



Telling a mountain story. Ideas for an anthology of children's mountain novels

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Abstract

This paper presents a study on how the Mountain is represented in children's literature. The aim is to show that, by including literary representations in geography education, students may not only acquire mountain skills and knowledge but also develop the ability to relate to and appreciate the rich assortment of natural and cultural values found in mountainous areas. By reading the stories told in books for children and young adults, students have the opportunity, informally, to fill a gap left by formal education and acquire relevant knowledge and geographical skills about mountains.

The paper presents a critical analysis of the evolution of the representation of the Mountain in Italian literature, looking in specific at how some children's novels, by virtue of their success with the public, are contributing to create a rich imagery within which we may find specific research themes that offer great opportunities to reflect, also at school, on relevant contemporary issues about the high lands.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Geography Education, Mountain Literature, Mountain Representation

1. Introduction

This paper is a study on how the Mountain is represented in children's literature. Mountains are geographically interesting for at least three important reasons: their physical-morphological conformation, the distinctive human processes that occur there and for their ability to conjure up varied images, narratives and depictions which find their own expression in different art forms.

Unfortunately, all these interpretations are mostly lost when teaching the geography rela-

tive to mountains as, in most cases, it is taught via a traditional regional approach, in other words, via the analysis of its anthropo-physical characteristics, which leaves little room for literary descriptions. The aim of this paper is to show that, on the contrary, by including these aspects in their studies, students may not only acquire mountain skills and knowledge but also develop the ability to relate to and appreciate the rich assortment of natural and cultural values found in mountainous areas.

Despite this deficiency in teaching practices,

we notice an abundance of literature which has different mountain portrayals as its subject. This can also be found in books for children and young adults, so that, by reading these stories, children have the opportunity, informally, to fill the gap left by formal education and acquire the relevant knowledge and geographical skills.

We will approach the subject with a critical analysis of the evolution of how the mountain has been portrayed in Italian literature, and then look at how some children's novels, by virtue of their success with the public, have contributed – and are contributing – to create a rich imagery within which we may find specific themes. From the geography teaching and geographical education perspective, these novels offer opportunities to reflect on relevant contemporary issues without previous knowledge of the “high lands” and to reflect on relevant contemporary issues that would otherwise be difficult for students to understand. Because of their young age, they cannot have a wide range of “upland” experiences to which they may attach complex deliberations. Themes as diverse as risk, fatigue, ambition, marginalisation, the countryside, protection of the environment, the relationship with wildlife or between humans and animals and many others may be addressed through these works by underlining the relevant geographical implications.

2. Methodology

Having analysed 56 illustrated books, collections of short stories and novels, we have chosen to give a geo-literary assessment based only on the novels. For methodological and presentational consistency, only novels have been considered in this paper. We might eventually carry out further research to elaborate on the theme of the depiction of the mountain in other narrative forms, illustrated journals for example, which may be of specific interest but require special methods of investigation.

The books listed in Table 1 are derived from an editorial research in which we tried to identify all the children's books devoted to mountains published in Italian from 2000 onwards and still on the market (for the books of foreign authors we took into account the Italian editions). Obvi-

ously, it is unlikely that we have identified all the texts of this kind and, probably, some works released by minor publishers have been neglected. However, we believe that the list is representative of the tendency, especially in the last few years, to publish books of this type (Figure 1). No criteria of discrimination based on age have been applied, so texts intended for a wide age group have been considered, with an implied readership ranging from Children (6-11 years old) to Young Adults (12-18 years old).

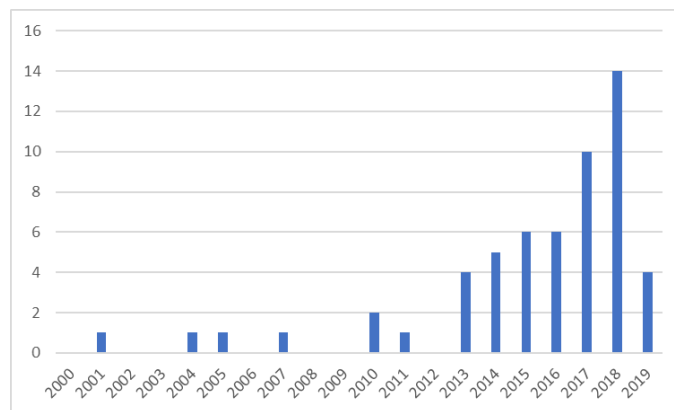


Figure 1. Children's books devoted to the mountains published from 2000 onwards and still on the market. Source: the data refer to the list described in Table 1.

The geo-literary method is derived from humanistic geography (Tuan, 1976; Pocock, 1981; Porteus, 1985; Brosseau, 1994) and from literary critiques related to so-called spatial inversion (Jakob, 2005). The basic idea is the creation of a geo-critical approach (Westphal, 2009) to the literary text concentrating on its geo-poetical aspect (Italiano and Mastronunzio, 2011). From a geographic point of view, the geo-literary approach has been established and developed as a specific field of research since the 1990s (Brosseau, 1994).

Geography and literature have been on a parallel path for a long time, it is clear that approaches and methodologies have taken on articulated declinations. These are either based on monographic or comparative approaches (in a literary or geographical sense) or on specific literary genres; paying attention to certain elements of physical or human geography. They

focus on particular places and study broad concepts related to the geographical vision (Papotti, 2011). The emphasis is on the concept of questioning the fictional construction of places to create a new view of real geographies (Luchetta, 2019). The idea is therefore to move between text and context, between narrative and reality and to understand the cultural phenomena that stem from territorial processes based on the narratives that define the concepts in a circular process.

In our case, we have applied a comparative approach, that provide students with various interpretations linked to possible meanings of the mountain, by selecting some works as possible reference points for the compilation of an anthology of passages. From these we may build different educational paths, promoting an understanding of the mountain territory and raising public awareness and responsibility towards a fragile territorial system, which although exposed to risks, contains human values of extreme interest and importance (Dematteis and Giorda, 2013; Giorda, 2011; Molinari, 2017).

More in detail, the article deals with six novels (all for Young Adults), from which relevant quotes have been extrapolated to describe the main themes that are informing children's literature and therefore explanatory of the Alpine imaginary that is being built through these works. The results of the geo-literary research have been shared with some groups of teachers during some training courses organized by AIIG Lombardy (Italian Association of Geography Teachers).

3. The Alpine landscape in the Italian literature

Mountains have, with some difficulty, become part of the Italian literary imagination. In European culture the “discovery” of the peaks in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the first mountain ascents generated a multitude of images and emotions associated with the romantic spirit. When mountaineering began as a sporting activity, satisfying subjective physical and psychological needs, the new vertical geographies that were discovered contributed to radically change the portrayal of the mountain.

Numerous European mountain regions, such

as the Apennines (Ardito, 2010) or the Pyrenees (Martinez de Pisón and Álvaro, 2014), have been protagonists of different processes of redefinition of the representation of mountains. However, it was the Alps that were the protagonists of a radical process of redefinition of the imaginary, which then took on a broader cultural value, referable to mountains in general. For this reason, having no chance to articulate all these processes here, we will focus on the Alpine imaginary.

The experiences of mountaineers in the Alps generated the birth of a literary genre, the *recit d'ascension*, which, in part, transcended the limited scope of the travel journal and influenced the work of many great nineteenth and twentieth century European authors. The link between mountaineering and literature is actually two-way street. There are many literary works to which we can attribute a determining value in equal measure as to the ascents of the Mont Blanc by Jacques Balmat, Michel Gabriel Paccard and Horace-Bénédict de Saussure. The reference obviously is to the works of Halbrecht Von Haller, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Étienne Jean-Baptiste Pivert de Senancour, who laid the foundations of a literary standard for the depiction of the Alpine landscape. These authors were recognized for their innovation and their ability to bring new topics to the attention of high European culture. They gave new life to artistic and literary expression, though, unfortunately, in the years that followed, the imagery crystallised and continued to repeat itself instead of growing and evolving (Rinaldi, 2017).

It is surprising that this tendency towards clichés and stereotypes is still alive today and that we can see traces, in present-day imagery, of that romantic fascination with the charming, picturesque Alpine idyll, and its sense of the sublime (Scaramellini, 2008). At first glance, it almost seems that archetypes of the mountain were created by romantic culture, with this geographic element leaving an indelible mark on Europe's collective imagination.

Although the Alps and mountaineering played an important role in Italian history between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Pastore, 2003), mountains have struggled to penetrate the great authors of Italian literature's

imagination. Of course there have been interesting episodes: “*Piemonte*”, “*L’Elegia del Monte Spluga*” or “*Le Esequie della guida E.R.*” by Giosuè Carducci¹ for example, or “*La Picozza*”, by Giovanni Pascoli². There are also a few items by other authors such as Edmondo De Amicis, Giuseppe Giacosa, Achille Giovanni Cagna and Clemente Rebora. The mountain can be found also Giuseppe Ungaretti’s works on the Great War and in the impassioned pages of Antonia Pozzi, Dino Buzzati, Nuto Revelli and Mario Rigoni Stern; and, of course, we cannot dismiss the idealized visions of Dino Campana, Guido Morselli and Andrea Zanzotto.

In short, there are many examples, so we cannot say that the mountain has been absent from Italian literature (Alessandri, 2018), but no great author has been able to link his name with the mountain (Brevini, 2013). Nor has any led a real literary current inspired by the mountains, capable of renewing literary imagination, promoting understanding and divulging the multiple connotations assumed by the Alps and the Apennines in the history of the unification of Italy by demonstrating their complex social, cultural, political, economic and territorial role in the dynamics of the Italian peninsula.

4. The mountains amid reality and representation

Over the last few decades, there has been a wide range of scientific research dedicated to understanding the processes of transformation that mountains have undergone since the Second World War. Initially, the aim was to record the inexorable decline of the “last” inhabitants of the high lands (Bini, 1972); of an ancient civilization that over the centuries had moulded the ter-

ritory and changed the landscape. The focus was, therefore, on the traditional identity of a world that was coming to an end and that had to be understood in its complexity (Salsa, 2009). This type of study gradually enabled us to understand the significance of the transformations that were unfolding, and perceive the Alps as a resource and not as a problem (De Vecchis, 1996; Scaramellini, 1998). The mountain regions thus assumed their own importance and emerged as a specific field of study in which we see not only the negative dynamics of loss and destruction of tradition under the blows of modernisation, but also the ever-changing dynamic situations in the heart of Europe (Batzing, 2005; Morandini and Reolon, 2010; Debarbieux and Rudaz, 2010; Bartaletti, 2011). As a consequence new areas of interest have grown around the history of the Alps (Camanni, 2002; 2017) and around the physical and architectural transformation of the high ground as a result of the processes of modernization (De Rossi, 2016). The outlook from which we observe the Italian mountains has changed. We no longer view them as a peripheral area, nor as an unspoiled natural paradise: the outlook is much more aware of the real dynamics (De Vecchis, 2004) and of the narratives produced by the Alpine territories (De Vecchis, 2014). For example, studies are being conducted on the new inhabitants of the Alps, in other words people born and raised in the urban centres of the lowlands who have returned to the mountain (Dematteis, 2011, 2017; Corrado et al., 2014).

All this has also led to a revision of the cultural connotations attributed to the mountain. An important geo-philosophical exploration began (Bonesio, 1997), in which the themes and languages characteristic of the mountain, as experienced by those who frequent it as insiders or outsiders, have penetrated into common thought, generating a very peculiar style and approach. The result is a true philosophy of the mountain that hovers between physics and meta-physics. This has transcended the mysticism that characterised the traditional spiritualist approach to the mountain (Vallega, 2006), in order to embrace holistic deliberations that stem from nature but tend towards humanity and mutual understanding (Tomatis, 2008). This school of thought comes from experience, but also from an exis-

¹ “Via tra lo sdrucio de la nuvolaglia / Erto, aguzzo, feroce si protende / E, mentre il ciel di sua minaccia taglia, // Il Dente del gigante al sol risplende”. “Through a wide rent of which stands forth confessed/In cruel majesty, precipitous, Cleaving the azure air with thret’ning crest// The Giant’s Tooth, sun smitten, Glorious”.

² “Salgo; e non salgo, no, per discendere, / per udir crosci di mani, simili / a ghiaia che frangano, / io, io, che sentii la valanga”. “I climb; and, no, I don’t climb to descend, / to hear the sound of hands, like gravel breaking, / I, I, who have heard the avalanche”.

tential type of reflection that tends to return to concrete experience, that is, to a living mountain, inhabited by subjective individuals who characterise not only the significance of mountain communities, but also the mountain in general. It is a new way of the mountain, unique and varied, which arises from the practice of hiking and mountaineering and views the heights of the mountain world not only with subjective passion and admiration, but also with scientific rigour (Tomatis, 2019). The result is a complex way of thinking, endowed with its own language, which cannot be fully experienced without being completely immersed in a culture reserved for a small but expanding community of frequent mountain visitors. Once the prerogative of a small elite, this culture has become a present-day phenomenon, encouraged by climbing gyms, mountain walks, cable cars installed high in the mountains and specialist tour operators. It is necessary to experience this culture to it in order to understand the current significance of how mountains are portrayed. Indeed, literature offers us an interesting way to explore this, since, in recent years many themes and images have converged there. The tales no longer only concern idyllic native landscapes, on the contrary, they are enriched by alpine and non-alpine settings of various kinds (Pesci, 2004), creating realistic depictions of the mountain world and its visitors' approach to it.

5. A new literary interest in the upland areas

We have seen how, historically, in Italian literature, important themes linked to the transformation processes of the mountains and, in general, alpine imagery have struggled to establish themselves. Despite this difficulty, in recent years we have seen a gradual change of direction, especially if we look away from the classic literature normally used in teaching, to other kinds of works. From the modern literature perspective (Spinazzola, 2005), the works of the great authors (or those who are recognised as such) and those that are currently published and read by the general public both deserve equal attention. In this case, the reference is to mountaineering literature which has emerged, in recent years, as a popular literary genre with its

own niche of devoted readers. The proliferation of specialist publishers and collections³ is a sign of a particular interest in mountain-related issues. This is not the forum in which to explore the characteristics of this literary and publishing universe. It is sufficient to refer to the importance of a literary genre based on the idea of mountain climbing reports. These offer reflections and analyses related to the evolution of mountaineering practices and develop a narrative that, without exhausting the sense of contemporary exploratory mountaineering (Della Bordella, 2018), outlines its main features and stimulates reflection on the significance of the mountain experience. The catalogue of the main authors of this genre (for example Walter Bonatti, Reinhold Messner, Nives Meroni, Simone Moro, etc.) would require a separate treatise. We will therefore limit ourselves to listing the main themes that we find in the most recent works of this kind: the quest for new challenges, exposure to risk, the search for adventure, the affirmation of personal qualities, confrontation with nature, the pursuit of personal limits, introspective reflection, the relationship between climbing partners, the futility of conquest, the search for an alternative to the modern way of life, sporting competitiveness, physical and psychological preparation, etc.

In recent years, the traditional literary scene has also been enriched with works that are more or less related to the theme of the mountains, many of them linked to a new aesthetic awareness, a new geographic expertise and to the renewed interest in mountaineering we have described so far.

Some authors have begun to redefine the role of the mountains in Italian literature, perhaps marking a turning point and bridging the gap

³ After the closure of historical publishers such as Dall'Oglio, Vivalda and the Centro di Documentazione Alpina (Alpine Documentation Centre) and the discontinuation of the series dedicated to the mountains by Zanichelli, generalist publishers like Rizzoli, Baldini e Castoldi, Laterza, Hoepli, Ponte Alle Grazie, Salani, Einaudi, Mondadori in recent years, have shown a growing interest in the mountain. In addition to this, specialized publishers have emerged occupying specific areas of the market, for example Corbaccio, Priuli e Verlucca, Alpine Studio, Idea Montagna and Versante Sud.

which we described above. It is too early to say if these writings will be combined into a coherent whole, within which we may read the consolidation of a portrayal of the mountain in the Italian literary imagination. We can, however, identify some interesting processes that perhaps will lead in that direction. One such initiator might be identified in Mauro Corona who, since his debut in 1997 with “*Il volo della martora*”, has been able to redefine the aesthetic standards of Alpine imaginary in Italian literature. By alternating plausible stories of the lives of men and animals in the woods and Alpine valleys with fantastical stories inspired by the legends of the mountains, he has been able to capture the public’s interest in a way that had been unimaginable till then, but has since become increasingly pervasive⁴.

Even before Mauro Corona, some authors, who were well integrated in the mountain world, could produce interesting literary works, but their writings had not been able to reach beyond a restricted circle of readers. Rolly Marchi, Enrico Camanni, Alberto Paleari, to name but a few, are authors well known to fans of the genre. Not surprisingly many of their books are published in collections like that of the Lichens⁵, in which some of the most significant mountaineering literature has appeared. None of these authors, however, has managed to appeal to the general public in the same way as Mauro Corona⁶. In his wake, it was as if the world of Italian publishing suddenly realised the opportunities that the

theme of the mountain could offer from the point of view of a potential audience. Publishers started to promote more and more texts that placed the mountain at the centre of the narrative, instead of just as a background or a setting in which the stories unfolded. In this way the mountain became a central element of the story, around which specific views and manifestations of the Alpine imagination rotated.

In recent years many important Italian publishers have begun to propose books centred on the mountains: Feltrinelli with Erri de Luca; Bompiani with Claudio Morandini; Guanda with Matteo Righetto; Einaudi with Paolo Cognetti, Sandro Campani and Marco Balzano.

We must recognise Einaudi’s important role in this process, especially with “*Le otto montagne*” (2016) by Paolo Cognetti, who won the Premio Strega in 2017, thereby ultimately confirming the entry of the mountain as a central theme in contemporary Italian literature. This fact is important not only in itself, but above all in relation to its themes, that are fully consistent with the afore-mentioned science and philosophy of the mountains. We are now witnessing to a new and emerging cultural climate that is finding a common shared interest among Italian readers. This means that a different cultural geography of the mountain is possible, aimed at interpreting the real mountain through the literary word (Luchetta, 2019).

The die is thus cast and after many decades of immobility and low innovation in the models of representation, something is stirring and the genre is being enriched with new contributions inspired by real practices and by different interpretative models of human processes. Many stereotypes are thus being reinterpreted and partly superseded in favour of alternative portrayals of the Alpine world and its inhabitants.

6. Telling a Mountain story. The mountain in children’s literature

Everything we have reported so far can also be found in children’s literature, testifying to the birth of a new cultural landscape connected with the mountain’s assertion in Italian literature.

⁴ Mauro Corona’s first books were published by small publishers such as Vivalda and Biblioteca dell’immagine, but then Mondadori, transformed this whimsical and eclectic author, artist and first class mountaineer of his generation (a refugee from Vajont with a difficult past as an alcoholic), into a cultural publishing phenomenon, as can be seen from his assiduous presence in on TV entertainment and opinion programmes.

⁵ The collection has a long history. It was founded by Vivalda in 1992. Following the merger with the Centro di Documentazione Alpina (Alpine Documentation Centre), the Lichens were then published as “CDA and Vivalda”. Today the series has been passed on to Priuli and Verlucca and, after a few quiet years, has recently regained momentum, with regular publications.

⁶ “*Il volo della martora*” was published by Vivalda in 1997 in the Lichens collection.

6.1 At the origins of an Alpine fictional world in children's literature: Heidi e Uorsin

Before we proceed with the presentation of the geo-literary analysis that is the subject of this study, let's try to trace a general overview of the role of the mountain in children's fiction.

The roots of this literary vein can probably be traced back to the 19th century and to the enduring success of the Heidi stories, first published in instalments and then merged into two novels: "*Heidi's Leh - und Wanderjahre*" (1880) and "*Heidi kann brauchen, was es gelernt hat*" (1881)⁷, nowadays often published together. The many reprints and re-editions of the text (as well as the films and the famous Japanese animated series), are evidence of the success of a story and a character which together have succeeded in building an Alpine image that was instrumental in the creation of the mountain as a tourist destination.

Set mainly in the Swiss Alps, the novel alternates between moments of rural life on mountain pastures and periods of life in the city, highlighting the benefits of alpine rural life, as opposed to the urban lifestyle of the fledgling industrial society in Frankfurt. The Heidi stories, gather together a series of idyllic Alpine stereotypes that are presented to young readers with such a strong and eloquent power that they have influenced the imagination of many generations for more than a century. The mountain is represented as an ideal place, where there is no toil or suffering, almost a magical place, able to heal the body and spirit of those who live there and are able to grasp its universal value. It is an idealised mountain, to which high moral values are attributed as a contrast to the deterioration of social relations that are formed in the city. Heidi's success has been extraordinary and still today continues to shape the perception of the mountain on the basis of clichés and stereotypes expressed by the pen of Johanna Spiry, who went on to inspire subsequent generations of children's writers. An example of this is another Swiss-born child character Uorsin (or Ursli), invented by the author Selina Chönz in the 1940s

⁷ The Heidi books were published for the first time in Italy by Salani in the '30s, in the series "I libri per ragazzi" with the titles "*Heidi, storia di una bambina svizzera*" and "*Heidi a casa sua*".

and 1950s, whose stories were first told in Romansh and then translated all over the world: "*Uorsin*" (1945), "*Flurina*" (1952), "*La naivera*" (1957)⁸. As recently as 2015, a film version of Uorsin's stories was released, confirming the persistence of the idealised depiction of the mountain launched by Spiry (Roveda, 2018). The simplification produced by these texts is troubling because it affects the ability of a wide audience of young readers to understand the true nature of the Alps. Consequently, the misconception created during childhood and adolescence continues into adulthood, when as active citizens they are potentially able to decide the fate of a region that, in spite of itself, remains on the outskirts in the European context.

6.2 New children's literature dedicated to the mountains: ideas for an anthology of children's mountain novels

As shown in Table 1, in recent years there has been a real explosion in children's literature on the mountains. It's not just a question of quantity. Many editors are now publishing books on the subject and some established authors are also turning to children's fiction and their quality is high, as many of these writings are introducing new and alternative themes to those long promoted by Heidi and her heirs. It is probably impossible to reconstruct in a comprehensive way the many offshoots of this literary output. However, we can try to organise the material for an ideal construction of an anthology of texts, aimed at helping young readers deal with the main issues concerning the many possible representations of the mountain and its complexity as a geographical element, endowed with fundamental meanings, both from the physical and human points of view. Obviously the limits of a scientific article do not allow an extensive reproduction of large portions of the texts analysed, so we will limit ourselves to examining them, highlighting some central topics that are particularly interesting from a geographical point of view, and citing some of the most noteworthy passages.

⁸ In Italian: "*Una campana per Ursli*" (Il gioco di leggere, 2008); "*Flurina e l'uccellino. La sorellina di Ursli*" (Edizioni Silva, 1987); "*La grande nevicata*" (Edizioni Silva, 1985)

A first interesting element concerns the introduction into children's novels of themes derived from scientific reflections on the current transformations of the mountains and therefore on the meaning of country life in the high lands of the present day. In many of the novels, there is a special focus on the relationship between tradition and innovation in the Alpine region. It is easy to understand how far these works detach themselves from the traditional stereotype, finally proposing a realistic mountain in its human and natural dimensions, without taking anything from the story, the imagination or even the enchantment that are essential to engaging children's attention and emotional involvement (Campagnaro, 2014). From this point of view, the work of Morandini (2018) is particularly interesting. In the first pages of the novel, a crucial passage symbolises a turning point in the portrayal of the mountain in children's literature. – Table 2, Quote 1 –

The author's evident willingness to free himself of the burden of previous literary works is summarised in a few pages, with skilful sarcasm, from the critical point of view of the young leading character of the novel. He narrates the book's main theme, namely the description of the physical and psychological degradation which characterises the way of life and relationships of many inhabitants of the Alps, and results from the remoteness in which they live⁹. The novel's realism allows the reader to immerse himself in the human dynamics of a mountain village, almost as if he were experiencing it directly. Yet the harshness of life and psychological and social degradation are not the only issues it contains. In fact, the mountain is not described as a hostile world and the young hero does not disavow it. On the contrary, although he feels that he is different from the others, he remains a mountain dweller with no intention of refraining from being one. Through this expedient the author rejects a further stereotype: confronting the reader with the complexity of Alpine anthropology and encouraging him to go beyond appearances (the masks, not by acci-

⁹ This is a theme that is also key in other novels by Claudio Morandini and characterises his literary work. For example, his treatment of this theme is particularly effective in the book "*Gli oscillanti*", published by Bompiani (2019).

dent). In fact, the author captures the multiple articulations of a culture with a long history behind it, that continues its transformation, interacting with the verticality of the slopes and with the influences that come from the valleys. The young protagonist wants to find a way to be accepted by the community, so he undertakes a path of rediscovery of the ancestral values that the local community has lost and of which he becomes the unwitting bearer. Ultimately, he is the source of a renewal based on the rediscovery of a system of values and rooted in a profound knowledge of nature and its respect, that is derived from centuries-old practices of peaceful and productive interaction, but is also re-worked and reintroduced into the present-day. The novel is not about the Alpine idyll, but the territorial competence of the mountain inhabitant, who is part of the landscape to the point of being able to disappear from the view of those who are foreign to his world. – Table 2, Quote 2 –

Under the guidance of old Bonifacio, the young protagonist learns what it meant to be a mountain dweller of the past, before modernisation climbed the mountain and inexorably changed its culture, society and history. What is in fact regarded as the tradition of the local carnival, around which the whole novel revolves, is actually a recent invention, with little in common with the current manifestation, although described and praised by scholars from the city as if it were the last sign of an archaic society on the verge of extinction. – Table 2, Quote 3 –

Morandini's mountain is therefore a place where normal human relations occur. Society and territories evolve and habits, customs and traditions change over time; only the external and urban gaze tends to describe it as fixed in time and based on archetypal values.

At the end of the book the reader emerges from a sort of journey in a parallel reality, but at the same time he has the feeling that this world is not so distant: the mountain becomes a possible other place, not a distant reality and relegated to a world of its own and separate from their own daily experience. Even the appeal for the need to recover nature-related skills is not presented in a bygone or backward-looking way. On the contrary, the author emphasises its importance and points out that in the mountains,

above all, it is still possible to discover new ways of relating to nature, not in order to return to the past, but to progress towards a future in which to build a new awareness of the part that humans play in natural forces.

Another author, Giuseppe Festa, also examines the theme of awareness of natural values and the need for communities to find new ways of interacting with nature and he expresses its beauty in all his works, not just through accurate descriptions which have a strong emotional impact. – Table 2, Quote 4 –

Festa's novels have the fundamental ability to generate an empathetic relationship between the reader and the places where the novels are set. In "*Il Passaggio dell'Orso*", from which the previous quotation is taken, the central theme is the responsibility of humans who protect nature and provide the necessary conditions for the existence of other living beings. The subject recurs throughout the novel, through the actions of a group of young people who volunteer for a period of work in the National Park of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise and the forest rangers who act as their guides. The guards also protect the park from the actions of poachers and those who would like to sabotage the integrity of forest ecosystems, particularly endangering the lives of the bears, one of the most valuable ecological assets of the territory. In some of the passages these themes emerge explicitly, allowing us to grasp succinctly the purpose of the story and the message relating to the portrayal of the mountain contained in the novel. – Table 2, Quote 5 –

The theme of the mountain as a place where nature expresses itself at its highest level commonly occurs in almost all the novels related to the mountain and those intended for children are no exception. In these cases, however, this combination is often used in a figurative way, creating a sort of educational novel. In these, the mountain can be the main character or may merely stay in the background, providing an excuse for the novel. In any case, the writings do not fail to articulate compelling interpretations of this geographical entity, introducing very interesting subjects for our consideration.

This is the case, for example, of Laura Bonalumi's "*Voce di Lupo*". In many ways it is a classic young adult novel, designed to help the

reader identify with the main character. Here, however, the author introduces some of the elements that characterise her passion for the mountains, whilst assigning to the protagonist traits both of normality and those specific to mountain lovers who regularly visit to hike or climb, so encouraging the young reader to develop a special inquisitiveness for mountains and nature. – Table 2, Quote 6 –

The novel is about a boy's solitary escape into the woods. This flight lasts for several days, as the boy tries to overcome the trauma of the loss of a friend with whom he used to go into the mountains. During this episode, the boy meets a wolf, who represents the spirit of his dead friend and who guides him and helps him in his search. This is obviously not a real wolf but a sort of spiritual guide to the forest. Thanks to this, the reader is fully immersed in a form of nature, explicitly inspired by American transcendentalism¹⁰. – Table 2, Quote 7 –

In other cases, the educational novel uses the mountain as a way to reflect on the relationship between father and son and on the difficulties imposed by the confrontation with the harshness of a vertical world. These help to overcome the existential difficulties typical of adolescence and help with the transition to adulthood. In Antonio Ferrari's "*Il ragazzo e la tempesta*", the mountain remains mainly in the background. – Table 2, Quote 8 –

The real focus of the novel, is on the father-son relationship. The mountain is in fact represented in a vague way, almost as a symbol of paternity, a sort of summary of many values attributable to fatherhood. Like a parent it knows how to be harsh, sometimes fierce and unrelenting, but is always just, even when delivering an implacable judgement such as death. In this way, it leads the young man on a path to self-discovery that results in the awareness of his own limits and potential. Like a father, the mountain helps the young man on his journey towards adulthood. – Table 2, Quote 9 –

¹⁰ The text includes quotations from Henry David Thoreau.

The theme is similar to the one in Guido Sgardoli's "*Oltre il sentiero*"¹¹, which deserves further consideration as it differs in how it is narrated and how it presents features related to the depiction of the mountain. The novel is set firmly in the world of hiking and includes a series of episodes which highlights how the father-son relationship develops around this activity, favouring their intergenerational encounters and interactions through shared moments suspended in time and space. – Table 2, Quote 10 –

It is interesting to note how the novel introduces the theme of the self-identification of the individuals who frequent the mountain. A fascinating aspect of mountain portrayal is that it characterises an attitude typical of many lowland inhabitants who, more and more, identify with - and belong to - a more or less narrow circle of mountain "experts", who know its secrets and understand its complex system of cultural and natural values. – Table 2, Quote 11 –

In this book also, the young hero, through the mountain, has to overcome his own limits so that by the end of his adventure, he feels stronger and better prepared to face reality with detachment and lucidity. Because of this he has become more of an adult. – Table 2, Quote 12 –

The mountain thus represents a form of identification of a community who in it discover the opportunity to manifest their physical and moral strengths which are normally stifled by the limiting systems and conventions of urbanized society. All this becomes even more evident in the last novel that we intend to describe, namely "*In fondo al crepaccio. Cronaca di un soccorso impossibile*", by Katja Centomo. This novel bears witness to the introduction of mountaineering into children's literature, providing a sound overview of a complex system of values that until recently were the prerogative only of a small circle of lovers of mountaineering literature. It is interesting to see how many climbing stereotypes are dismantled with extreme ease through the accounts of the different characters in the novel, all experienced high-altitude visitors.

The reader is led to immerse himself in places to which, presumably, he would never have

given a thought, but through the story, they become real, possible and potentially fascinating. "The Teodulo had bewitched me" (Centomo, 2018, p. 14), says the hero in the initial pages, introducing a name which he uses to develop an interesting presentation of the Matterhorn group, on the border between Switzerland and Italy. – Table 2, Quote 13 –

Mountaineering enthusiasts have detailed knowledge of Alpine orography and toponymy and by bringing these into children's novels, readers gain an understanding that encourages them to become emotionally involved.

There is also a skilful description of the ideal mountaineer, that to some extent, in a more or less conscious way, inspires most of those who frequent the mountain. – Table 2, Quote 14 –

These aspects are seemingly of secondary importance, but in effect they are not, as it is through these that the novel builds a representation of the mountain that is shared by many of its visitors. These visitors, at various levels, embark on mountaineering in search of a conquest of something that, from a general point of view, is perhaps useless (Terray, 2003), but which is also essential for the life of those who learn to relate to the high mountains. In the last pages all this becomes evident through the words of the Alpine climber, subject of the "impossible rescue" to which the title refers. – Table 2, Quote 15 –

People who visit the mountains are confronted with risks and even death. Forcing people to confront their own limits results in an element of risk that cannot be overlooked, and undoubtedly helps define the representation of the mountain that can be found not only in children's books. Centomo's novel, however, does not give in to the temptation to succumb to a rhetoric about risk that is often cloying and not true to the feelings of those who choose to confront it. Despite the experiences on the brink of survival narrated in the novel, the mountain never ceases to exert an irresistible attraction on those who know it and have learned to frequent it. This is not about being unaware or reckless, but is one of the clearest expressions of the significance of the portrayal of the mountain, which in turn produces self awareness and awareness of others. The mountain becomes part of her and she becomes

¹¹ The text is enriched with illustrations by Alessandro Sanna.

part of the mountain, an unbreakable bond. – Table 2, Quote 16 –

7. Conclusions

The texts mentioned, like most of those in Table 1, describe some of the characteristics of the emerging literary language that is dedicated to the mountains and allow us to understand how it is converging in children's literature. From Morandini's mountain dwellers to Centomo's mountaineers, the leap seems enormous, but in reality these two extremes largely summarise the significance of the literary depiction of the mountain in children's novels. We have already said how direct experience is creating a philosophy of the mountain. Discovering how this process is affecting children's literature is important at a time when we are discussing the formation of a new cultural climate that allows us to understand the real mountain based on its literary representation.

At this point, however, if we want to understand the circular relationship between reality and representation, we must introduce a final consideration. It is indeed difficult to say whether the real mountain is the one actually described in these novels, but perhaps that matter is not particularly important.

Mountains have long been considered peripheral regions so their growing importance in Italian literature, in many ways, bears testimony to a turning point. This is actually a more generalized process of change, which finds in literature a specific expression, attesting its wide and articulated cultural dimension. The ways of living are rapidly changing, attributing to mountains new meanings that testify the progress of a new "mountain paradigm" based on the work of people who practice diversification and adaptability instead of standardization, who rediscover multi-activity and multi-functionality, preferring them to monofunctional specialization, who prefer distribution and horizontal cooperation between small villages to intensification and the rush to productive gigantism (Varotto, 2017).

In this new cultural climate, we appear to see a transition towards a fresh concept of the mountain environment, which has gained a new importance by virtue of its ability to express a

growing need to move away from urban and global lifestyles. The search for experiences that are in touch with nature and the countryside, both by occasional visitors and by mountain dwellers, is therefore increasingly evident. As in other regions and at other times, literature plays a role in this process as a tool for research and for the definition of "being" (Campra, 2000). In this case, the mountain is a physical and meta-physical entity, a real place of action and an ideal setting for the imagination. It is as if, through literary works, the mountain is being brought back into the limelight and is winning over a new audience of enthusiasts by reinventing itself and creating new meanings for its anthropological and physical characteristics. These have been reinvented and presented in such a way as to become a powerful means of expression for its readers. The novels can be set in real or invented places that are nevertheless realistic. The mountain is always a real presence and even if the authors introduce elements of fantasy in the narrative, the story never loses its connection with the alpine world. Yet, however realistic they may be, the novels convey a poetic vision of the world expressed through a form of imagination that is receptive to possible encounters with magic. The latter is not placed in a fantasy world; on the contrary, it is an integral part of the mountain and of the life of its inhabitants. Based on these considerations, we may ultimately suggest using the specific definition of the concept of magical realism¹² to describe the main theme of Italian children's novels dedicated to the mountains. From this perspective, a

¹² The concept originally derives from German post-expressionist art, but has been re-elaborated in a completely new way in the literary field, especially in Latin America. Although there is also a specific interpretation of the concept in Italian literature (see, for example, the work of Massimo Bontempelli), it is above all in Hispanic-American literature that the concept took on a central role in the second half of the 20th century. Over time, the concept has taken on a variety of different meanings and, although it is now customary to recognise Gabriel Garcia Marquez as the author of reference, we would like to propose the particular elaboration proposed, for example, by Miguel Angel Asturias or Alejo Carpentier with reference to which we usually speak of "*real maravilloso*", attempting to put on the same level of reality what is tangible and what is a dream (Barroso, 1977).

possible development of the research presented here might be launched.

For the time being, we can confine ourselves to stating that, from an educational point of view, magic and reality allow geography to embark on an interesting journey, based on emotional spatial competence, which is now considered to be the central theme of contemporary geography (Puttilli and Santangelo, 2018). Fundamentally, this is essential in helping children understand the sense of the local dimension (as well as the multi-scale nature of the processes), otherwise we risk placing the object of our teaching in an abstract and meaningless space. Spatial competence depends directly on localisation skills (Zanolin, 2019), i.e. the ability to ask oneself where a specific phenomenon occurs and what relation a specific place has with its context. From this point of view, it may be useful to integrate geo-literary work with the use of geotechnologies. These tools enable us to experience indirectly the geographical reality and therefore the passage through cognitive, operative and metacognitive learning phases (Pesaresi, 2016), which favour the appropriation of spatial values otherwise difficult to access, such as mountain values.

Effective geography teaching should therefore work first and foremost on the emotional dimension, looking for tools that can stimulate the development of localisation skills. Mountain literature offers a wealth of opportunities, encouraging students to get in touch with places and appreciate their value by being actively involved with them. It is possible to understand, from this study, how children's literature may provide these important tools. By analysing novels like the ones described above, it is possible to discover that the apparent simplicity of children's books is only half of the story; the other half lies in its implicit meanders. Through children's literature it is therefore possible to create more complex teaching approach. The task of the teacher would be to guide students in the right direction: the rest would be done by the text. It is important to stimulate in students a taste for the search for "narrative truth" and for the questions that arise from the challenges of interpretation. The aim is not to teach them to distinguish good from evil or truth from falsehood, but to teach them the desire to know, un-

derstand and accept human nature and the ambivalence of human relationships and existence (Campagnaro, 2014).

With reference to mountains, a didactics based on these principles can be functional to promote the development of a greater awareness of the values potentially expressed by the high lands. In this way, it is possible to debunk many stereotypes and offer the new generations the opportunity to reach a careful and inclusive gaze at these regions. The political and material marginality towards which they have been confined derives in fact from a cultural marginality that has represented them as residual spaces. The discovery, through literature, of the dynamism of the territories, offers the opportunity to be aware of the paths of experimentation, innovation and hybridization of which mountain inhabitants are protagonists and that in the future will hopefully generate a new centrality, in a socio-territorial contest that is increasingly a far cry from the legacy of the twentieth century (Morandini and Reolon, 2010; Varotto, 2017).

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Table 1. List of mountain children's book examined in the study.

1	<p>Master Bernardoni was also annoyed because when he read aloud the sugary pages of his favourite books, with titles such as <i>Il piccolo guardiacaccia</i>, <i>Il piccolo pastore</i>, <i>Vita negli alpeggi</i>, I used to get bored. I know that life here in the mountains is not how the writers in the cities describe it. They come up here on holiday, watch where they put their feet and always clean their spoons before eating. For sure, they've never stuck their arms into a cow's bottom, for example, and they can't even guess that it's often done to make sure everything's okay in there.</p> <p>Master Bernardoni was a villager from Pocacosa like us, but he adored those stories full of mountain heroism that he used to recite to us. They were stories full of misfortunes, illnesses, bereavements, but everything was accepted willingly, because a beautiful sunset or a flowery meadow were enough to feel that it was God putting men to the test. [...] Also I couldn't stand the idea of the goodness of mountain people. [...] in Pocacosa wickedness is swallowed with our wine, and boils over even in church, while the priest recites his homily and all pretend to listen and instead of murmuring their prayers they hurl horrible threats at their rivals. [...]</p> <p>So far it was not a bad thing: but then, at the end of his reading, the teacher, a little moved, would ask what we thought of what we had just heard, I couldn't resist, I would raise my hand and speak. I would say that the stories were unrealistic, with unbelievable characters, and that life is much more complicated and strange than that described in those pages. I would add that the mountain does not improve people, on the contrary it tends to crush them until it squeezes out of each one a kind of juice of nastiness (Morandini, 2018, pp. 18-19-20).</p>
2	<p>We move horizontally towards the point where we would have come across the two climbers. Now I too see them well, climbing from below, one in front of the other, regular and precise. Their high-tech clothes are brightly coloured, red, yellow and electric blue. [...] In comparison, the two of us, stuffed in our animal skins and blankets, look like two cavemen, two beasts, and I'm a little embarrassed at the thought that we're going to meet dressed like this. [...] We're only a few meters away from them. The two men climb with regular steps, their eyes fixed on the ground, only occasionally lifting their gaze towards the summit they will reach. We're standing right on the path. They haven't noticed us yet: the grey hides and the ash-coloured blankets make us invisible (Morandini, 2018, p. 88)</p>
3	<p>They don't admit that Pocacosa's monsters are a recent addition. For them they are, they must be, the legacy of an archaic phase of mountain civilization, and that's it. We simply must have forgotten about them (Morandini, 2018, p. 91).</p>
4	<p>In front of them, the enchantment of springtime. A carpet of auburn leaves, smooth silver columns and a ceiling of freshly blossomed shoots, caressed by the warm breath of late May. And then flowering clearings dotted the forest, crowned by swarms of dancing insects, and all over the foliage made golden by the sun, combed by the wind. In the distance, the gentle murmur of the Scerto brook, which flowed crystal clear from the Camosciara to plunge into the river Sangro and flow into Lake Barrea. (Festa, 2013, p. 12)</p>
5	<p>"Dear Sandro, I am more and more convinced that the real culprit is not a man, but a way of thinking, of seeing things, of believing that the wilderness as a property, a danger, an obstacle to our thirst for wealth. Many are unwitting killers of bears: scientists who desecrate their lairs or who would like to monitor their every step, tourists who invade their kingdom just for a photo, shepherds who report fake attacks on their livestock casting the blame on bears even when they have nothing to do with it. And maybe I too, Sandro. In the past I worked hard to trace new paths, so that even the most remote areas of the Park were within everyone's reach. But have I done well?" He sighed (Festa, 2013, p. 201).</p>
6	<p>I'm only thirteen (and a half) years old and taking them there is not a piece of cake: there are those who want you grown up and those who remind you that, after all, you are still a child. There are those who tell you that you have to be responsible and those who want a follow-up phone call every five minutes. Thirteen years old: too many for your demands, too few for my thoughts on the future [...] Giacomo's gone and I miss him a lot. Many people asked us if perhaps we were brothers: we were always together.</p> <p><i>Always.</i></p> <p>We liked going into the woods, walking in the mountains. He said he would have climbed to the tops of the "seven peaks", the highest mountains of every continent. Chiara had pointed out to him that, in order to travel around the world, he would had to, at least, learn to speak English. "The mountains speak the language of the man who respects them" he had confidently replied. I'm sure he'll "touch" all of his seven peaks. There, where he is now, he will not struggle and will not need to learn any other language (Bonalmi, 2017, p. 19).</p>
7	<p>I'm learning to recognise every little noise. The woods talk to me, they never sleep. Of course, the noises are not as loud and metallic as those of the city, here they are completely different sounds! They seem like a soundtrack with a continuous, rhythmic beat.</p> <p>I like to think that, above all, the trees, with their precious breath, are conducting all this. If I raise my head towards the sky, their branches accompany me all the way to the top, where the blue of the day or the black of the night find a place. Trees rule the world and their existence has power over our future (Bonalmi, 2013, p. 111).</p>

Table 2. List of quotations from children's novels cited in the paper. Translation by the author. For the references see Table 1.

8	The next morning, on my way to school, I looked at the mountain. The air was fresh, the sky was a little bluer than usual, and you could touch the mountain with your hand. Instead I had never been up there and it scared me a little. Sometimes it seemed alive. Sometimes it seemed to call me. Come, come, it would say. You've never been here. Come, what can I do to you? I am just a mountain (Ferrari, 2014, p. 82).
9	I felt as if I were someone else, as if I were like my father now, and that one day, I would do the things he did. I had discovered new things. My father had taught me about the mountain. He had come back for a little while, had burnt like a tree and I was the seed that remained (Ferrari, 2014, p. 146).
10	At home, Alberto and his father, Giacomo, were the lovers of mountain excursions. His mother, by far, preferred the sea, [...]. So, the trips to the mountains were a private matter between father and son. A <i>boy's</i> thing that Alberto liked a lot. It made him feel a little older than his eleven years of age and also his father, when they were alone, would talk about some interesting things. – about work, family, about when he was Alberto's age, even about the girls he'd had before he married his mother – things that never came out of his mouth when they were at home. Almost like a conversation between friends" (Sgardoli, 2018, pp. 8-9)
11	He'd been climbing in the gym, but it wasn't the same thing. One day he would have climbed real peaks, perhaps alone, like those great personalities of whom he had read and seen the exploits on TV. He didn't want to do it as a profession, not that, but maybe it would have been his hobby, his great passion. As, after all, it had been for his father when he was younger (Sgardoli, 2018, p. 24).
12	At recess he was approached by the guy from 3D. He was less aggressive than usual, though. When Albi got rid of him by telling him to go and bother someone else, he had read something in the look of the little one's eyes; someone who, until a few days before, had always been submissive. In those eyes he had read determination and courage, and no fear. Sure, a good punch would have knocked him out, but the guy knew it wouldn't have helped to wipe that new determination from his eyes, and that, in fact, turned him into a whole new person (Sgardoli, 2018, p. 94).
13	The story began with a Swiss and French group of people who had decided to reach the Dent d'Hérens, a beautiful "White Tooth" that stands on the Grandes Murailles glacier between Italy and Switzerland and that, with its 4171 meters, seems to want to counter the Matterhorn, which was only three hundred meters higher. I couldn't help but know of the Grand Murailles chain: sharp and vertical, it loomed over Cervinia and from the Teodulo refuge it could be seen extending south towards the Central Valley. The glacier, however, although very close as the crow flies, could not be seen from our side, because it descended from the ridge towards the Valpelline. The Valpelline is not as famous as the Valtournanche, but Giuliano had explained to me that it is just as beautiful because it had remained very wild" (Centomo, 2018, pp. 28-29).
14	Giuliano and Lucio were very alike and very different, like two sides of the same coin. The first was calm, reflective and firm, the second impulsive, instinctive and fast: together they had the genetic code to create the perfect mountain guide. As typical mountain men they did not seem very good at expressing their feelings or talking about themselves, but from their gestures, from the respect they showed for each other, it was clear that there was a strong bond between them. I had managed to understand them a little more, to penetrate through their armour of sunburnt skin, just by observing their connection" (Centomo, 2018, pp. 18-19).
15	– The mountain had given me the strongest emotions, – Brigitte said, dreamily contemplating the profile of the Grandes Murailles that stood out against the night sky. – It had bestowed on me a full life, warmed by the affection of my fellow climbers, by the effort of the ascents and by the euphoria of the descents. It had granted me wonderful years at the top of the world, where I had filled my lungs to the full and lived every moment without regrets. And now the mountain was with me even in my death. It had been generous to me, had shaped my soul and filled my dreams. Now it was letting me leave without pain, lulled by the embrace of a glacier. At that moment I knew that, if she had called me, I would have followed her (Centomo, 2018, p. 110).
16	I stayed for a month in the hospital in Geneva, followed by a long period of rehabilitation, but none of this managed to stop me: at the end of July I was already at the Cabane du Mountet in the Swiss Alps, on a four-hour hike with a few friends, and exactly one hundred and eleven days after I fell into the crevasse I was making an ascent on the Tooth of the Giant, on the Mont Blanc chain (Centomo, 2018, p. 121).

Table 2bis. Follow from previous page.