Children’s Books: From Shelves to Streets

Children’s publishing as a tool for social change in the Italian ‘anti-gender’ scenario

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ABSTRACT

In my Degree Project I developed a case study of two independent publishers that promote children’s literature with a special focus on diversity and challenging gender stereotypes, situating them within the bigger framework of activism for gender equality and against homophobia in Italy. I looked at the potential of children’s literature as a significant instrument of communication for social change and analysed the publishers’ activities as a form of activism. I narrowed my analysis to two publishers: Lo Stampatello, specialising in children’s literature against gender stereotypes and homophobia, and Settenove, specialising in the theme of gender equality. I analysed first a selection of texts from these publishers and then some of their diffusion practices, through which they engage with other entities dealing with gender equality and LGBT rights. I see these publishers as self-aware agents of change, that produce messages about equality, deliberately diffused into the public sphere and specifically targeting an audience of children, parents, teachers and educators, thus playing an active role in the scenario of contentious politics [Tilly and Tarrow, 2007].
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Introduction

In my Degree Project I developed a case study of two independent publishers that promote children’s literature with a special focus on diversity and challenging gender stereotypes, situating them within the bigger framework of activism for gender equality and against homophobia in Italy. I looked at the potential of children’s literature as a significant instrument of communication for social change and analysed the publishers’ activities as a form of activism.

In 2016 civil unions were recognised in Italy, but parenthood related rights for same-sex couples are substantially not on the table yet and overall these topics are still perceived as controversial by some public opinion. Italy is currently faced with ‘a significant political and cultural conflict, waged for the most part by Catholic associations and groups both in the media and schools’ [Bellè, Peroni and Rapetti, 2016, p. 74]. Following Bellè, Peroni and Rapetti ‘the current public position on gender and sexual citizenship [...] seems ambivalent, characterised as it is by both the emergence of a new openness and the persistence of conservative positions’ [Bellè et al., 2016, p. 74].

This conflict is reflected by the increasing number of ‘groups and activities which have been organised in resistance to what previously appeared to be an irreversible process of achievement of gender equality and sexual rights in the Western world’ [Kuhar and Zobec, 2017, p. 31]. Kuhar and Paternotte [2017] highlighted the increasing amount of activity of these groups across Europe, the connections between these phenomena in different countries and their linkage with analogous forms of activism in other continents, such as South America.

As Kuhar and Zobec recall, mass protests across have centralised in the past few years around so-called ‘gender theory’ [Kuhar and Zobec, 2017, p. 29]. Public schools are one of the main targets of European anti-gender activists. In the Italian context this confrontation included episodes of censorship of children’s books considered as part of ‘gender propaganda’.¹

I argue that both gender equality movements and the anti-gender activists act as agents of social change. Children’s books on gender equality/family diversity reflect and elaborate key concepts of this contemporary debate, intersecting with the discourses carried on and defended by social movements and directing their communication practices to a sensitive target: children and their parents. My attention focused on the messages produced by these actors; I considered books

¹ https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/19/world/europe/venice-childrens-books-ban.html
directed at a primary school age target, observing, specifically, how two macro-themes are represented: family diversity and male/female stereotypes.

I decided to narrow down my analysis to two publishers:

- Lo Stampatello, specialising in children’s literature against gender stereotypes and homophobia; and
- Settenove, specialising in the theme of gender equality.

These actors are the two main publishers in the country deliberately – and specifically engaging with these topics. Both are small and independent, started their activity in recent years (the former in 2011 and the latter in 2013) and entertain some sort of engagement within social movements dealing with gender equality and LGBT themes through a variety of public activities.

In this part I will clarify some key concepts that are part of the theoretical background of my work and I will specify my research questions and the methodologies I chose to apply.

**Communication for social change**

I situate communication practices of the social actors analysed within the area of communication for social change, which ‘emphasizes using communication strategically to address and often challenge the structural conditions that inform social change processes’ [Tufte, 2017, p.15]. Globally speaking, following Tufte, the notion of change considered by this approach is centred not only on individual behaviour but also on social norms, structural conditions and power relations.

**Discourse and representation**

My starting point is a constructionist approach, connected to the idea that ‘Discourses create representations of the world that reflect as well as actively construct reality by ascribing meanings to our world, identities and social relations’ [Joye, 2009, p. 49].

Discourse was intended by Foucault as ‘a group of statements which provide a language for talking about - a way of representing the knowledge about - a particular topic at a particular historical moment’ [Foucault, 1990, ref. in Hall, 1992, p. 291].
As Stuart Hall highlights, cultural meanings organise and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and have real, practical effects. We give things meaning by how we represent them: the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce and so on [Hall et al., 2013 [1997], p. xix].

Foucault saw knowledge as inextricably enmeshed in relations of power [Foucault, 1990, ref. in Hall et al., 2013 [1997]] which permeate all levels of social existence. He analysed discourses on sexuality (in Western societies), underlining how this is a constant public part of social life, constructed and regulated by forms of institutional power that embed it in a hierarchy [Foucault, 1990; Porzionato, 2016]. Power has to be understood also in symbolic terms, as the power to represent someone in a certain way and within a certain ‘regime of representation’ [Hall et al., 2013 [1997], p. 222].

Gender, stereotypes and homophobia

Gayle Rubin defined a ‘sex/gender system’ as ‘a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention’ [Rubin, 1975, p. 165]. Overall, my starting point is the idea that each society constructs rules and paths that regulate the destinies of men and women and their relationships [Piccone Stella and Saraceno, 1996]. Gender identities appear to me as the result of a complex process of social and cultural construction, intrinsically intertwined with power structures and representations. The idea of gender equality is a contested notion, highly debated within feminist theory, although it is commonly used in political agendas [Verloo and Lombardo in Verloo, 2007, pp. 22 – 23]. I will use the definition adopted by the European Institute for Gender Equality: ‘[Gender equality] refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and of women and men and girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women’s and men’s rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they were born male or female.’

Following Hall, stereotyping is a representational practice that reduces people to a few simple, essential characteristics. It symbolically fixes boundaries and can generate exclusion because it essentialises, naturalises and fixes ‘difference’ [Hall et al., 2013 [1997], p. 247], as part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order [Hall, et al., 2013 [1997], p. 248]. Prejudice, instead, is

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2 From the EIGE website: http://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/concepts-and-definitions
an ‘unjustified negative judgement of an individual based on his or her social group identity [Blaine, 2007, p. 61, ref. in Epstein, 2013]. Homophobia is defined as ‘fear, disgust and aversion’ towards homosexual people and practices [Blaine, 2007, p. 143, ref. in Epstein, 2013].

Children’s literature

My work starts from an assumption of children’s literature as one of the cultural foundations of contemporary Western identity [Beseghi and Grilli, 2011, p. 13; Hunt, 1994].

I adopt a broad definition of children’s literature as an ‘overarching title for a large set of texts read to and by young people’ [Epstein, 2013, p. 13]. I acknowledge that children’s books are not ‘innocent or simple’ [Hunt, in Maybin and Watson (eds), 2009, p. 15] and that power is a key dimension connected to them. As Hunt highlights, children’s literature is at root about power: adults exercise power while writing, and children read, either being manipulated or resisting manipulation. Children’s books are inevitably didactic in some way [Hunt, in Maybin and Watson (eds), 2009, p. 14]. I am interested in children’s literature because of the complex ways in which it generates collective imaginative material and because of the way it can mirror social and cultural conflicts and transformations.

Social movements

I will refer to social movements as ‘informal networks, based on shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilise about conflictual issues, through the frequent use of various forms of protest’ [Della Porta and Diani, 1999, p. 16].

Social movements are defined as informal and fluid actors with a rather loose and dispersed organisation, engaged in political and/or cultural conflicts meant to promote or oppose social change either at the systemic or non-systemic level [Diani, 1992, p. 11].

Social movements act within public space, ‘the space of societal, meaningful interaction where ideas and values are formed, conveyed, supported, and resisted’ [Castells, 2009, p. 301]. Yet they also represent an ‘arena of struggle, a fragmented and contested area’ [Keck and Sikkink, 1998, p. 34] where groups and institutions vie for power and legitimacy [Kavada, in Wilkins, Tufte and Obregon, 2014, p. 352].
Contentious politics

Tilly and Tarrow defined ‘contentious politics’ as a form of action in which actors make claims on authorities, use public performances to do so, drawing on inherited repertoires and inventing new ones, forging alliances, taking advantage of existing political regime opportunities and using a combination of institutional and extrainstitutional routines to advance their claims [Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, p. 7]. A ‘cycle of contention’ is ‘a phase of heightened conflict across the social system, with rapid diffusion of collective action from more mobilized to less mobilized sectors, a rapid pace of innovation in the forms of contention employed, the creation of new or transformed collective action frames, a combination of organized and unorganized participation, and sequences of intensified information flow and interaction between challengers and authorities’ [Tarrow, 2011].

Research questions, methodologies, strengths and weaknesses

My research questions will be the following:

1. How do these publishers discursively represent the themes of family diversity and gender stereotypes in their products?

2. How do the publishing houses relate to and act within movements working in Italy on raising awareness of these themes, thus becoming actors of contentious politics [Tilly and Tarrow, 2007] and agents of social change [Waisbord, 2014; Tufte, 2017]?

I chose to apply discourse analysis, focusing on recurring themes in the books and connecting these themes and meanings with the social scenario and the extra-publishing social practices of the publishers. ‘Doing a discourse analysis assumes that you are concerned with the discursive production of some kind of authoritative account – and perhaps too about how the account was contested – and with the social practices both in which that production is embedded and which itself produces’ [Rose, 2012, p. 197].

Picking an approach means discarding equally (or more) relevant paths. I considered other options, such as exploring the audience side (involving children, teachers or parents) or the relationship between these publishers and the media or comparing these texts with their international counter-parts, but developing any of these points would require a considerable
space within my paper. I decided, instead, to concentrate my work on the core messages and communication practices of the publishers because I was interested in highlighting the discourses built and diffused by these actors. To increase the validity of my analysis, I interviewed a representative for each publishing house to identify their motivations and their self-representation as publishers of socially engaged children’s books. I tried to capture the roots of the discourses they create and/or disseminate.

I chose to include texts connected to two main subjects (gender stereotypes and LGBT representations) and relate them to social practices. The theoretical extent of these themes is undoubtedly a risk factor, because there are potentially infinite angles to explore (from political to sociological and educational aspects). I tried to narrow my sample to a restricted selection of texts, because I believe the messages and the publishers’ activities are both relevant. I wanted to highlight their connections in the ‘big picture’ of the contemporary cultural conflict about ‘gender’.

This means that I could not expand my analysis to a higher number of samples and that I could not explore in-depth every book in all its literary and sociological elements: my analysis is necessarily concise and limited to the core discursive elements.

I decided to describe, in the first chapter, the main features of social actors involved in the aforementioned confrontation, because I consider it useful to introduce some background, although this meant subtracting some space to the core chapters.

This choice, together with the decision of combining two macro-subjects, determined a need for conciseness and could be seen as a weakness. I argue, nonetheless, that this represents an element of strength as well.

My overall intent was to provide a snap-shot of some confrontations taking place in Italian society, from a very specific lens: children’s books. I see gender equality and LGBT instances as closely intertwined, as the discourses they produce and the discourses produced by their detractors overlap in a significant way. The originality of my thesis lies in the connection between these themes, how they are reflected in the production of children’s books and in practices that relate their publishers to social movements. To do this, I start with a panning shot, before zooming in and exploring specific messages and practices.
Positionality

My analysis reflects a subjective vision, informed by my specific perspective and experience. I position myself as a European student, engaged in an international programme about media and development studies. Being an Italian woman close to feminist and LGBT instances plays a key role in the way I read social phenomena in the country. This positioning shapes the way in which I approach theories and develop my thesis.

Chapter 1. A rainbow battlefield

‘[…] social change is a non-linear, complex and often contested process.’

[Tufte, 2017, p. 21]

Anti-gender movements: an overview

Cultural change is defined by Castells as ‘a change of values and beliefs processed in the human mind on a scale large enough to affect society as a whole’, while political change is ‘an institutional adoption of the new values diffusing throughout the culture of a society’ [Castells, 2009, p. 300]. Castells characterizes social actors aiming for cultural change as social movements, and the processes aiming at political change in discontinuity with the logic embedded in political institutions as insurgent politics [Castells, 2009, ibidem]. Communication is at the centre of these processes, as ‘different forms of control and manipulation of messages and communication in the public space are at the heart of power making: the public space is a contested terrain’ [Castells, 2009, p. 302].

As highlighted by Verloo, ‘the political efforts and victories of feminism have never eliminated their opposition, nor have they rendered opposition to feminism powerless’ [Verloo, 2018, p. 4]. In Europe, structural changes such as the increased marketization of politics and public services and the reduction of government power have facilitated in recent years the emergence or intensification of the activity of actors linked to far-right, populist radical right parties and actors linked to organized religions [Ibidem, p. 5], engaging in opposition to gender equality policy.
Since 2012, a series of mobilizations with similar characteristics have appeared across Europe. Demonstrators generally contest gender equality and policy reforms related to LGBT rights, while invoking notions such as ‘gender ideology’ or ‘gender theory’ [Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017, p. 12].

‘Gender ideology’ is used by demonstrators as an umbrella term and interpretative frame opposing reforms and depicting them as part of a secret political strategy imposed by European and Western elites and institutions; ‘gender’ is interpreted, overall, as a means to destabilise the so-called ‘natural family’ [Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017].

Kuhar and Paternotte [2017] collected a series of essays, depicting the characteristics of such protests across several European countries.³ These campaigns, they argue, are part of an organized and increasingly global phenomenon, which they identify as an anti-gender movement. Following Kuhar and Paternotte, the discourse of ‘gender ideology’ was elaborated between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s.⁴ In most cases, movements activate in reaction to a proposed policy and act as opponents towards specific actors, such as feminist and LGBT groups. The issues attacked by protesters fall into these categories [Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017, pp. 299 – 303]:

- LGBT rights: Activists oppose marriage equality or civil partnership policies and fight against policies regulating access to kinship for LGBT individuals or couples;⁵
- Reproductive rights;
- Sex and gender education: Opponents invoke the image of the innocent child as a mechanism for triggering moral panic strategies [Thompson, 1998 and Robinson, 2008, ref. in Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017];
- Gender: Gender studies are constructed by the movement as ideological and non-scientific; and
- Democracy: Protesters present anti-discrimination policies as attempts to curtail freedom of speech.

³ Austria, Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Russia, Slovenia and Spain.
⁴ The ‘Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family, Life and Ethical Questions’, published by the Pontifical Council for the Family in 2003 was the first systematization of the rhetorical device invented by the Vatican after the UN Beijing Conference [1995] to delegitimize analyses affirming that sex and sexuality are political issues [Garbagnoli, 2017].
⁵ Such as debates on second-parent and joint adoption for same sex couples, surrogacy and reproductive technologies.
The Catholic church appears as a key discourse producer; however, it is not a monolithic body and there are different factions with divergent opinions on these topics within it [Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017, pp. 306 – 308].

The movement has constructed a colourful and festive outlook, articulating a multilayered discourse to reach different audiences, including young people; the common repertoire of European activists includes demonstrations, sit-ins and stand-ins, petitions, collections of signatures, lobbying, referendum campaigns, electoral mobilization, email bombarding, boycotts and production of news-like stories; members are extremely active on the web, using it to build a sense of community, develop networks, reach new audiences and mobilise members for action in physical and web space [Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017, pp. 308 – 311].

Contacts between national movements (among Europe, but also in the United States and Latin American countries) are growing and specific networks have been established to target EU institutions [Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017, pp. 314 – 317].

Italian explicitly anti-gender protests were started in 2013 by La Manif Pour Tous Italia. The Italian movement has targeted mainly [Garbagnoli, 2017, p. 183]:

- The Scalfarotto bill against discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation and gender identity;
- The Cirinnà bill on same-sex unions; and
- The implementation of educational tools on gender equality and LGBT bullying in public primary schools.

Following Garbagnoli, the diffusion of the concept of ‘sexual difference’ in the Italian public space creates a fertile ground for naturalistic discourses on sexual order; anti-gender protesters mobilize a set of rhetorical arguments in which heterosexual conjugal family is the fundament of humanity, civilization and national community, combining the notion of ‘natural family’ with references to human rights and the defence of the weak, i.e. children (activists’ slogans claim the child’s right of having a dad and a mum) against an ‘anthropological revolution’ [Garbagnoli, 2017]. Typical modes of action include conferences run by experts, standing vigils performed in public spaces and street demonstrations.

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6 As Agnieszka Graff highlights, the religious and secular populist right has ‘learned to be ‘hip’: witty, great at using modern media, rhetorical strategies and communication styles associated with post-modernism and progressive social movements (positioning oneself as victim of ‘discrimination’ and rebel against the status quo)” [Graff, 2016, p. 271].
One of the key targets of the anti-gender movement are public schools; civil initiatives of ‘concerned parents’ have tried to pressure school authorities and teachers to not address certain topics, such as same sex families, the social construction of gender roles, sex education and homosexuality [Kuhar and Zobec, 2017, pp. 36 – 37].

As Garbagnoli [2017, p. 199] points out, until now Italian anti-gender protesters succeeded in imposing the terms of public debate on sexual issues; expressions such as ‘gender ideology’ are used by politicians and media, as form of equalization between the two positions (‘pro’ and ‘anti’).

**On the other side: an overview**

Emerging in the late 1960s in the form of small groups, Italian feminism developed into a large, mass based and yet internally diverse, highly visible movement, that had an important political and cultural impact [Bracke, 2014]. Women’s movements contributed setting the stage for the emergence of identity movements focused on challenging traditional ideologies of family, sexuality and gender [Nardi, 1998, p. 579]. In the 1970 major changes happened: from the introduction on divorce in 1970, to the new family law passed in 1975, the parity in the workplace law in 1977 and the legalization of abortion in 1978. The issue of sexual liberation was at the centre of Italian feminism of the 1970s. Another analytical methodology, the feminism of difference, suggested that sexual difference is inherent to the constitution of subjectivity; following this approach, feminism should have the objective of unmasking the modern fallacy of a neutral, universal male subject which has been historically legitimising the subordination of women at a symbolical level [Malagreca, 2006].

Contemporary LGBT activism in Italy has its roots in the early 1970s. A critique of heteronormativity and gender binarism was one of the main features of the Italian sexual liberation movement in the 1970s and early 1980s; the diffusion of queer theory from the 1990s inserted itself in this tradition [Di Feliciantonio, 2014, pp. 30–32]. Trappolin [2004] distinguishes between liberal LGBT groups, whose claims mostly target sexuality and discrimination (like in the case of the most visible and well-known organisations, such as Arcigay), and radical ones, addressing revolutionary claims around multiple issues of social and economic justice.
The scenario of feminist and LGBT associationism in Italy, heirs of the constellation of movements originated in the 1970s, is far from static. Along with historical associations, in recent years Italians assisted the flourishing of a variety of realities related to gender equality issues and to LGBT rights. Some of them are single organisations, such as Arcigay, the main LGBT association, pursuing mainstreaming campaigns about LGBT rights, or Se Non Ora Quando (If Not Now When – the name is inspired by the eponymous novel by Primo Levi), a cross-cutting feminist movement. Some are smaller collectives (most of them based in universities and squats), while others are networks of organisations. For instance, there is D.i.Re (‘Women network against Violence’), the first Italian national association of non-institutional anti-violence centres or Non Una di Meno (Not One Less), a demonstration and the following assembly, named this way to recall directly the Argentinian demonstrations #NiUnaMenos and to stand in solidarity with all women who are fighting discrimination and violence and for their self-determination.

Some of the actors deal with across-the-board issues – such as gender violence and female representation in the media – while others are specialised in specific themes related to the LGBT sphere, such as legal support, advocacy, media analysis or the promotion of equality in the employment sector.

As we have seen previously, schools have become a decisive and strategic place where an encounter/clash of ideas about family, love, sexuality, etc. takes place. A variety of actors from feminist and LGBT sectors are engaged in educational activities about gender equality and/or LGBT rights or homophobia prevention.

In the last year networks connected with gender education have been created. For instance, Educare alle differenze (‘Educating for Differences’) is a national network of associations created in 2017 from the experience of the eponymous event ‘Educare alle differenze’ – an annual meeting that gathered for a few years thousands of teachers, educators, individuals and organisations in a national meeting aimed at sharing and spreading practices connected to gender equality education in Italian schools. One of the main actors behind the event and the network, Scosse (literally ‘shakes’, but it could also mean ‘upset women’), is a non-profit organization.

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7 www.arcigay.it.
8 http://www.senonoraquando-torino.it/
9 https://www.direcontrolaviolenza.it/
10 https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/
11 http://www.scosse.org/educare-alle-differenze-rete-nazionale/
that realizes and supports activities and policies for equal opportunities. The association aims to spread education to respect differences and deconstruct stereotypes, starting from early childhood, so it regularly carries out training for teachers and workshops for students. Scosse also conducts training interventions, seminars and workshops dedicated to stereotypes-free children’s publishing.\(^\text{12}\)

It can be observed that feminist and LGBT actors’ trajectories in the educational field are often inextricably woven together, because both LGBT-related activism and gender equality activism face common challenges connected to patriarchal values and cultural gender stereotypes. This affects both the male/female relationship on a societal scale and the situation of LGBT people, who do not mirror traditional gender roles themselves.

Communication practices of gender equality and LGBT actors in Italy are varied and include networking and aggregation practices [Juris, 2012], activated both in physical and in web spaces:

- A significant and visible part of the movements’ activities takes place in the public space: mass demonstrations, rallies and marches in the streets during which activists occupy public spaces with a variety of activities. Demonstrations can happen as a reaction to specific episodes, but they are commonly organized in key dates such as Gay Pride month and International Women’s day.
- Public events and debates also appear to be a fundamental part of the movements’ strategies to spread and discuss their objectives.
- Educational workshops in schools, as described previously, can be considered part of these actors’ communicative practices, as they are intentionally directed at raising awareness and spreading specific, inclusive narratives around controversial issues such as gender or homophobic stereotypes.
- Organisations and networks also intentionally and actively engaging in a dialogue with the media and a wide audience within a visibility approach [Santos, 2013, pp. 132 – 135].
- Social media play a large role in the communication practices of these actors.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{12}\) [http://www.scosse.org/chi-siamo-2/mission/]

\(^{13}\) As Kavada highlights, ‘blogs, social networking and content-sharing sites decentralise the process of creating and disseminating information’ [Kavada, 2010, p. 108].
Social media were and are used, in my view, by these movements, to respond to these core functions in a context of “mass self-communication” [Castells, 2009]:

✔ Organizing protests and demonstration on a local and national scale;
✔ Documenting the demonstrations and live reporting about them;
✔ Strengthening the creation of group identities around common goals; in the case of LGBT activists, for example, in the last 2 years social media tools helped promoting a national co-ordinated calendar for the Pride demonstrations with a common main theme; and
✔ Building narratives or counter-narratives around specific issues.

Overall, these actors’ practices tend to fall into the categories of contained behaviour as identified by Tarrow [2011]: conventionalized routines, such as demonstrations, that people understand and that elites will accept or even facilitate. In some cases, their practices appear as slightly disruptive, aimed at ‘disrupting the routines of life in ways that protesters hope will disarm, dismay and disrupt opponents’ [Tarrow, 2011, p. 99]. For example, in 2016, during the heated parliamentary debate about the Cirinnà Bill demonstrators of the ‘Svegliati Italia’ (Wake up, Italy) initiative activated simultaneously millions of alarm clocks in many public squares to symbolically ‘wake up’ the country about the importance of not stopping the path of the Bill. In some cases, demonstrators occupy the public space as an ironical or provocative answer to anti-gender demonstrations. In 2018, Famiglie Arcobaleno (the association composed by LGBT parents) organized in 9 Italian cities the Festa delle famiglie (‘families’ day’), held in public spaces, open to all kinds of families and including recreational activities, games and snacks. In Turin, the day was celebrated in a historical square in the city centre, where a big open air lunch was set. Initiatives like this, clearly aimed at gaining visibility, in my view consciously play with tropes like the traditional ‘Sunday family lunch’, while showing queer families in the sunlight, in all their everyday ‘normality’, thus provocatively challenging the idea of a divide between families with straight and gay parents.

In the next chapter we will see how specific messages in children’s books interact with the discourses of the aforementioned movements.


In February 2011 mass demonstrations organized by Se Non Ora Quando in different cities employed balls of wool to weave a net uniting all participants. The result was a mass of wool threads, intersecting themselves across Italy’s major squares.

4. Source: Next quotidiano

The web can be used, in some cases, to convey messages through a virtual use of public spaces. This is the case of Scosse’s campaign #contronatura? (‘Against nature?’), developed in the summer of 2015 to promote the ‘Educare alle differenze’ meeting. The organisation diffused through social media a series of graphic subjects around issues of gender and homophobic stereotypes. The images were virtually affixed in a variety of Italian cities through a series of photomontages.
5. Sentinelle in Piedi demonstration in Turin and counter-activists. Credits: Federico Bernini

6. An anti-gender demonstration. ‘Rome families are here to say: no to gender in school – yes to natural family’. Source: Tempi.it
Chapter 2. Powerful texts: children’s literature

‘What goes into children’s minds is our responsibility, just as much as what goes into their stomachs’ [Hunt, in Maybin and Watson (eds), 2009, p. 16]

Following Peter Hunt, it is practically impossible for a children’s book not to be educational or influential in some way, because it will reflect an ideology in any case [Hunt, 1994, pp. 3-4]. Therefore, dealing with children’s literature involves responsibility: ‘what may at first sight seem like trivial or ephemeral texts are in fact immensely powerful. They have been read by millions upon millions of people at the period in their lives when they are most susceptible to new ideas’ [Hunt, in Maybin and Watson (eds), 2009, p.15].

Zanfabro defines children’s literature as a particular kind of culturally situated discursive practice, implying an asymmetry between the reader and the writer; it implies political issues because childhood materializes within a specific power configuration, in a system of discourses, practices and norms that concur to determine what it means to be children [Zanfabro, 2017, p. 3].
Stories, in sum, are powerful: they inevitably reflect and convey ideas, visions and values. Their power can be used in many ways.

Nussbaum [1997], for example, defines ‘narrative imagination’ as the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself and to understand the emotions, wishes and desires that someone so placed might have, developing compassion. In Nussbaum’s view, narrative imagination can be cultivated through the arts, especially literature.

Writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in her famous TED talk ‘The danger of a single story’ held in 2009, warns about another side of the power of books: that of representing a dominant group’s view or situation as ‘normal’ [Adichie, 2009]. Adichie highlights the role of Western literature in portraying a dominant narrative [McCoy 2015, p. 64] about Global South and particularly Africa. The single story flattens the diversity of reality and creates stereotypes, which ‘make one story become the only story’, and it makes it difficult for people to establish connections as equals. ‘How stories are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. [...] Stories matter. Many stories matter.’ [Adichie, 2009]

I argue that an analogy can be traced between the issue of representation of race/culture (at the core of Adichie’s stances) and that of gender roles, homosexuality and family diversity in Western children’s literature. Children’s books have the opportunity to reiterate stereotypes or not, to tell one story or many stories, and to reflect the diversity in real life or not.

Since the 1970s, the rise of feminist and postcolonial studies led scholars to critically analyse classics focusing on the representation of race and gender, among other themes, in children’s books [Paul, in Maybin and Watson (eds), 2009, pp. 88 – 92]; this also impulsed the production of books meant to contrast stereotypes, to promote equality instances and a more diverse representation of girls and minorities [Pinsent, 1997].

The impact of gender stereotypes in children’s books has been studied widely over the past decades [Tsao, 2008, p. 109]: children’s books are an important cultural mechanism that teaches gender roles to children [Taylor, 2003, ref. in Tsao, 2008], and for a long time books for children have reflected societal attitudes in limiting choices and maintaining discrimination [Rudman, 1995, ref. in Tsao, 2008]. Over the past decades female representation in books increased, showing a greater awareness of authors about women’s changing roles, but ideally all children’s books
should have well-rounded male and female characters, with distinct personalities regardless of their gender [Tsao, 2008, p. 113].

In Italy the front of children’s literature challenging gender stereotypes began in the 1970s through the work of authors such as Adela Turin [1980] and Bianca Pitzorno [1979] and pioneer publishers (Dalla parte delle bambine14). During the 1980s, Italian children’s literature went through a renaissance, with new book series tackling social complexity and the diffusion both of Italian and foreigner ground-breaking authors. Since the mid-1980s the theme of sexism in textbooks became an issue among scholars [Biemmi, 2015]. The first translations of picture books about family diversity landed in the Italian market in the early 2000s – Lo Stampatello was the first publisher explicitly dedicated to tackling this theme.

As they inevitably reflect ideologies, values, ideas of childhood, family and so on, children’s books are quite vulnerable to censorship: what is acceptable and suitable for children changes with time and is a part of a complex network of social values [Hunt, in Maybin and Watson (eds), 2009, p. 24]. Only in recent decades sexuality became an accepted topic in (Western) books for younger readers and from the 1980s non-heterosexualities began to be depicted [Epstein, 2013, pp. 15–18], generating controversies. These topics still generate controversies: some adults feel that queer topics should not be portrayed in children’s books because they might confuse them or tempt them into being queer themselves.

Most books on LGBT themes for children and young people are marketed as “issue books”: these texts often focus on queerness as a problem [Epstein, 2013, pp. 26–27]: in picture books for young children, for instance, the theme of queer families is often dealt with in a normalizing approach, trying to affirm that they are as loving, as good and as normal as others, thus implicitly encouraging the idea that being LGBT still represents an issue to deal with. Lissa Paul calls these books ‘the crude “just like us” versions’ [Paul, 2009, ref. in Epstein, 2013], attempting to show that queer people are “just like” the supposed norm: a form of ghettoization, argues Epstein [2013, p.60].

Representation is important either way, argues Epstein: literary texts can expose young people to differences, and reading about LGBT themes is a way to reduce confusion about or prejudice

14 Dalla parte delle bambine (On girls’ side) took its name from the title of the groundbreaking pedagogical essay by Elena Gianini Belotti [1975], denouncing the persistence of strongly stereotyped roles in children’s education in Italy. The publishing house was active between 1975 and 1982.
against the “other” and also to reduce feelings of self-hatred or depression in those who recognize as LGBT [Epstein, 2013, pp.130–131]. Still missing in most of this literature is the depiction of more varied images of LGBT people [Epstein, 2013]. Epstein quotes Andrew Solomon, stating that neutrality is the end-game, reached only when activism becomes unnecessary [Solomon, 2012, ref. in Epstein, 2013]. For now, Epstein argues, activism is still needed: there are big power issues in relation both to literature for young readers and to gender and sexuality, and writing is a form of activism. In her opinion, it is important for queer young people and children of same-sex couples to see themselves represented in literature, and for non-queer young readers to read books that are not limiting and do not feature stereotypes on these topics [Epstein, 2013, pp. 246–247].

Lo Stampatello and Settenove

The publishing house Lo Stampatello, founded in 2011 and based in Milan, as synthetized by Valeria Illuminati, is faithful to its motto ‘Parlami in stampatello’ ['Speak to me in capital letters'] as it attempts to make complex, often taboo, themes accessible to using simple, clear, direct language [Illuminati, in Ramos, Cortez and Mourão, 2017, p. 229].

The publishing house was created to fill a gap in children's publishing, the one represented by families with same-sex parents. It moves from the idea that it is fundamental for all children to be able to mirror themselves in the stories and in the picture books. Moreover, the publishing house aims to broaden readers’ gaze on the themes of family diversity in general (tackling themes like single parenting or divorce) and themes like migrations and bullying.15

Settenove was founded in 2013 in Cagli (a small town near Pesaro, in the Marche region) and is the first Italian publishing project entirely dedicated to the prevention of discrimination and gender violence.

Both publishers’ production includes a selection of titles translated from foreign authors/illustrators and books curated by Italian authors/illustrators.

I will briefly analyse the main messages of a range of titles – mostly picture books – published by Lo Stampatello and Settenove.

15 From the website www.lostampatello.it.
Preventing and fighting gender stereotypes

A common thread linking a variety of books is the implicit or explicit objective of contrasting gender stereotypes. This can be rendered in different ways.

Some books play with the trope of princess stories, representing princesses who question their status or who find release from the boredom of a pre-fixed role.

In ‘C’è qualcosa di più noioso che essere una principessa rosa?’ ['Is there anything more boring than being a pink princess?' – Diaz Reguera, Settenove 2013], Carlotta feels like she does not fit in the classical role prescribed for princesses: she longs for adventure or for the possibility of becoming something else, like a chef, an astronomer, a dragon-fighter or a balloon-traveller. She has to argue with her mother, her father, her fairy godmother and the royal counsellors to convince them that she is able to run, jump, play and travel. She summons all the princes, princesses, fairy godmothers and royal counsellors of the world; at the end they establish new rules with freedom for everyone to be whatever they like.

In ‘La principessa salvata dai libri’ ['The princess saved by books' – Meddour and Ashdown, Lo Stampatello 2014], a modern-day Rapunzel is bored to death, self-confined on the highest floor of a skyscraper. Her friends, relatives, a postman and a wannabe-Prince Charming try in vain to cheer her up, until the princess opens a magic envelope brought her by the postman: she got a job at a local library. Her life is turned upside down: she finds a purpose and a passion for accessing knowledge and sharing it.

These books can be seen as part of a quite recent trend in picture books, focused on princesses who reverse traditional fairy tale tropes or, anyway, take on active roles refusing to be passive and ‘to be saved’.

Other books gently fight tight gender roles.

In ‘Ettore, l'uomo straordinariamente forte’ ['Ettore, the extraordinarily strong man'–Le Huche, Settenove 2013] we meet Ettore, a very strong man working in a circus. Ettore’s secret hobby is knitting, and we see him practicing quietly his passion in a cozy underground hideaway. When his secret is exposed by a couple of (sexist) nasty coworkers, he feels embarrassed, but the situation is quickly reversed, because a tornado suddenly eradicates the circus’ big tent, leaving all its members naked as worms. Ettore’s skills will be very useful: he will teach everyone how to knit and they will hand-knit not only their clothes but also the whole circus back again.
'Mi piace Spiderman...e allora?' ['I like Spiderman...so what?'–Vezzoli and Di Lauro, Settenove 2014] is a book with a longer text, though not a proper chapter book. We see six-year-old Cloe undergoing her first months at primary school, facing a variety stereotypes both from some adults and some peers and reacting to them with the help of her parents. The book tackles so many issues – from girls loving Spiderman accessories to the pink/blue debate, sexist advertisings and homophobia – although with such grace and humour that it works as a sort of explicit – although enjoyable – manifesto against all gender stereotypes in child rearing.

‘Storia di Giulia che aveva un’ombra da bambino’ ['Story of Giulia who had a boy’s shadow’ – Bruel and Bozellee, Settenove 2014] was first published in France in the 1970s. This fascinating and disturbing picture book is focused on a little girl whose ‘tomboyish’ apparel and behaviour meet a strong and painful resistance from her parents. One day, Giulia wakes up with a boy’s shadow, which she cannot get rid of and which echoes her own discomfort about stereotyped expectations from girls. The story has an uplifting episode: through the encounter with a boy suffering himself from the ‘boys don’t cry’ attitude of his family, Giulia will start embracing her personality and standing up for her right to just be herself.

Other books promote gender equality by strongly yet humorously affirming the right of boys and girls and men and women to be themselves beyond traditional expectations.

‘Io sono così’ ['I’m like this’ – Degl’Innocenti and Ferrara, Settenove 2014] is an original accordion book that plays with gender expectations about children. While we open and go through the first part of the book, we collect information about the protagonist’s like and dislikes. This child is happy playing football and playfully wrestling with a brother and declares a love for French fries, pretending to be a pirate and running wildly on a bike. At the end of the first half of the book, we learn that the character hates being called ‘a tomboy’. While opening the second half of the book, we learn that the voice belongs to a little girl. The authors deliberately play with preconceived ideas of what boys/girls like and do to state that all children should be free to be themselves.

‘Cosa faremo da grandi? Prontuario di mestieri per bambine e bambini’ ['What shall we do when we grow up? A handbook of jobs for girls and boys’– Biemmi and Terranera, Settenove 2018] is a funny catalogue of possible jobs for girls and boys, meant to “keep dreams free from any
prejudice”.\textsuperscript{16} It plays also on a linguistic level with the collective imagery of what should girls and boys dream of and become.

Lo Stampatello embraced an interesting project about gender stereotypes related both to adults and children by translating into Italian a series of books already available in French and English.

‘La dichiarazione dei diritti delle femmine’ and ‘La dichiarazione dei diritti dei maschi’ [‘Declaration of the Rights of Girls’/‘Declaration of the Rights of Boys’ – Brami and Billon-Spagnol, Lo Stampatello 2015] state in a humorous joyous way that girls are entitled, as much as boys, to ‘do the stuff they like’. They can be scruffy and untidy. They can play with any toys and practice any sports, climb trees, wear anything they like and not necessarily love babies’ nappies. Boys are entitled to not be good at do-it-yourself, to not ace at maths. They can cry in the cinema and want to be hugged. Both books end by declaring that girls and boys can fall in love with whomever they want.

‘La dichiarazione dei diritti delle mamme’ and ‘La dichiarazione dei diritti dei papà’ [‘Declaration of the Rights of Mums’/‘Declaration of the Rights of Dads’ – Brami and Billon-Spagnol, Lo Stampatello 2016] extend this friendly yet iconoclastic stereotype-debunking to the often sacralized roles of mums and dads, declaring parents’ right to not reflect stereotyped expectations. Mums, for example, have a right not to be perfect all the time and they have a right not to be disturbed when they read in the toilet. They have a right to some alone time. Dads are allowed not to know all the answers, to cuddle and tend to their children, to be a disaster at repairing things, and so on. Both books end by declaring that mums and dads have a right to their love life, also if they separate and find new partners.

\textbf{Diverse family portraits}

Lo Stampatello is particularly engaged in representing family diversity, giving space and voice to a variety of contemporary family configurations, including families with separated/divorced parents, adopted children and single parents, with a special focus on same-sex parents.

A sub-series called ‘Piccola storia di una famiglia’ (‘Little story of a family’) features rather simple, someway didactic booklets explicitly aimed at explaining how same-sex parents’ families are

\textsuperscript{16} \url{http://settenove.it/articoli/cosa-faremo-da-grandi/342}
formed to their own children and/or their peers, at the same time giving out a normalizing image of what these families look like – that is, like any average family with small children.

For example, ‘Perché hai due mamme?’ ['Why do you have 2 moms?’- Pardi, Sanmartino and Torelli, Lo Stampatello 2012] draws upon a lesbian couple (which represents the publishers themselves), how they fell in love and dreamt of building a family. The book explains in a plain language how they went to a sperm bank and how they created their big happy family, featuring four kids and three cats.

‘Piccolo uovo’ ['Little Egg’ – Pardi and Altan, Lo Stampatello 2011] is probably the most famous book from the publisher. Altan is a very well-known Italian illustrator. Little Egg isn’t born yet, and it wonders what a family is. So it travels across Altan’s characteristic naïf landscapes to discover a variety of animal families, featuring a single hippo dad, two cat mums, two penguin dads and adoptive kangaroo parents alongside the classical mum and dad configuration. The message delivered is that all these family types are functional to the well-being of their puppies: they all look well cared for and happy to Little Egg, who is about to break and discover the world.

‘Benvenuti in famiglia’ ['Welcome to the family’ – Hoffmann and Asquith, Lo Stampatello 2014] is a funny, ironical yet tender catalogue of the different shapes and sizes in which families can occur, from single parents to foster and adoptive parents, same-sex parents, divorced parents and blended families. The explicit message is: there are many ways for a child to land in his/her family, but what matters is for him/her to be taken care of with patience, kindness and love.

‘Qual è il segreto di papà?’ ['What is dad’s secret?’- Pardi and Guicciardini, Lo Stampatello 2011] deals with the theme of a recomposed family in which the father has found a new, male partner. We see the process of him coming out with his two children. We see the children happily incorporating mum’s and dad’s fiancés in the family. Homophobia is tackled in a soft and reassuring way, with the older child’s teacher explaining what homosexuality is in class to dissipate some kids’ use of ‘gay’ as a derogatory term.

Common threads
We can identify a few recurring themes in books on gender stereotypes.
A key idea is that girls and boys have a right to freely live and develop their aspirations and inclinations: no ‘destinies’ should be ascribed to one gender or another. Attention is focused on girls, who are encouraged to dream outside the box of stereotyped paths, but also on boys, who are encouraged to recognize their feelings or to embrace interests traditionally identified as female, if they want to.

A wide range of feelings and inclinations can be experienced and expressed indifferently from boys and girls, men and women: no category must be ascribed only to one gender or the other. Caregiving is not naturally ascribed to women: men can be good caregivers, too. It is suggested that domestic work and parenting can be shared in an equal way between mothers and fathers.

An overall message across these books is that everyone should be free to be himself or herself and not be conditioned by stereotypes and gender-related social expectations – a gentle, simple message that can assume a ‘revolutionary’ weight if we situate it in the context of the conflict about the category of ‘gender theory’. Anti-gender movements rest on a rigid, traditional idea of what a ‘natural family’ is or should be and their discourses imply a complementarity between maternal and paternal roles, seen as clearly distinct. This complementarity is one of the core values of the movement: it is seen as something in danger that must be preserved and protected. What is at stake here, argues the sociologist Chiara Saraceno, is the idea that men and women must not be confined into stereotypical roles; anti-gender movements contrast LGBT rights, but they also resist any attempt of overcoming rigidity in male/female roles [Saraceno, 2017, p. 90].

Rigid, stereotypical gender roles have a serious impact on society, warns Saraceno: they contribute to establish and legitimize an asymmetrical labour and power division and can potentially produce violence against women [Saraceno, 2017, pp. 142 –143; my translation]. In addition, in Italian society it is still commonly accepted the idea that the children’s wellbeing is an almost exclusive responsibility of the mothers – Italian mothers have to balance themselves between ‘an old-new maternalism’ (combining the stereotype of the self-sacrificing mother and totalizing maternity with an equally totalizing idea of children’s needs) and the new model of the ‘juggler mum’, who is able to conciliate childcare and a full time job [Saraceno, 2017, pp. 39 –40; my translation].

Considering this context, I see books on gender stereotypes as tools used to convey an alternative

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17 As reported by Saraceno [2017, p. 48], Italian women still struggle to stay in the labour market, due to their load of unpaid care work and parenting responsibilities, which still falls predominantly on their shoulders. Although the gender gap in housework has slightly diminished, especially in young couples, women still do the 67.3% of it in families with children.
message, deliberately contrasting the existing tensions about gender roles by proposing a change of paradigm, towards a new, less rigid configuration of relationships between genders.

Among the recurring themes in books on family diversity we can identify a few core ideas. Love is implicitly and explicitly depicted as the basis of family ties.

A positive emphasis is placed on family models in which parents and children do not necessarily share a genetic connection. Ethnic differences among families and within families are portrayed and it is consistently repeated that love, care, responsibility is what makes a family.

LGBT people are represented in these books in the roles of loving parents or relatives – affectionate and reliable adults within loving and happy families. It is explicitly affirmed that being gay is a normal option of human affectivity and it must not represent an issue – although it can be affirmed that the existence itself of these books is rooted in the reality of discrimination and the following necessity of educating children and adults about equality.

Most of these books can be identified as part of the ‘issue books’ category [Epstein, 2013]: they were deliberately published to give children of ‘rainbow families’ a portrait able to reflect their reality and other children a reassuring and educative explanation of what family diversity is to promote the respect for different family patterns.

The messages conveyed by these books are formulated in a rather simple, although not simplistic way. Their aim is to tell children things as they are (including how children of LGBT or unfertile heterosexual parents are conceived), while at the same time affirming that family diversity is a positive value, and that all kinds of families (as long as they are loving and functioning) have the same worth.

As highlighted by Saraceno, ‘in Italy the public discourse on family is often interwoven with ideological conflicts, ambiguities and misunderstandings’ [Saraceno, 2017, cover].

In Italian culture, the shift towards social inclusion of LGBTs has resulted in an ideological clash on core cultural values, as for a part of society, allowing the legitimacy of LGBTs has been seen as an attack on the patriarchal family arrangement and on marriage [Zappettini, 2010, p. 131].

In Italy, activism focused on partnership rights in the 2000s. Only in May 2016 the Cirinnà Bill on the recognition of civil unions (for homosexual and heterosexual couples) was approved by the Italian Parliament, with two relevant changes from the original proposal, presented in 2015: the
elimination of the obligation of marital fidelity and, especially, the elimination of the so-called stepchild adoption, i.e. the possibility of adopting the children of a partner. During the institutional discussion, public debate was very intense [Bellè et al., 2016] and ‘Divisive, derogatory language about same-sex couples and their children, from parliamentarians who opposed the bill, became a distasteful hallmark of the legislative process’ [from ILGA Europe’s Annual Review, 2017, p. 128].

Today, same-sex parents still cannot count on a legal framework to recognize parental rights for non-biological parents.\(^{18}\) Law proposals about discrimination based on sexual orientation and homophobic violence are still on the table, waiting to be discussed.\(^ {19}\)

It can be assumed that these books, as well as those dedicated to gender equality values, are conveying a message carrying political weight in the Italian political and social context. These books convey ideas and representations that can be object of contestation, thus situating them intrinsically in a position of social and political engagement over themes that are still involved in ‘contentious politics’ [Tilly and Tarrow, 2007].

I find particularly suitable here to recall White’s view of the dynamic between social structure and culture. White conceives networks as ‘islands of meanings’, made of discourses and stories [White, 1992, ref. in Passy and Monsch, 2015, p. 25]. In this interpretive framework, an identity emerges out of efforts at control in the middle of contingencies and contentions; the root of control is finding footing in the biophysical and social environments. Meanings come from the switching of

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\(^{18}\) As highlighted by the ILGA Europe’s Annual Review of 2017, a series of important adoption-related legal individual cases were decided by courts from Rome to Naples, recognising parental rights for non-biological parents, but these families still have no official recognition under the national law. As I write, in May 2018, some mayors started provocatively to register new births from same-sex parents with the names of both parents, but substantially there is a legal void about this issue in the country. At the core of the debate can be found the practice of surrogacy, which is illegal in the country and represents perhaps the most complex – on an ethical, legal, emotional level – matter related to the sphere of same-sex parenting, sharply contested also by some sectors of feminism and LGBT activism because of the risk of exploitation of poor women as instruments for fulfilling a parenting desire [Saraceno, 2017].

\(^{19}\) In July 2011 the Parliament rejected for the 12\(^ {th}\) time a project-law that would recognize discrimination based on sexual orientation. In September 2013 the House of Representatives approved a new law on homophobia, the Scalfarotto Bill (introducing the crime of discrimination and incitement to hatred and homophobic violence), but after four years it was still waiting to be discussed in the Senate.
identities among netdoms (network-domains) and cumulate into stories; social processes and structure traces from successions of control efforts [White and Godart, 2007; White, 2008]. Individuals are, thus, agents in a communicative process; the cognitive toolkit of an individual is constantly modified through experiences, events and conversational interactions [White, 1992, ref. in Passy and Monsch, 2015, p. 25].

Out of metaphor, I argue that actual stories portraying a variety of gender roles and families intentionally engage in the never-ending process of building meanings in order to let identities emerge and find a safe space in their environment. Children’s books can represent a significant part of the cognitive toolkit of an individual, as they give the reader words and images to interpret the world.

In the next chapter, we will see some of the ways the publishers get involved in their social environment, adding a layer to their engagement with gender equality and LGBT rights.

Images from ‘Piccolo uovo’ [Pardi and Altan, 2011].

Translation of text: ‘Little Egg was tired and satisfied. It had met many kinds of families: all of them looked like a beautiful place to grow up in.’
Meri and Franci loved each other and wanted to make a family.

In the mornings they have breakfast all together. Antonio sits on the high chair and the cats under (and on!) the table.
Cover and an image from ‘Storia di Giulia che aveva un’ombra da bambino’ [Bruel and Bozellle, 2014].

Translation of the text: ‘Giulia would like to be little, very little. She would like to hide in a mice den. Underground, mice do not have shadows, at least them. Look, it’s true, underground there is no shadow!’

Cover and an image from ‘Qual è il segreto di papà?’ [Pardi and Guicciardini, 2011].

Translation of the text: ‘The next day, the teacher explained in class that gay is not an insult, it is an English word that means ‘cheerful’ in Italian. It is used alla round the world to refer to whoever loves a person of his/her own sex: a man who loves a man, or a woman who loves a woman.’
Cover and an image from ‘Ettore, l’uomo straordinariamente forte’ [Le Huche, 2013].

Some pages from ‘Io sono così’ [Degl’Innocenti and Ferrara, 2014].
Covers of ‘La dichiarazione dei diritti delle femmine’ and ‘La dichiarazione dei diritti dei maschi’ [Brami and Billon-Spagnol, 2015]. Source: Produzioni dal basso.

Chapter 3. From shelves to streets

‘Individuals are symbol-making creatures who spin webs of meanings around themselves, and these meanings allow them to act. [Passy and Monsch, 2015]

In this chapter I will observe how the publishing activity of Lo Stampatello and Settenove is interwoven with other initiatives related to activism for gender equality and LGBT rights. I will integrate my report with the words of the publishers themselves, which I had the opportunity to interview. I will incorporate their reflections on their messages and the sense of their work into the discussion.
Lo Stampatello: building bridges across differences

Lo Stampatello was created by Francesca Pardi and Maria Silvia Fiengo, a same-sex married couple with four children. Lo Stampatello’s activities intersect in various ways with those of associations and entities engaged with education about gender equality and LGBT rights.

1. Maria Silvia Fiengo and Francesca Pardi during a book fair. Source: lostampatello.it.

Pardi and Fiengo are actively engaged in Famiglie Arcobaleno (FA) (Rainbow Families), the main association of LGBT parents. FA is engaged in the educational area on different levels: it creates materials for schools with the aim of informing about the existence of various types of households, providing the possibility of meeting between teachers and school leaders with the association and providing books dealing with the topic of families with same-sex parents. Fiengo was one of FA’s founders. Pardi and Fiengo are visible on social media as a part of FA, and they participate in numerous public debates and meetings about same-sex parenting and their books. Books from Lo Stampatello are on the list of useful resources available on FA’s website.

Some of Lo Stampatello’s publications are also on Amnesty International’s (AI) - Italian section’s educational catalogue. Among its educational resources about human rights, AI includes the four ‘Rights declaration’ books [Brami and Billon-Spagnol, 2015-2016]. On AI’s website they are

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20 http://www.famigliearcobaleno.org/it/informazioni/gruppo-scuola/
described as ‘four funny picture books dismantling with irony stereotypes and prejudices, highlighting the importance of equality and respect for everyone’.\textsuperscript{21}

The publishers are currently organizing public readings with games and book-related activities for children in bookshops in Milan.

Starting in 2015, Lo Stampatello launched an exhibition titled ‘Ci sono anch’io. Fuori dagli stereotipi, dentro la realtà’ (‘I’m there too. Outside stereotypes, into reality’).\textsuperscript{22} The exhibition is made of self-supporting panels in the form of large open books on which the browsable volumes are displayed. It is a traveling exhibition, designed to move into libraries, fairs, municipalities in the provinces, etc. It comprises a choice of 120-140 picture books from a variety of publishers focused on inclusion and the promotion of diversity. The books are available to the public, and have been selected from those published in Italy, based on a bibliography made from Lo Stampatello’s and the catalogue ‘Reading without stereotypes’ by SCOSSE. The exhibition includes four areas: families, gender roles, relationships with foreign cultures and different psychophysical abilities. Some books from Settenove are included.


\textsuperscript{21} From https://www.amnesty.it/entra-in-azione/progetti-educativi/

\textsuperscript{22} A presentation of the exhibition can be watched at the link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVbHpNqNfQ, in which the Pardi-Fiengo family describes some of the books.
As Lo Stampatello notes on its website,

Not being represented makes you feel excluded and makes you suffer unjustly, especially the little ones. Telling about them and telling them about them are the two gestures that bring all the little girls and boys left out of the adult representation of reality into the circle of their peers. [...] We have no claim to have been exhaustive, it is above all the contribution to a collective discourse that we hold dearly and with which we identify ourselves deeply. And hopefully it can be transformed over time by a discontinuous stream, and not without obstacles, in a long tranquil river. [Translation from Lo Stampatello website].

In 2017, Lo Stampatello promoted ‘#1000 libri alle scuole’ (1,000 books for schools), a campaign aimed at giving books for free to schools, libraries or childhood-related associations. The campaign was originated from the generous gesture of a family who decided to pay for a donation of 1,000 books from Lo Stampatello to various schools in Italy. Other sponsors supported the idea and the campaign was launched through a crowdfunding platform, Produzioni dal Basso (‘Bottom up productions’), to connect the potential receivers with the publishing house, to support the posting expenses and to attract more supporters.

Previously, Lo Stampatello had already used the same platform to support the publication of some of its titles, such as ‘Perché hai due papa?’ and ‘La dichiarazione dei diritti dei maschi’/‘La dichiarazione dei diritti delle femmine’.

In 2015, Lo Stampatello’s books, along with many others, were the object of an act of censorship in Venice, where the mayor Luigi Brugnaro confiscated 49 titles from different publishers, accused of promoting the ‘gender ideology’. Along these books could be found famous works like Leo Lionni’s ‘Little blue and little yellow’, telling a universal story about friendship, and ‘Piccolo Uovo’ from Lo Stampatello. Authors, publishers, citizens, booksellers and librarians mobilised with readings in the streets, flash mobs, and campaigns. All kinds of books were included in the list, including books about disabilities, racial discrimination, adoption and bullying in schools.

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23 From http://lostampatello.it/919-2/
24 http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/07/04/news/venezia_nei_libri_all_indice_per_il_gender_anche_i_capolavore_dell_infanzia-118306936/
recalled by The Guardian, more than 250 Italian authors wrote to the mayor asking him to remove their books, in an act of solidarity with those banned. As a consequence, the initial list of 49 banned books was reduced to two: Francesca Pardi’s ‘Piccolo Uovo’ (‘Little Egg’), and Ophélie Texier’s ‘Jean a deux mamans’ (‘Jean Has Two Mummies’).

Brugnaro criticised the previous administration, which he said introduced its ‘personal view of society’ into schools without consulting parents, who ‘must have a say on the crucial issues that affect the education of their children’ (a claim typical of ‘anti-gender’ activism). Regarding this issue, Pardi declared that

‘In Italy, many people are silent, and don’t speak out about things, but now with this, many people are taking a position,’ she said. ‘All the world of children’s literature – they are completely with us.[...] The books in question are very simple books, showing that gay people can be normal people, that they can be good parents. [But] they are saying terrible things [about them] to put fear in people, because they don’t want this message. They don’t want things to change. They want homosexuality to remain in people’s minds, to keep the prejudice.’

The episode had a great impact in the media, both domestically and internationally, causing celebrities such as Elton John to join the protest against Brugnaro.

In April 2018 I interviewed Pardi about how she and Fiengo perceive their role as publishers on a political and social level. Here follows my translation from Italian of the key points of the interview.

Pardi explained how they conceived their activity and its key characteristics.

We created the publishing house starting from a personal impetus, but with an awareness that this could be relevant for many other people, as well. We meant to induce a change that many other people would have benefited from. In this sense, yes, there is a form of activism in our activity. Our publishing project starts from a personal experience, but it is aimed at promoting a capacity to live together beyond stereotypes. We felt the urge of

25 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/16/italian-authors-venice-mayor-ban-books-children-same-sex-family
26 Ibidem.
27 Ibidem.
28 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/18/elton-john-protests-venice-ban-on-gay-childrens-books
promoting an education to coexistence and acceptance of diversity, which we feel is the foundation for civil cohabitation and for feeling good among others. Our project is political from this point of view. [...] I would say that our books’ potential lies in the fact that they speak directly to children to prevent the formation of socially construed prejudices which would be very difficult to eradicate. Books have a huge power and that is exactly why they faced and face hostility. They don’t have the power to change children or to put something in their heads, but simply to prevent this from happening. The purpose is to let people grow up with the natural predisposition to evaluate what they see in front of them, and not following an abstract idea. Homosexuality doesn’t hurt others; there is no motivation for being afraid of it or to attack others: when this happens, it is the fruit of an ideological education which builds up a sense of fear. [...] Pardi explained further the political concept of Lo Stampatello’s work and the impact of anti-gender debate.

Behind our work there is a political discourse: there is the deep belief that happiness only happens within collaboration and sharing with others. As we live the situation of homosexuality, which tends to isolate and marginalize you, the urge we felt was on a double level. We wanted to live within society, to collaborate, to build as many bridges as possible, but we also had the political belief that this is what society lacks and needs the most. This is, after all, the root of a leftist thought: the idea that one cannot live well if not among others and together with others. This is the common thread of it all. We collaborate with associations, like Famiglie Arcobaleno and Amnesty International and I feel that this is our common ground: trying not to live fearing others, but, instead, looking out for contact, for a bridge, an exchange.

Anti-gender activism had a devastating impact on us; we were starting to naturally diffuse books in schools from below. We started through Famiglie Arcobaleno: parents proposed them as tools to their kids’ teachers and slowly teachers, educators, etc. started diffusing them. We also created contacts by participating in the Bologna Children’s Book Fair. Teachers were appreciating them. At the beginning, we also received orders from Catholic schools, because some of our books (like those on migrations) have a common ground with the Church’s views. It all stopped when these books’ power of legitimizing rainbow families was recognized. Now teachers have to take sides [...] and this has stopped the
dissemination of our books in the territory. The Italian State has not assumed a clear position, it feels the need to mediate because the Church has a huge economical and political power and all of this has created many obstacles for us. [...] .

Pardi explained further the position Lo Stampatello maintained towards its detractors.

Our strategy has always been that of looking for dialogue. We have an assertive attitude: we do not intend to provoke or to raise a conflict, we do not like to play defence: the stories we tell, they reflect our daily life. We propose content, we share values and try to convey through our books a message about openness to diversity, about not being afraid of the Other. The attitude we receive from our detractors comes from a radically different approach. We received attacks online, through the social media and we maintained an open attitude, looking for dialogue whenever it was possible. Often people who are aggressive online hide an emotional weakness, which is easily taken advantage of by organisations or political forces that use these discourses to strengthen their base. These organisations take advantage of people’s fears.

Whenever we can, we answer kindly to people attacking us on social media, looking for a way to talk with them. When this is not possible and they persist with their aggressiveness, we ban them from the page. Until now, this strategy has worked, the aggressions have decreased over time.

Sometimes we had occasions to meet people opposing us in person, for example at a public book presentation; in these cases, it is the same, we try to open a dialogue. It is possible sometimes with individuals when they are not too aggressive – their argumentations are usually weak and sometimes they listen to what you answer.

The confrontations with anti-gender sensitivities also led the publishers to reconsider their whole production process, due to economical reasons. As Pardi noted,

Our biggest challenge has been and is to survive economically as an activity. [...] We never had any kind of financial support from anyone, except from the crowdfunding platform. [...] Now we are thinking of basing our entire publishing activity on crowdfunding. In a sense, the publishing house will belong to the people who buy the books. To us, this would be our very last resort but, at the same time, it may be something beautiful on a social level.
In April 2018, a few weeks after the interview, Lo Stampatello officially announced its transformation into a publishing house completely based on crowdfunding: it will only publish the books that receive the sufficient economical support via the crowdfunding platform.

**Settenove: opening up a new imagery through stories**

Settenove’s production is the expression of an integrated project, including books targeted at children, teenagers, educators and the general adult population. It appears as if all the production is inspired by the logic of contrasting gender stereotypes and gender related violence. Children’s books work on the children’s collective imagery while essays targeted at adults aim at giving tools to interpret reality and act about it.

Settenove was the first (and only, for now) publisher to translate one Laurie Penny’s ‘Meat Market: Female Flesh Under Capitalism’ [Penny, 2013] into Italian. In collaboration with Di.Re they published a short series of documents about male violence and the reality of the Centri Antiviolenza. Other two books were conceived in deep collaboration with realities working in the field of education about gender equality.

‘Di pari passo. Percorso educativo contro la violenza di genere’ ['Hand in hand. An educational course against gender violence’ – Muscialini, Settenove 2013] collects the experience of the educational course against gender violence undertaken in secondary schools by the anti-violence centre Soccorso Rosa in Milan, supported by Fare x Bene onlus and Terre des Hommes in the context of the Indifesa campaign sponsored by the Ministry for Equal Opportunities.\(^\text{29}\)

‘Leggere senza stereotipi. Percorsi educativi 0-6 anni per figurarsi il futuro’ ['Reading without stereotypes. Educational courses to figure out the future working with 0-6-year-olds– Fierli, Franchi, Lancia and Marini, Settenove 2015] was written by the association SCOSSE. Aimed at teachers, parents, educators and educators who work with the 0-6 year age group, the volume analyses picture books published in Italy and abroad from the perspective of the presence or

\(^{29}\) As stated by the author, ‘The imaginary of boys about the relationship between man and woman is influenced by gender stereotypes already from 10/11 years, but is not yet rooted. The path that the book proposes, is aimed to deconstruct this imaginary and structure relationships of respect and collaboration between the female and the male gender’. From http://www.settenove.it/articoli/di-pari-passo/305
absence of gender stereotypes related to early childhood and offers activities practices - starting with the use of books - directed at overcoming stereotypes. This book was promoted through a rich calendar of presentations and interventions during events all across Italy.


Another book, ‘Cosa faremo da grandi? Prontuario di mestieri per bambine e bambini’ ['What shall we do when we grow up? A handbook of jobs for girls and boys’— Biemmi and Terranera, Settenove 2018] was promoted and sponsored by Unicef.

Settenove is very active in organizing public presentations of its books and often participates in festivals and events, including critical festivals about education and children’s literature. It is very active on social media, too, often commenting on news about gender issues (for example, femicides) and connecting them with the publications. The publisher is close to the Non Una Di Meno network, whose initiatives are diffused also through Settenove’s social media, and participated in various editions of the Educare alle differenze event.

30 http://www.settenove.it/articoli/leggere-senza-stereotipi/317
31 http://www.scosse.org/per-litalia-leggere-stereotipi/
I interviewed Monica Martinelli, Settenove’s founder, in March, 2018, about how she perceives the political and social role of the publishing house. She told me about the core ideas at the heart of Settenove’s production. Here follows my translation from Italian of the key points of the interview.

To me, the idea of working with children, of showing them how a world without stereotypes would be, of opening up for them a wider imagery should help not to instil into them what they have or not have to do, but instead to understand how an equal world should be, it leads them to interiorize a non-discriminatory world. The core problem is that we are immersed in a bain-marie into a strongly patriarchal world. Any problem, discrimination or violence is perceived as normal, when it is not. This was basically what triggered everything. […] Our books don’t propose reversed gender models: this would be wrong. Our purpose is to help children develop their critical sense, help them recognizing discrimination and being able to name it, to be brave and calm enough to tell when they don’t feel at ease in a certain situation. That is already a great engine of change.

About the anti-gender debate, Martinelli ironically declared that

We started in 2013, when the ‘boom’ of anti-gender activism happened in Italy; in a sense, it is helpful: when they attack us, we know that we are working into the right direction.

Martinelli explained to me how she feels that her job is a form of activism and how the sphere of education is key in Settenove’s work.

I see my job as a form of activism because normally work lasts 8-9 hours in a day, while my work at Settenove permeates the whole day. When I go speaking in a school, I don’t simply go to sell books, but to carry on ideas and tackle issues, to talk about something I’m deeply interested in. To transform this passion into a job allows you to dedicate your whole life to what you’re interested in. As a publishing house, we sometimes intervene in schools to present what is behind our project: issues in gender communication in children’s books, in advertising, etc. At the beginning, we also developed long term projects in schools, in collaboration with associations and connected with our books, but it became materially difficult to carry them on. Behind Settenove’s books there is always a project anyway. For
example, the gender education series reflect projects which were carried on in different regions of Italy, but also some of narrative books were born from projects.

A core element of Settenove is that it is an integrated project: we publish for children and for adults. The books directed at adults have an informative approach: some are targeted at educators, but we also publish essays on gender issues directed at a wider public. Our idea is to avoid the separation between a niche of experts and the majority of citizens.

Our challenge for the next [few] years is to be able to publish more books, because we constantly find or receive many great projects, but we only can publish a few books every year.

4. Flyers from some of the numerous public initiatives to which Settenove was invited to intervene with its books.
Conclusion: Children’s publishers as actors of contentious politics

The initiatives reported in the preceding chapters refer to different areas and respond to different objectives, but I argue that they can be summarized into a few core categories:

- Collaborations with associations active in the educational field (the books are either directly used in schools/proposed to teachers or echo the results of educational experiences about gender equality, with the aim of diffusing good practices);
- Dissemination of messages through public initiatives targeted at a wide audience (exhibitions, public debates, etc.);
- Production and diffusion of the books themselves through a popular crowdfunding platform, thus engaging directly a sensitized and sensitive audience (teachers, parents, etc.); and
- Active presence on social media, which are used both to promote books and to disseminate the ideas behind them.

Children’s publishers are not formally constituted actors within social movements, but I argue that they play a specific and relevant \textit{de facto} role within the context of polarization of the public opinion about gender stereotypes and LGBT rights in Italy.

I see them as self-aware agents of change, who produce messages which are deliberately diffused into the public sphere, specifically targeting an audience of children, parents, teachers and educators, and who play an active role in the scenario of ‘contentious politics’ [Tilly and Tarrow, 2007]. From the interviews it appears clearly that the publishers are well aware of their role in discourse making: all of their work starts from the objective of contributing to the elaboration of public discourses about gender roles and family diversity.

Modern forms of contention, as stated by Tarrow [2011], are aimed at demonstrating a claim, either to objects of the claim, to power holders, or to significant third parties; all of this makes contentious politics a form of representative politics and instils in it symbolic and cultural elements. In Tilly’s view [Tilly, 1998, ref. in Passy and Monsch, 2015, p. 26] contentious politics are ‘composed of ongoing conversations between protest actors and power-holders, as well as between activists and their public. Contention is thus made of relations.’.
My opinion is that these actors put into being practices and messages aimed at their public and indirectly at power-holders. Through children’s books, these publishers tackle a dichotomic idea of human beings supported, among others, by the Catholic Church. Following this vision, from the biological sexual difference and complementarity between sexes inevitably derives a difference and a complementarity in the social roles of men and women [Saraceno, 2017, p. 14].

Their messages are meant as vehicles for a symbolical and cultural change in the way the public opinion views and interprets these issues. Messages are elaborated and diffused not only through the commercial diffusion of books, but also through the synergy with a constellation of social actors who actively decide to contribute to their diffusion: teachers, librarians, operators from associations.

I argue that all of these elements concur with the possibility of defining these publishers as actors in a process of communication for social change, whose complexity lies in its double target. The publishers explicitly put at the heart of their projects the goal of contributing to protect children:

- From developing harmful prejudices or stereotypes about themselves or others;
- From derogatory or unsettling explanations of homosexuality, same-sex family formation, family diversity;

and to empower them:

- By giving representation of different ways of being male/female and of different family structures (e.g. children of same-sex parents who could otherwise feel they are made invisible);
- By giving them a wide imagery about their future, about who they can become and what they can be and do in their present time; and
- Overall, by enhancing their ‘narrative imagination’ [Nussbaum, 1997], giving them the ability to see their reality from different perspectives and to be empathetic with others.

At the same time, the books can be used as educational tools for parents or educators who wish to approach these themes but may struggle to find words to speak about them in a language suitable for children, reassuring but clear. Indirectly, the books can reach – through the children – adults who still feel uncomfortable with these themes.
My overall impression is that books dealing with the theme of gender roles show a little more complexity in their structure, while in LGBT-themed books, although of good quality, plots are simpler and the educational purpose is still very clear. Books about LGBT themes are still mostly ‘issue books’; as suggested by Illuminati [Illuminati, in Ramos, Cortez and Mourão, 2017], though, this is probably what is needed in Italy at this time. Although we have a longer history of children’s books engaged in some way with gender equality, considering the contemporary conflict resurfacing in this phase, the same can probably apply to books deconstructing gender roles.

Overall, I see these books as media texts intentionally used to reinforce a discourse about inclusion and equality; the public diffusion of these messages beyond the publishing activity can be seen as a deliberate strategy of communication for social change, supporting the diffusion of these messages to a wider public. The books do not go down in the streets by themselves, but they do circulate the public sphere and symbolically reach streets, schools and civic centres via public initiatives.

I argue that all of these actions fall into the definition of Communication for social change, which ‘emphasizes using communication strategically to address and often challenge the structural conditions that inform social change processes’ [Tufte, 2017, p.15]; and into the broad definition of Communication for Development produced by the World Congress on C4D, as ‘a social process based on dialogue using a broad range of tools and methods […] seeking change at different levels, including listening, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change’ [as quoted in Scott, 2014, p. 2].

Following Castells [2009], in the network society, a battle of images and frames takes place in multimedia communication networks, which reflect power relationships embedded within the networks; power is enacted by the construction of meaning through processes of communication. Social change, thus, entails the reprogramming of communication networks in terms of the cultural codes, values and interests they convey. As stated by Dutta [2011, p.169, ref. in Wilkins, Tufte and Obregon, 2014], media texts, as a ‘dynamic and contested terrain’, allow groups struggling ‘in social change processes’ some control over ‘the sites and channels of representation in societies’.
I see Lo Stampatello’s and Settenove’s work as media texts/communication tools deliberately deployed within a scenario of shifting images, meanings and values to enhance representation of minorities and an overcoming of binary gender roles.

As highlighted by Jasper [Jasper, 1997, ref. in Passy and Monsch, 2015], people often protest because their systems of meanings are at stake. In times of changing policies and shifting relationships between the genders and within the family, some backlash and resistance to new representations can be expected as a part of the transformation process – it happened in Italy during the debates about divorce and abortion.

At the core of the protests against ‘gender education’ can be found a lack of substantial acceptation of gender equality: a fear of the perspective absence of fixed roles between men and women, of the possible blurring of the borders between gender roles. This blurring can be perceived as destabilizing of deep-rooted categories through which people read the world.

Globally speaking, all the educational efforts deployed by the actors we observed are aimed at preventing and/or deconstructing these fears, in order to contribute to the reinforcing of a collective imagery less charged of stereotypes and bias and, thus, to an increased equality in their social context.

Further research could be undertaken focusing on the reception of these messages on different targets, such as children, teenagers, teachers and parents, also over time. It would also be interesting to analyse more in-depth the books’ messages using a wider range of texts and/or comparing on an international level both the books and the publishers’ activities with those conducted by their counter-parts in other countries – choosing contexts with a similar or, instead, a different situation regarding gender representations and LGBT equality. Another path could be that of exploring the representation of these books in traditional and social media; or the intersection between their production and the evolution of policies regarding gender equality and LGBT rights.


**Websites**

Amnesty International – Italian Section - www.amnesty.it

Arcigay - www.arcigay.it

Di.Re. - www.direcontrolaviolenza.it
EIGE - European Institute for Gender Equality - www.eige.europa.eu

Famiglie Arcobaleno - www.famigliearcobaleno.org

Lo Stampatello - www.lostampatello.it

Non Una Di Meno – www.nonunadimeno.wordpress.com
Scosse - www.scosse.org

Se Non Ora Quando Torino - www.senonoraquando-torino.it
Settenove – www.settenove.it.