

A Traditional Avant-garde

– *Trends and Features of Scandinavian Children's Literature in Italy*

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CSS Conference 2019, published in July 2020

My paper is meant to present the first outcomes of a new research, which in turn is a widening of a previous investigation: some years ago, I studied the influence of Scandinavian children's writers on Italian ones during their childhood or their education, by basing my survey mainly on their direct statements and testimonies.¹ From this perspective, I assessed that Scandinavian children's writers, above all the Danish Karin Michaëlis, the Swedish Astrid Lindgren and the Finland-Swedish Tove Jansson, played a relevant role both in the inspiration of some future children's writers and in the innovation of Italian children's books; to this regard, two main waves of change can be pointed out in the 1960s and in the 1980s.² This time I propose to look at the overall phenomenon from a broader perspective, with reference to which Scandinavian children's books were published in Italian translation, so as to constitute a kind of Nordic tradition in the still neglected area of children's literature. This survey will allow me to highlight which Scandinavian children's writers (have) characterized the Italian children's book market and how the presence of Scandinavian children's authors in Italy changed through the years.

The present contribution features, therefore, as the first step of a potential deeper survey, which raises a series of questions, in the following introduced as a kind of framework. First, we should reflect on what ought to be considered children's books or, at least, to notice how this label includes very different works, from illustrated albums to young adults' literature, from nursery rhymes to fantasy novels, just to mention some. In spite of common readers' viewpoint, it is therefore hard to consider children's literature as a "literary genre", as it actually consists of very different genres (nearly all finding a counterpart in adults' literature). On the other hand, it seems surprisingly easy to identify children's works, as they are clearly mentioned in editorial catalogues and evidently shown in specific sections of most bookshops and libraries, sometimes even in handbooks about the history of literature. The case of fairy tales or folk tales is enlightening to this regard: born as the expression of folklore, they represented wonderful and suitable means to involve children, even to transmit values or, at least, to start making

¹See D. Finco, "Freedom starts as early as childhood. Scandinavian children's (female) writers' impact on Italian children's literature before and after the Second World War" in Robert Zola Christensen (ed.), *A collection of articles based on presentation held at the CSS Conference 2017 – "Rethinking Scandinavia"* (web proceedings), Lund, International web community for Scandinavian Studies, 2018, www.csspublications.net/konf17proceedings

²See also point 4 in the conclusive remarks of the present paper.

the youngest ones more aware of reality, of the outer world, its challenges and its dangers, through their symbolic language and their typified characters. Therefore, they played an important role in children's experience of narration and, if possible, in children's readings, so that they gradually were pointed at as children's literature, as they commonly are considered even today. When publishing his worldwide known tales, H. C. Andersen himself shifted from the initial title of *Eventyr fortalte for Børn* (Fairy Tales Told for Children) to the later *Eventyr og Historier* (Fairy Tales and Stories), so as to highlight the different and peculiar approach he had towards this kind of stories in spite of his original source of inspiration.

Another interesting, even though less problematic aspect is that children's writers – more and more often in Scandinavia – do not write children's books only, and sometimes they are known in Italy just for their adults' books, or for their children's, or even for both. In order to define my corpus, I chose to refer to the canon of children's literature as is presented by Italian scholars of Scandinavian studies. To this purpose, I found a very useful and relevant tool in the recent Italian history of Scandinavian literature,³ which displays a specific section on children's writers; starting from this corpus, I mapped Italian translations of Scandinavian children's works, by consulting both the Online Catalogue of the National Library and several lists of Italian translations available online.

A first necessary, general remark – which I will not go into in this paper – is that in the beginning, Scandinavian children's books – as well as Scandinavian books on the whole – were usually translated from French, German or English versions, even though translations from Scandinavian languages appeared, occasionally, relatively early (a noteworthy example is Selma Lagerlöf's *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige*, published in 1906-1907 and translated into Italian from Swedish already in 1914). A second, more meaningful, feature is that both children's literature in Scandinavia (like in Europe) and Italian translations of Scandinavian books are late phenomena, thus the connection of them both could only lead to a late beginning, as well as a late breakthrough, if compared to other literature.

This is clear if we consider the low number of Scandinavian children's writers who for decades had a place in Italy; as a matter of fact, before the 1950s Sweden is represented, in Italian translation, by Selma Lagerlöf and Gerd Rissler; Denmark by H. C. Andersen, Karin Michaëlis and Jens Sigsgaard; Norway only by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe (however, with their folktales); Iceland only by Jón "Nonni" Sveinsson.

Selma Lagerlöf is here considered for the above mentioned *Nils Holgersson*, which is undoubtedly a children's book as it was commissioned as such (even though she made a *Bildungsroman* out of the requested

³ Massimo Ciaravolo (ed.), *Storia delle letterature scandinave. Dalle origini a oggi*, Milano: Iperborea, 2019.

geography handbook). After the first translation in 1914, certainly encouraged by her winning of the Nobel prize (as the first woman) in 1909, another Italian version appeared in 1922, later in the 1930s, in 1960, 1964, 1974 and, most recently, in 2017. This marks, therefore, a constant presence of this writer, although the numerous complete translations were often accompanied by the publishing of excerpts, or – even – by adaptations or reductions.⁴

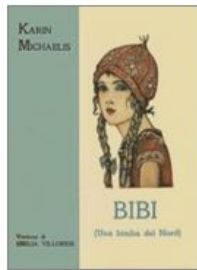


One might reflect, in addition, on how much and how pertinently authors like Selma Lagerlöf may be taken as children’s writers into account: can *Gösta Berlings saga*, or other novels by her, be considered books for children or adolescents? This inclusion, in any case, would relevantly increase her presence in Italy through the whole 20th century. Gerd Rissler’s *Mickegubben på Rosenön* (1943) was translated in 1949, but the author had no other book translated afterwards.

H. C. Andersen’s (fairy) tales were partly translated already in 1864 and this author is regularly present in Italy and elsewhere until nowadays. Therefore, he can be somehow considered the first Scandinavian writer featuring in Italy as regards ‘children’s literature’. Karin Michaëlis is the other Danish author who can boast an almost constant occurrence, although with an obviously much later beginning; however, she had her Bibi-series early translated into Italian, likely due to her international renown at the time: her seven novels on Bibi (the last one was actually ‘completed’ by the translator) were published between 1927 and 1939 and translated between 1932 and 1941; moreover, they were republished in the 1960s, 1970s and 1990s (however, a new translation, this time from Danish and not from German, appeared first in 2005). I will not go into details now, but the importance of this character is testified by several Italian children’s writers, so that they even have talked about a “Bibi generation” and a “Pippi generation” as for young (female) children’s writers and readers.⁵ At the time of her Bibi-breakthrough in Italy, she was famous for *Den farlige Alder* (1910), a provocative and modern portrait of a woman in her forties, which had had an Italian version in 1911 and 1929.

⁴ Selma Lagerlöf’s book participated therefore to the high increase of translations of Scandinavian works in Italy during the 1930s, when – paradoxically, if we consider the historical context and climate – Italy was the European country that displayed the highest amount of literary books in translation (see, e.g., Christopher Rundle, *Publishing Translations in Fascist Italy*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2010, p. 46).

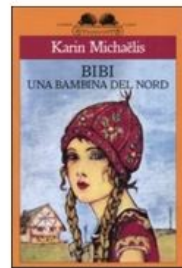
⁵ See Donatella Ziliotto, “Generazione Bibi, generazione Pippi”, in Francesca Lazzarato - D. Ziliotto (eds.), *Bimbe, donne e bambole. Protagoniste bambine nei libri per l’infanzia*, Roma: Artemide, 1987, pp. 23-33.



1931

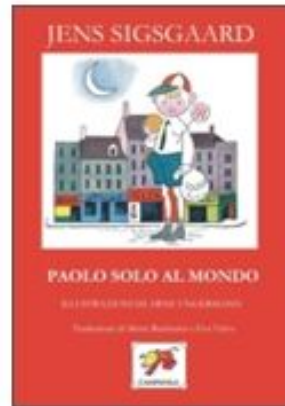


1967



2005

Jens Sigsgaard wrote *Palle alene i verden* in 1942: it is the story of a child who discovers he has remained alone in the world, something that – with regard to children’s dreams of power and freedom from the adults – shows similarities with the much more articulated and famous adventures of Pippi Longstocking. This work was based on a real survey that had involved children, and was translated into Italian already in 1949, whereas a second translation appeared only in 2005.



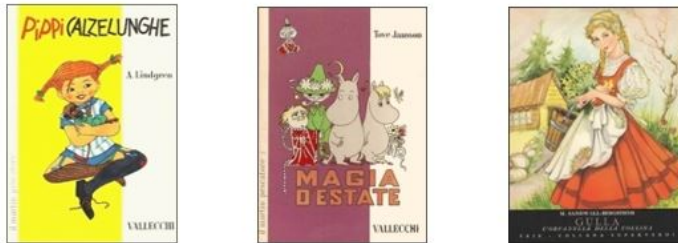
Asbjørnsen and Moe’s collections of folktales (*Norske folkeeventyr*) are likely the most famous and among the earliest examples of Scandinavian folklore in Italy, translated in 1925 and 1945. Apart from all controversial issues we have mentioned before, Scandinavian folktales or fairy tales had their first Italian editions already in the late 19th century, more systematically in the 1940s and regularly from the 1960s onwards. I think that they contributed much to the imagery of North in Italy (even beyond the field of children’s literature) in terms of mythological beliefs and relationship with nature, and this might have somehow influenced Italian editors.

Jón “Nanni” Sveinsson authored autobiographical novels – written in Danish and German – about life in Iceland, which were published in

Italy from the 1920s, in 1946 and, later, only in 1998.⁶

I propose now to follow the Scandinavian children's books' fortune in Italy, at least in terms of translations, decade after decade, starting from the most present country, which is Sweden (and this occurs, by the way, not only for children's literature).

In the 1950s, we find the first translations of the three children's writers who will mark the Italian survey for several decades: Astrid Lindgren (her *Boken om Pippi Långstrump*, 1952, was translated in 1958),⁷ Tove Jansson and her Moomin-series (1946-1970, since 1959 in Italian) and Martha Sandwall-Bergström (Kulla-Gulla-series, from the 1940s to the 1970s, in Italian from 1956 to the 1980s). Astrid Lindgren, unsurprisingly, dominates the Italian panorama until nowadays, with ever new versions and editions; more notably, in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, Lindgren, Lagerlöf, Sandwall-Bergström and Jansson are nearly the only Swedish children's authors translated into Italian, as far as I have found, the exceptions being Maria Gripe, whose *Hugo och Josefin* (1962) was translated in 1977 and whose Italian fortune lasted until the 1990s (with a republishing of *Galsblåsarns barn* in 2018), and Gösta Knutsson's *Pelle Svanslös på äventyr* (1939, transl. in 1956).



In 1980, we have the only Italian version of a book by Inger and Lasse Sandberg, in spite of their series of illustrated albums started in 1953 and published for over fifty years. Other relevant exceptions are Ulf Nilsson (*Älskade lilla gris*, 1982, transl. in 1984) and Gunnel Linde (*Den vita stenen*, 1964, transl. in 1994), on the friendship between an unmarried mother's daughter and an orphan, which inspired a successful TV-series. We can conclude that until the half of the 1990s the presence of Swedish children's books in Italy was stable, rich in publications but relatively poor in the number of authors.

At this point, Italian children's book market made acquaintance with the currently most famous or trendy writer: Ulf Stark, whose *Sixten* (1987) was translated in 1995. His works have regularly appeared in Italian, often only a few years later than the Swedish version, and he is appreciated for his humour and – as many other Scandinavian children's writers – for his courage in dealing with delicate topics, in particular the relationship between children and adults and children's view of the adult

⁶ These latest versions feature, however, in several numbers of the review *Popoli* (Folks) and were translated from French. The context highlights the character of these contributions as testimonies about life in a little known country.

⁷ See Donatella Ziliotto's considerations (as translator and editor of *Pippi*) on the relevance of her relationship with Astrid Lindgren and on the pioneering role of Pippi in the Italian children's book market in D. Finco, "Freedom starts as early as childhood", *cit.*

world.



Other Nordic tendencies occasionally emerge in the Italian context, like the so called “idyllofobi”, or preference for gloomy atmospheres, very problematic and hopeless situations, violence and conflicts, all described in a rough realism. Here the examples are Peter Pohl (*Min vän Janne*, 1985, transl. in 1996) and Mats Wahl (*Vinterviken*, 1993, transl. in 2004). I would, however, observe that this trend does not meet with the same success in Italy, where, on the contrary, these features are expected by readers rather in the Nordic noir.

Relevant authors at the beginning of the new millennium are Anna Clara-Tidholm, pioneer in illustrated books for very little children, which are translated few years after their publishing, and Annika Thor, with her tetralogy of novels on two Austrian Jewish sisters during the Second World War (1996-1999, transl. in 2002-2005). It is worth mentioning Gunilla Bergström’s illustrated books on the character of Alfons Åberg: twenty-six works since 1973, some of them translated in 2007, where a father takes care of his child in the urban context of suburbs around the three main Swedish towns in the 1960s and 1970s. Between the last decade and this, Italian readers have had the chance to know Martin Widmark’s detective stories for children, Barbro Lindgren – above all in the last few years, with her lively albums on children’s daily life – and Moni Nilsson, with *Tsatsiki och morsan* (1995, transl. in 2009) and *Tsatsiki och farsan* (1996, transl. in 2010), on the son of a Swedish rocker-woman and of a Greek fisherman who wants to establish a contact with his father. These novels approach even violent relationships and family

disease with empathy and humour.



Italian readers have been also able to meet with the adventures of Zigge (by Inger Lindahl, 2000-2003, transl. in 2003-2007) and Sandvargen (by Åsa Lind, 2002-2003, transl. in 2009-2010), and with Sara Bergmark Elfgren’s fantasy novels (2011-2012, transl. in 2012-2013).

Coming to Danish literature, in the 1950s we only find two novels by Estrid Ott, whose books have never been translated thereafter: *Elsebeth paa Ekspedition* (1936) and *Sally Smaalotte* (1940) were published in 1953 and 1951, respectively, by the very active Salani publishing house in the series *Biblioteca delle giovinette* (Young women’s library). In the 1960s and 1970s, the mentioned Karin Michaëlis was accompanied on children’s bookshelves by Klaus Rifbjerg with the generational novel *Den kroniske uskyld* (1958, transl. in 1966) and *Anna, jeg, Anna* (1969, transl. in 1974). We could, maybe, include in this list the Danish illustrator Ingrid Vang Nyman, whose creations enriched Astrid Lindgren’s Pippi-books from 1945 to 1952 and have been known by Italian readers until nowadays, especially in illustrated adaptations of the 1970s.

In 1975, Italy was reached by an interesting and controversial children’s writer, Cecil Bødker, who, in her *Silas og den sorte hoppe* (1967), had introduced a new kind of character in Danish literature: a child with a complex temperament, ambiguous, who, bad treated, becomes suspicious and even cynical. This remains, however, Bødker’s only novel translated into Italian, republished in 1980.

We do not have any newness until the 1990s, when the other “revolutionary” children’s author (who, like Bødker, debuted in the turning point year 1967) had three stories translated, however, at about twenty years after their publishing in Denmark. I mean Ole Lund Kirkegaard, with *Otto er et næshorn* (1972, transl. in 1992), *Gummi-Tarzan* (1975, transl. in 1992), and *Albert* (1968, transl. in 1993). His stories feature a fantastic setting: in the first work, a rhinoceros is drawn before coming to life, while in *Gummi-Tarzan* the protagonist meets a witch who temporarily helps him face others’ violence. In Kirkegaard’s books, children make fun of ambitious and authoritarian adults, whereas they feel sym-

pathy for vagabonds, who have maintained the ability of dreaming and imagining.



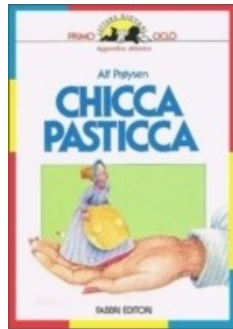
In the new millennium, the greatest novelties come first from Hanne Kvist, Lene Kaaberbøl och Bjarne Reuter. The first one is an illustrator, who authored the graphic novel *Drengen med sølvhjelm* (1999, transl. in 2000). Kaaberbøl's numerous fantasy novels (since 2000) have been translated since 2003: her breakthrough was the tetralogy on the child Dina, who, looking people in the eyes, can perceive what they feel guilty about. Later on, she had, among others, even her *Vildheks* novels (in 'Italian' *Wildwitch*) published in Italy from 2016 to 2019. Bjarne Reuter, a versatile, prolific and very popular writer, who debuted in the 1970s, has entered the Italian book market with *Kaptajn Bimse & Goggeletten* (1992, transl. in 2003).

After 2010, we find some illustrated albums by Jakob Martin Strid, dedicated to children's art. Danish authors, too, present hard situations and delicate topics, like suicide: here we can mention Glenn Ringtved, with *Dig og mig ved dag gry* (2013, transl. in 2016), on reasons that lead two young lovers to kill themselves, and Janne Teller, whose writing appeals both adult and young readers, with the controversial novel *Intet* (2000, transl. in 2012), where the efforts of a group of friends to show the protagonist what is worth living for ends in a burst of revenge and mutual violence.

As for Norwegian children's literature, we have to wait until 1960 to find something different from folktales in Italian translation. This first work is, however, peculiar, as it is Signe Marie Zinken Hopp's *Trollkrittet* (1948), Norwegian first nonsense book, where the little Jon finds a chalk that makes everything drawn alive. In the 1960s, Norwegian children's literature offered another unusual model with the novels by Aimée Sommerfelt, which deal with international issues and life in undeveloped countries in Africa or South-America; three of these works have an Italian version: *Vejen til Agra* (1959, transl. in 1965), *Den hvite bungalow* (1962, transl. in 1967) and *Pablo og de andre* (1964, transl. in 1968). The choice of such topics is evidently influenced by the political climate

of the time, but it certainly connotes Norwegian children's literature in Italy as very engaged and committed. At the end of this decade, Italian readers found the first work in their language by Thorbjørn Egner, *Folk og røvere i Kardemomme by* (1955, transl. in 1969), on three outlaws, driven by hunger, who are rehabilitated after a small punishment.

There is actually nothing new to highlight in the 1970s, while in 1980 the first book of a series by Alf Prøysen, promoted by Astrid Lindgren for Rabén & Sjögren, had its Italian version: *Kjerringa som ble så lite som en teskje* (1957), in Italian *Chicca pasticca*, that soon would become *La signora Minù* (*Mrs Minù*) in popular cartoons.



In 1988, Italian children's book market reached by the first of the three Norwegian authors who would play a central role until now: Tormod Haugen, followed by Jostein Gaarder (since 1994) and Klaus Hagerup (since 1999). Just a few words on their books: Haugen is interested in children as harmless and unprotected persons; his characters are often placed in unsafe situations that lead to uneasiness and anxiety. Hagerup, on the contrary, approaches adolescents' life in a light tone, in particular in the funny series dedicated to Markus (1994-2004, in It. Olle Pappemolle). Gaarder has become famous with *Sofies verden* (1991), and in his works a philosophical attitude and curiosity are celebrated.



Beside these three leading writers (as concerns Italy), I would like to mention Erlend Loe, both adults' and children's writer, who created the series on Kurt (*Fisken*, 1994, transl. in 2003, and *Kurt³*, 2001, transl.

in 2008), where parents show a childish behaviour; in general, his so called “naivism” is appreciated by young readers. And, finally, Ingvar Ambjørnsen’s detective stories for children and Tor Åge Bringsværd, the greatest Norwegian author of fantasy and science fiction, who debuted in the 1970s and whose children’s works have been translated into Italian since 2008.

Very little can be said about Icelandic children’s literature in Italy: before the year 2000, it is worth mentioning Friðrik Erlingsson, whose *Benjamín Dúfa* (1992), on four boys who during a summer found a chivalry order to fight against injustice, was translated in 1997. In the new millennium, Þorvaldur Þorsteinsson’s *Ég heiti Blíðfinnur, en þú mátt kalla mig Bóbbó* (1998, transl. in 2009) represents, in its coming back to fairy elements, the return to fantasy that characterizes Icelandic literature in the 1990s. Other translated authors, especially after 2010, are Þorarinn Leifsson, Birgitta Sif and Andri Snær Magnason.

At the end of this survey, which had the main purpose to start mapping the presence of Scandinavian children’s literature in Italian translation during the 20th century, with some hints at the more and more lively panorama of the new millennium, I think I can come to the following conclusions:

1. Italian versions of Scandinavian children’s literature appeared late and sporadically, offered a more lively scenery from the 1970s and, above all, the Italian children’s Nordic-canon initially articulated around few authors who were (and are) often translated and republished: for Sweden, Astrid Lindgren, Selma Lagerlöf, Tove Jansson, Martha Sandwall-Bergström, and, recently, Ulf Stark; for Denmark, H.C. Andersen, Karin Michaëlis and, recently, Lene Kaaberbøl; for Norway, Tormod Haugen, Klaus Hagerup and Jostein Gaarder.
2. Scandinavian children’s books display a variety of patterns, approaches and styles, among which some peculiar Nordic trends (at least if compared with Italian contributions in the same field) occasionally emerge, like interest for nonsense and the so called “idyllofobi”. Moreover, an increasing number of authors publish both for adult and for young readers, making this survey fascinating and thornier.
3. The charming aspect of Nordic children’s literature in Italian reception lies in the model of free children questioning adult rules, in the fantastic atmosphere linked to the triumph of nature and stratified in folktales, and in the courage to approach delicate and very problematic topics, like conflict with parents, violence, gender questions, before other literary traditions. From this perspective, Nordic children’s literature has been often received and described as a sort of avant-garde.

4. In Italy, the publishing of Astrid Lindgren’s works by the editor Vallecchi in the late 1950s marked a turning point. Donatella Ziliotto, that editor and translator (with Annuska Palme), has pointed out three main steps in the innovation of Italian children’s literature that were somehow connected with the Nordic tradition: in the 1930s and 40s, Bibi-series by Karin Michaëlis; since the 1960s, Astrid Lindgren with Pippi as the front character; and in the 1980s, Roald Dahl (*Matilda*, *GGG* and so on).⁸ Dahl is Welsh, but she reminds his Norwegian origins, something that critics consider fundamental in his creations. This last detail shows how broader a Nordic imagery in Italy is than Scandinavia itself, and, maybe, how we should remodulate the “Nordic” children’s canon, which, in any case, has proved to be influencing.

Undoubtedly, since the 1990s Italian children’s book market has experienced a renewal, with several attempts to diversify the offering of Nordic children’s writers. A noteworthy contribution has recently come by the editor Iperborea, which is the main Italian mediator of literature from North Europe (not only Scandinavia) and which has created a series dedicated to children’s literature (both classic works and newest ones), published since 2017.⁹ In the editor’s words we can maybe recognise what I assessed, noticed and commented on: “My first, somewhat mythical image of Scandinavia was created by Tove Jansson’s Moomins, those unconventional, anarchical and sometimes obsessed troll philosophers, by Astrid Lindgren’s unpredictable and genial Pippi Longstocking, and by Karin Michaëlis’ eleven-year-old Bibi, who could travel on her own around all Denmark. It was the idea of an anti-conventional world of freedom and independence, of an enchanted and wild nature, and of an essentially comfortable society, where curiosity, fantasy, friendship and sense for adventure were the only required qualities to work it out in life. I identified North with childhood’s happiness, and was already evidently caught by its literary fascination.”¹⁰

My last remarks concern what has not been treated here: meaningful details like the evolution of book covers or children’s books’ titles in translation, and bigger issues like the relationship with non-translated Scandinavian authors, that is to say how different the Scandinavian and the ‘Italian’-Scandinavian children’s literary canons are, as well as the relationship of Nordic children’s writers published in Italy with other Italian and foreign children’s authors in the editorial catalogues. Finally, of course, beside all data about Nordic writers who spotted the Italian survey, it would be meaningful to assess the actual reception of their works, how much they were read and how they were reviewed and described in handbooks.

⁸ D. Ziliotto, *Introduzione*, in Roald Dahl, *Matilde* (*Matilda*, 1988), Milano: Salani, 1995.

⁹ Iperborea’s series “I Miniborei” hosts the Swedish Katarina Taikon’s *Katitzi* (1969, transl. in 2018) and *Katitzi och Swing* (1970, transl. in 2019), the first Italian versions of these autobiographical novels (in a series of thirteen from 1969 to 1980, republished since 2015) on life of Roma in Sweden, which also are a literary denounce of discriminations.

¹⁰ Reported in Vera Stalton, “Storie scandinave. Intervista a Cristina Gerosa”, in *Andersen* n. 347, 23.11.2017, <http://www.andersen.it/storie-scandinave-miniborei-intervista-con-cristina-gerosa/> (my own translation). In the same article, among features that are shared by Scandinavian children’s and adults’ literature, C. Gerosa mentions the ecological attitude, ethical and social issues, sense of responsibility and, above all, a very special irony and narrative imagination as the legacy of medieval sagas, reading of the Bible, folktales and the long oral tradition.

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