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Bianca Pitzorno: Imagination and Feminism

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Bianca Pitzorno was born in Sassari, Italy in 1942, and after earning a degree in Classical Literature with a thesis on Prehistoric Archaeology, and her masters in Cinema and Television, Pitzorno started a seven-year collaboration with the Italian state-owned broadcaster RAI as head of the production of cultural programmes for the young audience in 1970. Included among her most famous programmes are: *Il Diodorlando*, *Sapere*, *Tuttilibri*, *Chissà chi lo sa?* and *L'Albero Azzurro*, which is still broadcast today. Pitzorno now lives and works in Milan, and has published numerous books for children.

In 1970, Pitzorno's first picture book for young readers, *Il Grande Raduno dei Cow Boys*, was published in Switzerland, and was also her first book to be published in a foreign language. In 1973,

Pitzorno published *Sette Robinson su un'Isola Matta*, which represents an ironic parody of adventure novels. Just a year after, in 1974, one of her first big literary successes, *Clorofilla dal Cielo Blu* [Chlorophyll from the Blue Sky], came out as a clear example of the self-styled “fanta-ecologic novel”, a genre that combines fantastic and supernatural elements with the main theme of ecology and environmental problems. *Clorofilla dal Cielo Blu* also became very popular abroad. For instance, when it was translated into Polish, the book inspired a radio programme, while in Switzerland it gave rise to an animated cartoon. During the 1970s, Pitzorno started to write song lyrics used as signature tunes on television as well as in theatre.

Throughout her long career, Pitzorno has written more than 40 books to date, and she deals with many controversial and complex issues, ranging from diversity and childhood, to a multitude of environmental, social and political problems (for instance, pollution, political corruption, social class, and race). Although her books range over such a wide variety of topics, the plot has always remained imaginative, stylish, and amusing. Nevertheless, Pitzorno notes that while the subjects she has been interested in and her writing style have changed over time, keeping her focus on female characters the only constant element in her many stories. Girls are indeed the only characters of Pitzorno’s books that seem to tackle the problems involved with being a woman, a girl, or a little girl, in contemporary society, as well as in the past. Pitzorno, a left-wing feminist, is considered to have created a new season of literature for children and young readers focusing on female children or young girls who have complex personalities and are the main characters of the stories.

The peculiar characterization of those in her stories and of their personalities is one of Bianca Pitzorno’s hallmarks, and might also be considered one of the reasons for her popularity. Pitzorno usually tells her great and imaginative stories orally before writing them down with vivid detail, and these stories often include troubling narrative elements, such as suffering and death. These aspects are not eliminated or softened because, according to Pitzorno, they are a part of everyone’s lives, lives that are complex and complicated. Even childhood should not be considered a “carefree period” as it is usually depicted, because these sad realities exist in children’s lives as well. An example of this includes the work *Principessa Laurentina* [Princess Laurentina], which describes the powerful emotions connected with adolescence and family difficulties.

These great qualities have rendered Pitzorno one of the most successful Italian authors for children. According to Pitzorno herself, her books are this popular, especially among young readers, because she has always aimed at writing timeless stories, which include disparity between people both weak and strong and the arrogance of the latter, along with the struggle of the weak to become free of their ailments. Another reason for her great success among the younger generations may be due to the fact she has always considered their pain worthy

enough to be described, and she also uses irony in order to render it as important as adults' pain.

Another of Pitzorno's hallmarks is the clear handling of a number of taboos not usually found in children's literature, including death, divorce, social critiques, and excrement. For instance, in one of Pitzorno earliest masterpieces written in the 1980s, *L'Incredibile Storia di Lavinia* [The Incredible Story of Lavinia], the author deals with the taboos of death and excrement. The tale that recounts the misfortunes of a hungry, cold, little match girl, who faces death, is reminiscent of Hans Christian Andersen's tale, though it parodies the original by giving Lavinia a magic ring that transforms objects into excrements. Another great work written in this period is *Streghetto Mia* [My Little Witch], where the reader is involved in the adventures of a young witch as she takes revenge against misuses of power.

Some years later Pitzorno wrote the book *Ascolta il Mio Cuore* [Listen to My Heart], which is widely regarded as one of her best creations. This moving and realistic novel takes place in post-WWII Italy, and the author, through the innocent eyes of a little girl, is able to vividly recreate everyday life during this time period. The characters are children who, during a school year, learn to face injustices by fighting without ever surrendering. This book was so popular that the author decided to release another story about the adventures of the characters in *Ascolta il Mio Cuore* when they were little, set four years before the original takes place, in *Quando Eravamo Piccole*.

In the years 2000 to 2010, Pitzorno wrote a series of detective stories called *Gli Amici di Sherlock* with Roberto Piumini, who was among the writers of the TV programme *L'Albero Azzurro*, and has written many stories, poems, and fairy-tales for children.

In many of Pitzorno's books, the reader can find amazing, but at the same time quite complex, allusions to history, art, literature, and international classical literary works. A clear example is one of her latest works, *La Bambinaia Francese* [The French Governess], which is an intertextual, historical tale, intertwining elements of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* with Parisian and Caribbean revolutionary society in the 19th century. The references to the characters and places of *Jane Eyre* represent the contrast between different societies of that time; on the one hand, French society is described as more enlightened and flexible, and, on the other, English society is depicted as rigid, moralistic and intransigent. Furthermore, the author takes a stand on the importance of education for everybody, and on the equality of all human beings, whether they are men or women, white or black, nobles or slaves.

In addition to the clear allusion to Brontë's masterpiece, Pitzorno also makes numerous references to other important personalities of the past (musicians, philosophers and writers). Pitzorno alludes to French literature in particular, including references to Hugo, Perrault, Balzac, Molière, Rousseau, as well as towards English or Italian culture incorporating Swift, Dickens, Verri, and Rossini. For instance, Pitzorno's

work includes several references made by certain characters to many essays written by Rousseau about slavery and on children's education in the 19th century, which once again testify to the great effort she puts into research and the respect she has towards her audience.

Pitzorno's use of a large number of references, and of a particular language, has often been criticised for rendering her books only available to a certain kind of audience. However, the author has responded by being an advocate of reading difficult works, because they challenge readers. Her language is as unmistakable as her way of writing is. As previously mentioned, even though her main audience ranges from very young readers to adolescents, Bianca Pitzorno does not simplify the language by using diminutives, short sentences, or simplistic words. On the contrary, she uses a complex vocabulary full of difficult terms, because reading, beyond being a pleasure, might be used as a didactic instrument to stir up a readers' curiosity and have children ask questions in order to learn.

According to Pitzorno, writing is just as important as reading and learning. The author has indeed written books like *Storia delle Mie Storie* [The Story of My Stories] where she has explicated her own writing, as well as *Manuale del Giovane Scrittore Creativo* [The Young Creative Writer's Manual] which is a manual for young writers to test and improve their abilities by doing several exercises contained in each lesson.

In Italy, Bianca Pitzorno's success in the past and present is very clear when you take into account how many copies of her stories she has sold. For instance, Pitzorno has sold more than one million copies in Italy alone, and many of her books, including older publications, are in constant reprint, and also can be found in catalogues today. It must be remembered that her success is not restricted only to Italy because Pitzorno's books have been translated into more than ten languages worldwide, including French, German, Spanish, Russian, Japanese, and Chinese. Thanks to Pitzorno and the great number of books she has translated into Italian, many Italian children have had the chance to read great international authors and stories, including J. R. R. Tolkien (*The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* [Le avventure di Tom Bombadin]), Sylvia Plath (*Bedtime, Children!* [A letto, bambini!]), David Grossman (*Uri's Special Language* [La lingua speciale di Uri]), Enrique Perez Diaz (*Minino and Micifuz* [Minino e Micifuz]), Tove Jansson (*Who will Comfort Toffle?* [Piccolo Knitt tutto solo]), Soledad Cruz Guerra (*Le bambine dell'Avana non hanno paura di niente*), and Mariela Castro Espin (*What Happens During Puberty?* [Che cosa succede nella pubertà?]).

In 2001, Pitzorno was appointed UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, for which she has written two short novels: *L'isola degli smemorati* in 2003 and *Angeli in caduta libera* in 2008; both of these stories have also been adapted into animated cartoons. In the same year, she attended the project *Un mar de sueños*, which aims towards translating and exporting Italian classical literary works into Latin America. Pitzorno also wrote a novel in Spanish for this project, entitled *Cuentos de la isla de las Nuragas*.

Pitzorno has always been beloved by her readers of all ages, and also by critics, insomuch that the Italian publishing house Mondadori has recently prepared a new collection of Pitzorno's works, presented at the Bologna Book Fair. This special collection aims at celebrating the author's 70th birthday on the 25th of March as well as her long and successful career. During this day, renamed "Pitzorno Day," there were a number of events, including readings, taking place in many bookstores throughout Italy. This year, Pitzorno was among the shortlisted candidates for the Hans Christian Andersen Award.

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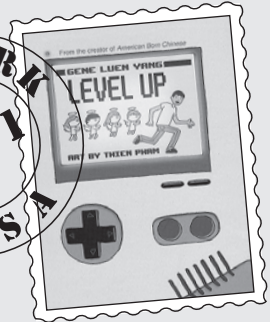
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Gene Luen Yang, creator of the acclaimed **American Born Chinese** (First Second, 2008), now published in ten languages, here teams with Pham to create another witty, readable tale. Again Yang explores with warmth and humor the trials that accompany growing up, among them dealing with a parent's plan for their child's future. This is Pham's first graphic novel; a solo work, **Sumo**, is scheduled for 2012. His down-to-earth art, here avoiding the exaggerated hectic style common to many graphic novels, complements a realistic story lightly touched with magic.

First Second is known for graphic novel publication for every reader in a field where many books are created for older readers. The popular Lunch Lady series (Alfred A. Knopf) and Baby Mouse series (Random House) are notable exceptions. Among 2011 First Second graphic novels for younger readers are fifty nursery rhymes reinvented as **Nursery Rhyme Comics** (3+), **Zita the Spacegirl** (pb, 8+), and **Astronaut Academy** (pb, 10+).
Glenna Sloan



Gene Luen Yang

Level Up

Illus. Thien Pham

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160 pp. ISBN: 9781596432352
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