads *outdoors* without interruption, crossing thresholds and boundaries in a dialectic relationship between strolls in narrative woods (Eco, 2008) and the outdoor woods, rightful raids into school gardens, the discovery of the natural resistance which offers up small plants even in the cracks in walls, and the return to foundations, where, using the instruments of culture, science and technique, the human constituents of fragility and uncertainty are nourished and protected.

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