

INTERVIEW

Anastasia Strokina

AN INTERVIEW WITH GUIDO SGARDOLI

At the request of Children's Reading, Russian writer Anastasia Strokina interviewed Guido Sgardoli, one of the most famous Italian children's writers today. In Italy the name of Sgardoli needs no introduction: his books have been translated into many languages, are loved by readers and have been awarded various prizes for achievements in children's literature. Sgardoli is also known for his social activities — he is a member of the *Writers with Children* movement, which fights for the rights of refugee and migrant children

In 2009, the jury of the prestigious Andersen Prize awarded to him the title of best writer with the following motivation: "For being, among the authors who have emerged in recent years, undoubtedly the most interesting and new voice. For a narrative production capable of tackling different themes, narrative forms and audiences, but always with high and convincing results. For having given us a novel of absolute value and skillful construction such as *Eligio S. — I giorni della Ruota*" (*Eligio and the Days of the Wheel*).

In Sgardoli's novels we see a great variety of themes and narrators' voices. His stories shift easily between the most disparate genres and age groups. Thrillers and science fiction with a historical background are the setting for *The Frozen Boy*. A lot of irony is given room in *Morto che parla* (*Dead Man Talking*), a detective story populated by ghosts, while a poetic (but not corny) language tackles the delicate and thorny issue of parental separation in *Due per uno* (*Two for One*), just to name a few of Sgardoli's brilliant books. Being by training and for work a vet, animals are omnipresent in his stories but a lot of space is also given to reality and history, as *Eligio and the Days of the Wheel* demonstrate: the story takes place over a period of about 100 years, around the establishment of

the Hospice of Mercy, a historic building in Venice which, in the XVIII century, gave shelter to orphans and children who were abandoned in the ‘wheel’ or revolving door. The reference to Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* is not out of place both regarding the plot and the style. Sgardoli is not afraid to tackle major issues and difficult times, such the First World War, during which *Il giorno degli eroi* (The day of the heroes) is set: it is the story of a very young and daring soldier who no longer wants to kill, a cry for peace so as not to forget the victims of all wars.

Sgardoli is always looking for the right language and point of view to stay “at child’s height” and give prominence to children’s imaginative ability. In this process, according to the writer, art, and literature in particular, should play a significant role: as Gianni Rodari’s one said, “I would like everyone to read, not to become writers or poets, but so that no one is any longer a slave”. Guido Sgardoli’s books definitely move in that direction.

Anastasia Strokina: In your book “The Island of the Mute” (L’isola del Muto) you quote Anna Akhmatova’s poem “The Door is Half Open” (Дверь полуоткрыта). I should confess, this is one of my favorite paragraphs of the book — with such sadness and thoughts of the soul in it, when the whole family gathers to bury their beloved father and grandfather. I even burst into tears when I was translating this episode into Russian. By the way, in Russia this book has become really popular and I hope it’s gaining the same fame all over the world! My first question is related to this episode. Why have you chosen Akhmatova? What other Russian poets did you read?

Guido Sgardoli: Anna Akhmatova is well known and appreciated in Italy. She was a poet who knew how to mix suffering, love and mysticism with great wisdom. So reading her, I always find myself in her personal torments, which are — simultaneously — the torments of the human soul itself. I also love her because I associate her with another great poetess of pain, Alda Merini. Other Russian poets I know (but not as well as I would like) are definitely Pushkin, Mayakovsky and Lermontov — I even wrote about him in my last novel.

Anastasia Strokina: Thank you for your honest answer. It’s really important to hear that you are involved in cross-cultural communication especially nowadays, you see, when misunderstanding and aggression arise among people in different countries. Do you think that art can change anything in the world? Influence it? In what way?

Guido Sgardoli: I think that art and literature can really change the consciences and thoughts of people, especially those of the young readers to whom we, who write for children and adolescence, address.

Books and fascinating stories help to understand the world around us and even to create democracy and better citizens, as long as you know how to make good use of literature. Books also allow us to find the ways to escape from reality that sometimes angers or oppresses us, as it's happening now. Books can make us change our point of view, put ourselves in the shoes of others, compare other truths with our own, and create our personal opinions. However more than anything, books help us to imagine some — probably — strange ways of changing the world, completely different from the ones we thought would change it.

Anastasia Strokina: On the contrary, the great Anglo-American poet W. H. Auden said that art hadn't changed anything in the world. Sometimes I agree with him. Nevertheless, one thing is certain: art can change something within a particular person. Would you please tell me about the book that influenced you most as a child.

Guido Sgardoli: There is not a single book that influenced me the most when I was a child. There are many of them. From an early age my imagination forced me to invent alternative worlds and characters to escape my reality, which by the way wasn't unbearable or suffocating at all: I had a quiet childhood full of love and respect. I just mean that my childhood reality simply was not enough for me. Books allowed me to travel and make discoveries before life let me actually do so. The adventures of Salgari, London and Verne were my first exciting literary experiences, my first trips away from home. I remember with particular fondness the mysterious island of Verne, where a group of castaways find themselves building a new life out of nothing on a deserted island. Discovering how bread could be made from a grain of wheat or glass from sand for tiny self-made windows — seemed miraculous to me.

Anastasia Strokina: I adored Verne! However nowadays he is not that popular as in your or my childhood. Are you following the modern literary trends in Italy? What is especially popular with young readers right now? Do you notice any trends in the Italian book industry?

Guido Sgardoli: In Italy, as far as I have noticed, there are some literary trends that I do not share. One of them is closely related to the popular TV series. But let us remember that books — literature itself — are not television, they do not speak the same language. If we think of attracting readers with books that mimic television series then we are wrong, because when boys and girls realize (and they definitely do — soon or later) that a book cannot be the same as a TV series, they will be disappointed and we will lose rather than gain our readers. The second trend I would call “mimetic fiction” — I mean books that reflect the world too closely — this everyday world in which the reader

is immersed. These books repeat reality and their narrative has an insignificant weight. Such stories may be true but not interesting. Books should work with our imagination. I suppose, we can hardly imagine anything in the repetition of reality. I am also sure that the task of writers is to propose new challenges to their readers, to raise the bar more and more but not to follow market demands. In today's world there is a dangerous tendency of averageness, of mediocrity, which authors have a duty to combat by offering the young people a range of the best possible suggestions, not the least ones.

Anastasia Strokina: Definitely, we face some new tendencies now. The age of machines is coming soon, the time of total digitalization. I'm convinced that a person will be able to compete with machines only with the help of critical and creative thinking. Do you believe that the book can help to develop this type of thinking in a child? And what are the tools for developing it?

Guido Sgardoli: The development of critical and therefore creative thinking (I would call it imaginative) is achieved through the incitement to be curious. Curiosity is the key to discovery, knowledge, comparison. Without curiosity a man would be still staying in caves. Curiosity gives us tools to decode reality and form personal opinions. Books, cinema, travel, music, art, socializing — all these contribute to developing us as complete individuals.

Anastasia Strokina: Especially if we are to remember that the Latin word "individuum" means something that cannot be divided into parts. So books can help us to come back to our personalities. Good books, naturally. Would you be so kind to name five Italian books that children and teenagers from all over the world should read.

Guido Sgardoli: Well... Here are these five books:

Piccolo blu, piccolo giallo by Leo Lionni; *Favole al telefono* by Gianni Rodari; *Cipì* by Mario Lodi; *L'ultimo elfo* by Silvana De Mari and *Il rinomato catalogo Walker & Dawn* by Davide Morosinotto.

Anastasia Strokina: Great! And I would also add your book *L'Isola del Muto*. This is a profound story about a family where people argue, suffer, love, change their locations, kill, cure, but nevertheless are trying to understand each other — something that we miss so much nowadays.