

Changing Fathers. An Investigation into the Representations of Fatherhood in Children's Picture Books

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Abstract

The essay investigates the evolution of the representation of the father figure in recent publications for children, comparing it with the transformations of the fatherly role in real life. The symbolic world built by picture books offers unexpected representations of parenthood, and in particular of fatherhood, challenging the gender expectations within society that still today mark off maternal and paternal roles with rigid boundaries. The first part of the essay presents a review of the literature about so-called “new fathers”; the second part reports the results of a survey on a *corpus* of picture books published from the year 2000 to the present day, where fathers play the leading role.

Keywords: fatherhood, gender equality, children's publishing, contemporary family, gender imagery.

Abstract

Il saggio indaga l'evoluzione della rappresentazione della figura paterna in una recente produzione editoriale per l'infanzia, mettendola a paragone con le trasformazioni del ruolo paterno nella vita reale. Il mondo simbolico costruito dagli albi illustrati offre rappresentazioni inattese di genitorialità, e in particolare di paternità, andando a sfidare le aspettative di genere all'interno della società che perimetrano ancora oggi i ruoli materno e paterno in confini rigidi. La prima parte del saggio presenta una rassegna della letteratura sui cosiddetti “nuovi padri”; la seconda riporta i risultati di un'indagine su un *corpus* di albi illustrati editi dal 2000 a oggi che hanno per protagonisti i papà.

Parole chiave: paternità, uguaglianza di genere, editoria per l'infanzia, famiglia contemporanea, immaginari di genere.

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1. *Changes in the family and in parental roles, in contemporary society*

Over the last fifty years, the topic of the transformation of the father figure has been the focus of a wealth of interdisciplinary reflections and studies (psychological, pedagogical, social, historical, and legal) that investigate the multiple causes and possible effects of what has been defined as a true «revolution» (Quilici, 2017, p. 3)². One of the most significant changes – not yet fully completed – is the progressive approach of fathers to the tasks of education and childcare and the consequent hybridisation of parental roles, maternal and paternal, in the direction of greater interchangeability.

In the late sixties, Talcott Parsons (1967, It. transl. 1971) theorised the necessary division and complementarity of maternal and paternal roles: the father was defined as “instrumental leader” and the mother was defined as “expressive leader”; the father’s task was to act as mediator between the family and the outside world by virtue of his professional role and as the breadwinner, the mother was expected to perform (unpaid) care and emotional tasks.

From the mid-sixties onwards, this vision of complementarity, both fusional and asymmetrical, began to break down due to a series of historical events, first and foremost the central role of the feminist movements of the seventies that denounced and highlighted the asymmetries in gender relations in the family and the burden of that «double female presence» (Balbo, 1978, *passim*) that forces women to take on all the domestic and care work even when they enter the labour market. Gender relations tend to become progressively more symmetrical and equal, and to take on a voluntary and negotiated character within the couple, even if «paternal change is slow» (Zanatta, 2011, p. 23) and the father continues to retain traditional features that coexist with traits of renewal.

The new physiognomy fathers are taking on is therefore nuanced, undefined. This appears from the many labels that are being coined to try to qualify the «changing fathers» (Murgia, Poggio, 2011, *passim*). “Caregivers”, “new”, “involved”, “post-patriarchal”: these, and other labels, are not without ambiguity; in the worst case, they endorse the idea of an implicit incompatibility between masculinity and care (see

² Unless otherwise stated, all English translations of Italian texts are the Author’s own, Editor’s Note.

the newly coined Italian expression “*mammo*”, which recalls a sort of misappropriation by fathers of roles, functions and skills considered intrinsically “maternal”).

To define in absolute terms the traits, characteristics and distinctive features of contemporary fatherhood (Cescato, 2017) is extremely complex, but one thing is certain: the process of redefining the experience and social role of fatherhood highlights «a male malaise that can take the form of a desire for change or a frustrated reaction to change that has already taken place» (Ciccone, 2011, p. 21).

Studies on fatherhood take shape in the context of men’s studies, a branch of gender studies that has been developing since the eighties and which focuses on the social construction of masculinity, with a specific look at unorthodox, «borderline» (Ruspini, 2012, p. 39), «non-alpha» (*ibidem*) masculinities. From this point of view, the caring fathers who enter the female territory of care, affection and the expression of emotions, are of course seen as unorthodox and in some ways challenging with respect to the hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995, It. transl. 1996; Messerschmidt, 2018, It. transl. 2022) that defines the features of a real man in diametrically opposite terms: aggressiveness, strength, detachment from emotions, vulnerability and pain, disciplining the body.

At the same time, new fathers seem unwilling to waive all the privileges linked to following the hegemonic model, and seek a fluctuating equilibrium that leads to the constitution of the s.c. *hybrid masculinities*, where

hybridisation is more a staging of a “new” masculinity that deliberately distances itself from traditional masculinity and the stereotypes associated with it, but which does not waive or question the privileges and advantages associated with hegemonic masculinity (Cannito, 2022, p. 46).

The new fatherhood therefore does not entirely undermine the model of the virile man, who acts as breadwinner in the family. Some quite surprising sociological-statistical data demonstrate this, when a comparison is drawn with the rhetoric of caring fathers and the much-vaunted interchangeability of female and male roles in the family. First fact: a growing number of fathers express their intention to be “present” and “involved”, but the birth of a child not only does not lead to a reduction in the time they dedicate to paid work (as would be logical to expect, taking into account the time they dedicate to childcare) but, on the contrary, often leads to an increase (Bosoni, 2014). Second fact:

the gradual (though extremely slow) rebalancing of gender roles in the family that has been taking place since the eighties seems to be due much more to the cut made by women in domestic work than to the increase in the contribution by men (Carriero, Todesco, 2016; Fuochi, Mencarini, Solera, 2014).

A third fact concerns the type of care activities that mothers and fathers provide their children: mothers are more involved in physical care and supervision (feeding, dressing, putting children to sleep or simply keeping them under control) while fathers are more involved in play and recreational activities (Sabbadini, 2017).

2. *An investigation into the representation of new fathers in picture books*

The idea of analysing the representations of changes in the father figure in children's books has developed around what has just been outlined³. The sample considered includes picture books on the topic of fatherhood published in Italy from 2000 to the present (publication dates range from 2001 to 2023). Picture books published abroad have been included, provided they have also been translated and published in Italy.

The various fatherly models proposed in the set of books analysed have been categorised into three main types of fathers: the "ordinary father", the "extraordinary father or father-hero", and the "occasional father".

2.1. *Ordinary father*

Most of the fathers portrayed in picture books fall under the model of the cuddly, affectionate father, extremely caring and protective of his children, capable of listening and competent in the work of caring for them. The picture book *Guess How Much I Love You* (McBratney, Jeram, 2016) definitely falls into this category: here we see an actual competition between father and child hare, who challenge each other to demonstrate the intensity of their feelings:

³ The results of the study reported here represent a hitherto unpublished reworking and updating of the data that emerged in a survey conducted by the author and published in the volume: Biemmi I. (Ed.) (2023): *La maschilità nei contesti educativi e di cura: sguardi pedagogici e sociologici*. Rome: Carocci. (Hereafter, unless otherwise indicated, all footnotes are by the Author, Editor's Note).

“Guess how much I love you ...” said Little Nutbrown Hare. “Oh, I don’t think I could guess that”, replied Big Nutbrown Hare. “This much!” said Little Nutbrown Hare, spreading out his arms as wide as they could go. “And I love you this much... this much!”. Big Nutbrown Hare had even longer arms, “but I love YOU this much!”, he said. “Hmm, that is a lot!”, thought Little Nutbrown Hare⁴.

In the picture book *P di papà* (Martins, Carvalho, 2011)⁵ a dense series of pictures of dads – accompanied by sparse and essential texts – depicts the thousand functions that a dad performs for his child: Dad-umbrella shelters from the rain, dad-aeroplane entertains, dad-arm-chair welcomes, dad-bath takes care, dad-morning says good morning with a tender and delicate kiss.

In *Stammi vicino, papà* (Soosh, 2018) the poetry of Soosh’s images and words portrays a father with a solid and reassuring appearance (a sort of gentle giant) who is not “strong” in the traditional sense of the term (there are images that portray him as tired, sad, fragile): his strength depends on the very strong bond he has with his little daughter. The text opens with the words: «When I have my dad close to me, there’s nothing I can’t do», and closes with: «With my dad by my side, I can touch the sky with my finger».

Another example of a caring and playful father is that of *Caro Papà* (van Genechten, 2016) in which the son, speaking in the first person, closes the story in rhyme with an epilogue that leaves no doubt about the father-child bond («Dear Daddy, you are the sweetest there is, I like you so much... and you are everything to me») and again, the father-turtle who listens patiently to his son’s dreams for the future, until late at night in *Un papà tutto per me* (Horn, Kadmon, 2002). Other caring, affectionate and encouraging father figures are portrayed in *Io e te, tu e io* (Tanco, 2019), *Chi vuole un abbraccio?* (Wechterowicz, Dziubak, 2018), *Sei la mia principessa* (Minne, Eyckerman, 2018), *Chiedimi cosa mi piace* (Waber, Lee, 2016).

The new fathers share in the lives of their sons and daughters and show themselves to be fully competent in carrying out all the routines

⁴ It should be noted that, in the case of quotations taken from the picture books here listed, page numbers are not provided, as they do not appear in the original texts, Editor’s Note.

⁵ Unless otherwise stated, English quotations from picture books originally not in English are drawn from their Italian editions. For full bibliographic details, see References, and Specific References, Editor’s Note.

required in the care and education of young children. Bedtime and sleep rituals are the focus of *Buona notte, Nilo* (Pfister, 2008), *A letto, piccolo mostro!* (Ramos, 2005), *Non dormi, Piccolo Orso?* (Waddell, Firth, 2015); the beginning of nursery school, linked to the fear of abandonment, is told in the picture book *Ciao, papà!* (Kaufmann, Spetter, 2003); decorating the Christmas tree becomes a good training ground for the little protagonist of *Papà, decoriamo l'albero di Natale?* (d'Allancé, 2007) to understand the limits of his autonomy and the need to respect the boundaries set by a father figure who is both affectionate and protective; and again, in *Ancora, papà!* (Pesce, Penazzi, 2020) the author pays homage to her father by recounting step by step all the moments they spent together, from her birth to adulthood: the long list includes gestures from the most everyday (playing, brushing teeth, cuddling in the big bed) to the most significant (first love, first disappointment, first move, birth of a child) At the end of the story, the father becomes a grandfather and continues to show to his grandchild that willingness to care that seems to be an integral part of his identity. Sometimes dads have little time to dedicate to their children because they must work, but even in this case they do not miss out on affectionate gestures, hugs and kisses as in *Papà Bacetto* (Amiot, Guerlais, 2019) and *Bacioespresso* (Jadoul, 2012).

Worth mentioning is *Arriva la mamma!* (Banks, Bogacki, 2016): the facing pages of the book show parallel indoor scenes – where the father gets dinner ready, looks after the children, gives the youngest a bottle – and outdoor scenes that follow the route that the mother takes to get home from work (she crosses the road, takes the underground, opens her umbrella to shelter from a heavy shower). The strength of this book lies in the extremely natural way in which it portrays a working mother who only gets home for dinner, and a father who takes care of three children with great ease.

Then there are somewhat out-of-the-ordinary situations, such as the camping holiday at the seaside with dad, told in *Piccolo coccodrillo va al mare* (Montanari, 2021), or an adventure hunting an enormous bear – *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* (Rosen, Oxenbury, 2001) – which involves an easy-going father and his four children, one of which is still a baby: even in this extreme situation, full of unexpected events and obstacles to overcome, the father manages to get by very well, thanks to the strong bond he has with his children. The father and daughter in *Cuore di papà* (Trevisan, Lorenzi, 2020) also have an extraordinary and very complicated experience, but thanks to the strong bond and deep understanding that unites them, they will be able to weather any storm.

In *A Brave Bear* (Taylor, Hughes, 2023) Dad Bear accompanies his little one on a day of affectionate, ordinary adventure, while in *The Storm Whale* (Davies, 2014), Nico, the little protagonist of the story, will have to resolve a great dilemma and will find comfort and consolation in the closeness of a silent but empathetic and welcoming father.

At times, fathers are over-protective and would like to prevent their children from doing dangerous things: they become “fence fathers” who, instead of encouraging their sons and daughters to launch themselves into the world, exploring and experiencing dangerous situations, tend to confine and protect them. An example of this is the father in the story of *The Gruffalo’s Child* (Donaldson, Sheffler, 2004) who, at the beginning of the story, takes on an admonishing role (he warns his daughter not to enter a “deep dark” wood), which in traditional fairy tales is typically attributed to the mother figure. A similar situation occurs in *Big Boys Cry* (Howley, 2022) where a father, anxious about his son’s first day of school, tries not to show his concerns, but in the end of the story, allows himself a liberating cry in the company of his (male) son.

The worries of new fathers sometimes begin even before the birth of their child, as happens to Gigi, the father and protagonist of *Papa-île* (Jadoul, 2014), who confides all his doubts to his partner:

Gigi the bear was soon about to become a father. “Will I be a good dad?” Gigi wondered. “A super dad plays football. While I don’t like it at all,” said Gigi. “A super dad can swim like a fish. While I can’t even dive”, sighed Gigi. “And a super dad knows how to build a hut for his cub. While I don’t even know how to use a hammer”, said Gigi.

The same anxieties and insecurities, combined with a lot of excitement and happiness, are lived through by the father who is the protagonist of an ironic and surprising picture book from France – *Papa attend bébé* (Loew, Barroux, 2013) – which depicts the expectation of a child from the father’s point of view. From the news of the pregnancy («This morning I’m over the moon! In nine months you’ll be here! In nine months there’ll be three of us! I feel like shouting to the whole universe:... You know what? I’m going to be a dad!»), to attending a special school to become a good dad («At the school for future dads, I change nappies and give bottles. That’s it! For me, children no longer have any secrets!») right up to the day of birth («You’re born! Your mum and I are crying with joy. I’ll pick you up, starting today I’m the happiest dad ever!«).

2.2. *Extraordinary fathers, or father-heroes*

In some stories, dads are portrayed as extraordinary dads, with a thousand resources, sometimes with actual superpowers. An example of this is the protagonist of *Dad Can Do Almost Anything* (Günther, 2020), a clumsy dad, always racing against time as he tries to hurriedly handle all the tasks involved in looking after his two children: dad fixes toys (or at least tries to), cooks (he puts frozen pizza in the oven), runs like the wind (especially when he's late taking his children to school), tells wonderful bedtime stories (but falls asleep reading them, worn out). The ending reveals why he can do «almost everything»: But there's one thing Dad can't do... Be a mum! Well, one can't do everything! And anyway, as a dad... there's no one better than you!». The moral of the story: even the most extraordinary dad in the world can't compete with mum's skills. We could also venture a further interpretation: mums are naturally good at being mums, while dads need superpowers to do the same things that mums do effortlessly.

Another "superhero dad", albeit a slightly tired one, is the protagonist of *Come On, Dad!* (Maudet, 2021) who, after spending the whole day with a rather demanding child, returns home in the evening being carried on the child's shoulders, so worn out is he. And what can we say about the protagonist of *The Dad Who Had Ten Children* (Guettier, 2003)? He can look after ten children at once perfectly, and when he feels tired all, he needs is a short trip alone on his sailing boat to recover and return to his children more energetic than before. Another extraordinary father is Tommy's father – *Dad* (Nyhus, 2007) – even if he only lives in the child's imagination.

The father portrayed by Anthony Browne in *My Dad* (2013) is a father who «isn't afraid of ANYTHING», «can jump right over the moon», «is as strong as a gorilla», and «as soft as my teddy». However, there is one quality that stands out above all others: the father is a giver of unconditional love for his son. Here is the ending of the book: «I love my dad. And you know what? HE LOVES ME! (And he always will)».

The father portrayed by Mireille d'Allancé in *Dad Will Take Care of It* (2006) is also a strong, solid, reassuring one, but what makes him heroic in his son's eyes is the constant presence in the face of life's difficulties and the solidity of his affection. Here is the closing dialogue between the child and his father: «So, there's nothing that can separate us?», «Nothing whatsoever! Don't worry, your dad will take care of it!».

Finally, a truly legendary father is the protagonist of *Dad, Will You Please Bring Me the Moon?* (Carle, 2006): to fulfil his daughter's wish to go to the moon so he can play with her there, the father builds a very long ladder and goes to talk directly to the moon.

2.3. *Occasional fathers*

The fathers spoken of above are competent, they feel comfortable in their role as father and have a daily relationship with their children. Then there are the *occasional fathers*, who only come into the picture, when necessary, almost always because of the temporary absence of the mother. An emblematic case of this category is the father portrayed in *Giosetta and Her Father* (Ionesco, Busshoff, 2006). The book cover shows a father in a dressing gown and slippers, with a tired and somewhat apathetic look and an unkempt beard, with his daughter literally dragging him along by the belt. The reason for the father's neglect is revealed right at the beginning of the story:

This morning, as usual, Giosetta knocks on the door of her parents' bedroom. Dad hasn't sleep well. Mum had gone to the country for a few days. So Dad took advantage of her being away to eat lots of sausages, drink beer, eat pork pâté and many other things that Mum forbids him because they are bad for him. So, Dad has a sore liver. He has a stomach ache, he has a headache, and he really doesn't want to wake up. But Giosetta keeps knocking on the door. So her dad tells her to come in.

The father is clearly unable to take care of the child, or even of himself. The story then unfolds in a sort of game of hide-and-seek between Giosetta and her dad, leading to a happy ending in which mum finally comes home and everything goes back to normal.

A similar situation is described in the book *Mr Large in Charge* (Murphy, 2007). In this case the father – Mr Large – comes into the picture because his wife is not feeling well and must stay in bed that day:

“As a matter of fact, I don't feel *too* well”, replied Mrs Large. “But I was going to take them all to the park later on. Then there's the shopping and lunch, and there's...” “Well, you don't have to worry about any of that”, said Mr Large. “It's the weekend, so I'm in charge. Go on, back to bed with you – We'll take care of everything, won't we, kids?” “You bet!”, yelled Lester.

Actually, mum's rest does not go according to plan because she is continually interrupted by the incursions of the four children who appear totally out of control under their father's guidance. However, his wife seems to appreciate her husband's efforts in the extraordinary management of the children, so much so that after the umpteenth raid on her room she gives in and hosts them all in the big bed. Here's the closing dialogue:

"Everyone out!" ordered Mr Large. "Let mum have her rest now. She's not well today". Mrs Large heaved herself into a sitting position and patted the covers. "That's all right, dear", she said. "I've had a *very* restful day and I'm feeling *much* better now. Why don't you all join me for tea?". "Well, if you're *sure*" said Mr Large, and they all piled onto the bed to tell Mrs Large all about the day she'd missed.

In the end, Dad is acquitted despite all the mess he made during the day. In the book *Bunch of Pigs!* (d'Allancé, 2010) a father is forgiven, who cannot keep his three children in check, and shouts at them: «You bunch of pigs!», and he really does turn them into three little pigs. The happy ending, in this case too, is when mum comes home.

Conclusion

From the examination of paternal portraits taken from literary imagery for children, a variety of paternal representations emerge that are however held together by a common thread consisting of affection, a predisposition to care and the absolute absence of any form of authoritarianism. Except for a few clumsy fathers, not yet ready to take on the role of caring for their children, most fathers appear to be competent and at ease in carrying out the tasks of educating and caring for children that have traditionally been the exclusive prerogative of mothers. Comparing the scientific literature on new fathers with their literary transposition, we can conclude that the "*fatherly*" element represented in picture books seems more emancipated than that to be found in real life.

As Franco Cambi (1996) explains, the imagery of children's literature is prescriptive: not only does it tell stories, but it also educates. In this case it presents images of fatherhood that tend to be desirable, good, positive, to be taken as a model. There is therefore an implicit 'ought-to-be' in children's books from the year 2000 on: a good father must be affectionate, dedicated to caring for his children and competent. In

this sense we can conclude by stating that the picture books of the new millennium are educating new generations of girls and young women in principles (of gender equality, of equal relationships between men and women in the family) that are still looking for a space of actual application in Italian society.

These books can therefore be defined as *anticipating change*, and at the same time as *compassing that point* to the changes taking place, towards the directions considered desirable, which are nourished by values, ideals and principles oriented towards the well-being of children, gender equality and the fully shared responsibility of fathers and mothers in parenting tasks.

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