

“When I grow up, I am going to be happy” A transgressive aim to cultivate humanity*

Alessandra Avanzini

Questo articolo è stato presentato lo scorso novembre ad un congresso internazionale sulla letteratura per l'infanzia: dopo aver tentato di adattarlo alle pagine della rivista, ho preferito non modificarlo per mantenerne l'impatto proprio di una presentazione in presa diretta. Per questo motivo non si vi si trovano note o bibliografia. Si tratta di riflessioni libere su un libro che mi piace presentare senza alcuna pretesa filologica. The book of everything di Guus Kuijer è un libro per bambini o almeno dovrebbe esserlo e per tale è venduto nelle librerie. Così mi sono divertita a fare un gioco: se fossi andata in libreria e l'avessi preso e letto, quali riflessioni mi avrebbe suscitato? L'ho considerato come di solito faccio con tutti i libri che leggo, da un punto di vista pedagogico; e questo è il risultato – un viaggio con Thomas, il protagonista, all'interno della sua mente e della sua vita, che mi ha dato l'opportunità di scoprire qualcosa in più sulla felicità e sul coraggio.

This article was first proposed last November in an International Congress about children's literature and, after initially trying to adapt it to the pages of this review, I eventually decided not to alter it: I wanted it to keep its initial strength that I think comes from the need of being directly conveyed in an oral form to a public. This is the reason why I made up my mind about not to insert notes or bibliography: it does not want to be anything more than a free thought on the book I would like to present, without any philological claim. The book of everything written by Guus Kuijer is a children's book, or at least it should be – anyway as such it is sold and bought in bookshops. So, I just played a game: what if I went to a library, pick this book from a shelf and read it, what would it cause me to think? In this talk I considered it as I usually do when I read books, with a pedagogical view; and this is the result – a journey with Thomas, the main character, inside his mind and his life, a journey that has given me the opportunity to discover something more about happiness and about courage.

Parole chiave: letteratura per l'infanzia, Guus Kuijer, Olanda, trasgressione, felicità, irriverenza

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humans evolve towards humanity.
(G. Papagno, Taprobana)*

1. *Talking about children's literature*

When somebody talks about children's books the most usual reaction is to consider that they are not worth taking our time. *The book of everything* by Guus Kuijer¹ – one of the main Dutch author of children's literature – may lead the reader to take a different view.

Just in the first part, the author makes one of the main characters, Mother, be the one who expresses this almost universal underestimation of children's books – in this way, mingling reality and fiction together. She says, talking about a story her son is reading: "It's only a children's book, what harm could it do?"

But we all know that these stories can get messages across that adult books cannot afford to express – they may be harmful, dangerous, and cause people to think.

And that is just exactly the case of the book I am considering in this talk. In the preface Kuijer explicitly presents something that is not going to set our mind at ease since it is intentionally "disrespectful". He imagines the book having been written by Thomas, that now, as a grown-up, rings at his door asking him to publish the diary he wrote when he was 9, giving him a piece of advice: "I think you should read it first, because it may be too disrespectful".

The story begins with this literary *escamotage* and the author thinks that Thomas' story *is* actually worth a chance.

So he carries on with it, decides to write the story and asks Thomas, the grown-up: "Well Thomas? Did you manage to do it? Did you become happy?" "Yes" he said.

¹ Guus Kuijer (1942) has won many prizes dedicated to children's literature. He began his career in 1975 and his work is connected with the imaginary vision of infancy by Annie Schmidt, probably the greatest Dutch author for this kind of literature. His first book about Madelief (1975) was translated into Italian in 2017, while the first book of the series about the girl 'Polleke' – *Forever together, Amen* – was first published in the Netherlands in 1999 and translated into Italian in 2012. *The book of everything* was first published in the Netherlands in 2004 and translated into Italian in 2009 by Salani. It gave the author a world wide success.

Basically, disrespectfulness has gradually brought not only the story – but life itself – to a happy ending: disrespect has given a chance to happiness. Why?

2. The plot

Before coming to it, I need to shortly present the story itself.

I cannot say there is a proper plot, because actually there is not. It is a sort of extract of this man’s life, Thomas, at the age of nine and of the real terror he would experience day after day in his father’s house. The main characters are Thomas, his slightly older sister Margot, Mother, Father and Mrs. Amersfoort, the weird neighbour. The core of the narration is the fact that Father hits his wife, but also Thomas sometimes, because of his rigid interpretation of the biblical message: he firmly believes that every word of the Bible has to be taken literally – as if it had been written by God himself. So the ones you love have to be physically punished if they risk spoiling their own soul. For this reason Thomas is terrified and, when asked, he expresses his deep desire for his future: to be happy eventually. Mother constantly tries to defend his son from her husband but whenever she tries she ends up being beaten by him.

The story reaches a climax when Margot realizes her little brother is risking to lose his mind. Her first reaction is trying to advice Thomas: “Thomas, she said, you mustn’t always believe your eyes... You must keep your head... Don’t let yourself be driven mad”.

As Margot has just discovered, Thomas is a sort of visionary: he sees things that nobody else can see; for example he talks every day to Jesus and thinks that Jesus really stands there, in front of him. We can say he is building his own sense of religiosity against the fanatic attitude of Father.

From this moment on Margot is ready to react against Father. When she sees Mother trying to defend his little brother she initially seems not to bother but gradually becomes the real protagonist of the scene. “No one had been minding Margot. Suddenly she was there, as if she came falling from the sky. In her right hand the carving knife flashed, and her eyes blazed. She jumped in front of her father and pointed the knife at his throat. Father let go of Thomas and stared at the knife”.

The thought of Thomas also in this occasion is poetic: “She looked like an angel... the most dangerous angel in heaven. One of those with a flaming sword”. And Margot keeps talking to Father: “Hands off. I’ve had enough of this. I’ve had it up to here... God damn it” she said. “The curse was worse than the knife. It cut through the soul”.

“Mama and Thomas have no reason to be afraid of God... because they are kind. You are not kind’ she made a stabbing movement with the knife ‘Don’t think I won’t dare... I am like you. I am not kind either... I don’t care a bloody damn what you believe but there will be no more hitting”.

So Father gets stopped. Now he is afraid of his daughter but most of all he has been forced by her to face his own fears about life and about himself.

The story has a happy ending with all the characters gathering round in a reading evening. Father is isolated but comes back and asks permission to stay with them. No one refuses. The end of the story is so open to a positive perspective, that of giving everybody the opportunity to change their soul. This can be achieved through pity: the human pity that Thomas feels for Father may end up in saving Father’s soul. On one condition, that Father has to do it on his own.

In the final pages of the book Thomas talks with Jesus again: “Jesus?” asked Thomas. ‘Yes, Thomas?’ ‘Can you help Papa?’ ‘I am afraid not’. It was a pity, but Thomas understood that some people are hard to redeem. You couldn’t ask the Lord Jesus for the impossible”.

Up to now, I have not made the role of Mrs Amersfoort explicit, so let me say just a few words about her: she is “the witch” because she is weird, quirky and unconventional. She believes in her ideas and keeps to them.

She will help Thomas to get to know and accept himself by putting up a barrier against the violence of Father. She will show him how to achieve his aim, namely going to be happy, with these words: going to be happy “is a bloody good idea. And do you know how happiness begins? It begins with no longer being afraid”.

We can say she is a key character because she points out exactly what all these people have in common: they are afraid and unable to face their fears. And until they keep on acting in this way, they won’t earn the opportunity to improve their life.

3. *Coming to definitions*

And now I have to come to the definitions of the main terms we will use, transgression and disrespectfulness.

Disrespectfulness, is similar to transgression, I take it almost as a synonym, considering how it is used in the book: being disrespectful means that you lack respect to somebody or something, so you do something that is not welcome inside your world.

Transgressive is “the act or process of breaking a law or a rule”: the meaning is stronger, if we compare it to disrespect. All these things considered, we can say that both terms imply disapproval, the risk of offending other people, of acting in an unkind or at least unacceptable way.

The author proposes a strong connection between the idea of disrespectfulness, but I would also say of transgression, of breaking common, usually accepted rules and behaviour, and the idea of becoming happy. Strange as it may be, this is just the point: wanting to be happy is something disrespectful and it certainly is a transgressive aim because it leads you directly into trying to actually understand yourself and your true deep desires – and this can make you realize what you really want and what you don’t intend to accept anymore.

We can say that what often happens is that society or family or conventional rules decide on your behalf how you should be happy or at least they strongly affect your behaviour and your choices – but this may not actually correspond to what you really are and what you highly aspire to. If you go through a sad childhood you could simply get used to it at the beginning and later on maybe get angry, totally against society, but not transgressive or disrespectful, simply against, trying to break through. This is not the case of our character, Thomas. He is determined to be happy. The way he chooses is that of getting to know himself and the world thoroughly eradicating commonly accepted and formal rules. Thomas’ rebellion is an inner progressive and irreversible change, not a useless outcry. This is both transgressive and disrespectful. Getting to know oneself leads you to be free and to freely relate with the world you live in.

From this perspective, disrespectfulness is the first step towards transgression: Thomas first becomes disrespectful, because he transforms religion in a particular, intimate sense of religiosity. He sees Jesus, talks to him, makes up his ideas in these bizarre dialogues; then

he starts silently disobeying his father; we can say that his first strong act, paradoxical as it may seem, is beginning to think. This action is revolutionary – and transgressive – because it leads him to a total inner change and also because it is conditioning; it does not simply stay inside his mind and his soul, but it immediately begins to expand and to pass outside him. We can see how it is passed on to Margot's explosive but also terrific transgression, in which she explicitly affirms her new rule: she refuses to cope with that reality anymore and wants it to change at once. No one can stop her. There is a sort of silent energy going from Thomas to the other characters that starts in an imaginative world but ends up in concrete, real action, and total change.

4. Facing fears

Let's now analyse this energy I have just referred to: what is it? How can it be so strong to cause such a total mess?

To answer we have to go back to the story.

Thomas is not happy but he cannot find a way out of his sadness because it is really difficult to rebel against something that you experience every day since you tend to get used to it and love it come what may. So he decides to have a dream: "When I grow up, I am going to be happy".

But he is too afraid to fulfill it; the only way out that he can find is escaping from reality. He begins imagining something that does not actually exist, namely a tender image of Jesus appearing to his eyes only when he feels so sad; and he really thinks he sees him and talks to him and interacts with him. He is making up a sort of nowhere land that can help him through reality; we gradually assist to the creation of a totally new, alternative world, imbued with religiosity and alternative values as well – transgressive values since they don't correspond to those he is supposed to have. The sense of religiosity itself strongly contrasts with the rigid religion he is forced to accept and slowly allows him to take a trip inside his soul and get to know himself in a genuine way. He is afraid of Father but does not want to be totally overcome, he preserves his inner world and defends it creating a new reality against the one that he does not like. Clearly, the risk in this attitude is what Margot fully understands, that of going mad, of definitively mixing reality and dream as if they were one, coming to a total

confusion; while the positive consequence is the opportunity he is creating for himself to guard his dream and resist Father’s brutality.

So, to resume, we can say that he is deeply afraid, but he manages to create an unexpected energy escaping from the real world into a new one; but in this way he finds himself right in the middle of opposite attitudes, one of which may compromise his mental health.

Overcoming fear is the key to what you really are and to what your true desire is. From this perspective the greatest transgression is getting to know yourself and acting consequently.

We can consider this a utopian ambition, an expectation that goes beyond any materialistic goal. Considering it from a pedagogical point of view this is the proper way towards the creation of an educational perspective, that implies learning to look at the world with different eyes. When you confront your inner nature, when you manage to change your outlook on life creating a distance from society, you are beginning to consider the world from an educational point of view, that will allow you to find in that same world what you were not able to see before, what you possibly thought that world did not possess. This opens the way to change inside and outside of you.

All of the characters are stuck in their own fears. The book is divided into two parts: the first one is when fear keeps everyone from moving and from reacting to situations – they’d rather accept their life even though they do not like it at all, because they are afraid. The second part begins when fear starts gradually to be faced and overcome. The rebellion starts with disobedience and Thomas is the one who makes it happen and grow. He decides to do something to change the situation that his mother and himself have been suffering all those years because of Father’s bad behaviour. He takes a mysterious letter he had found days before in the mailbox and decides to put it into his father bible, the book he reads out loud them every day.

“Let this cut of suffering be taken away from me”, he thought. Thomas did not know what those words meant, but he knew Jesus had said them when He knew He was going to die. They were beautiful words which brought tears to Thomas’s eyes”.

Because Thomas likes words so much especially when he cannot understand them: what a word can create is a possibility worth being listened to.

Enchanted by his inner confused and poetic soul, guided by a sort of magic, he disobeys Father and puts this letter in the bible so that he

can see it; the letter says “A man who hits his wife dishonours himself”.

When Father reads it, nothing can be as before. With this action, with this disobedience things have started to change.

What happens next is all a consequence. The change in Thomas’ heart has rapidly caused the world itself to be turned upside down, has caused a chain reaction.

The courage of a single man to think in a different way has thrown everybody’s life towards a different direction; we could say that this transgression has lead every characters to discover a bit more of their humanity. Mother finally reacts. And so does Margot. And Father finds himself with his back against the wall and can do nothing but give up and silently admit his defeat.

At the end of the book nothing can be anymore as it was before.

5. *Managing the power of words*

Coming to a conclusion, I would like to quote from another book by this same author, that is *Forever together, amen*.

Polleke, the main character, maintains that she is going to be a poet, when she grows up. This is a transgressive act, because becoming a poet actually means thinking with a creative mind, in other words it leads you to be free.

In the same book we can read what follows: “sometimes” I say “I write poems that come directly from Spik’s mind. He forgets to write them, but I don’t”.

“Honey” replies Grandma “poems comes from your own mind, believe me. If Gerrit wants to write poems he just has to grab a pen”... I think it over and get sad. If I cannot write them for him, nobody will ever get to read Spik’s poems. They will always be stuck into his mind”.

Gerrit, alias Spik, is Polleke’s father. He is addicted to drugs and cannot find a way out of it. He does not have a direction because he does not know what he actually desires; he cannot find his way out of drugs because he does not know himself. And Polleke gives reason writing one of her poems: “maybe poets die in this way: when words come to an end”.

Her father lost his words and cannot become a poet; consequently he cannot be happy. I have used this quotation to underline the im-

portance of words in Kuijer's works. We can say that words are the way through which you make up your world, namely through words you can make up stories and stories create reality. Only in this way we have access to our intimate world, only in this way we can get to understand who we are and what we long for.

Language is the way through which our identity has been shaped; we have to understand it and have it at our fingertips in order to find out, and possibly change, who we are and the very world we live in.

We have to get to know the culture we are imbued with if we want to get free and find a way to happiness. We have to discover the cultures that live in our soul and that find their way through it independently from our expectation, if we want to have a possibility to understand ourselves. If not, we live in a total chaos and are lived through by others.

I'll have this talk over with the final scene of a great film, *2001 Space Odyssey*. In this film words play a small part; dialogues are cut to the minimum. Why does this happen? Maybe because the humanity represented in this film has lost its capacity of imagining, of making up stories; humans have lost their words and so cannot but go into the wrong direction. The technological distortion taken up by Western culture has come to a tragic epilogue: humans have forgotten their culture, lost their words and their humanity and have driven their discoveries against themselves, against the opportunity of being happy.

The final image is disturbing but causes the public to think: a baby wrapped up in his embryonic bag looks with huge eyes out of that same bag. What does it mean?

I think we should consider that bag as if it were the culture we are wrapped into since the moment we were born. Our eyes will always look at the world through that bag, we are conditioned from the very moment we come into this world and cannot be free unless we get to know that bag, find the words to describe it, represent it in our mind, and then find a way to it in order to transform it according to our intention. Only in that moment we have the opportunity to change it, improving ourselves and making the world we live in a better place, finding a way to happiness and making a step towards humanity.

Ignorance is not a solution anymore; even more, it could be said that ignorance is a dangerous weapon against humanity. Looking for words is the only way to become responsible individuals leading to their most intimate desires.

For this reason when Thomas say “when I grow up I am going to be happy”, he is transgressive; because his words are a sort of declaration of independence from the world outside and at the same time a sort of menace. I am going to be happy means that I won’t accept anymore things as they are now and that I am going to change the world outside and inside myself. And how? By making up *my own* story.

To conclude it can be said that this is not a politically correct book since it aims directly at making people face their true expectations, desires, nature and this may lead to actually disappoint even themselves at first and then others, not to talk about the reader who is challenged to consider an unusual perspective on life.

In order to send to the world his universal and transgressive message, Kuijer uses a universal, simple and clear language. He does not make use of a politically correct language neither does he use a transgressive one to explicitly deny it. Although being politically correct is out of question since it would mean to think of the world as if it were divided into different types of humanity linked together by neutral, respectful words aimed at avoiding any kind of offense. But this would also represent renouncing to a much more important and genuine concept: humanity is one and has the same words, the same language, the same expectations. So the author goes far beyond; the one who is talking to us in his books is not Thomas, not Polleke, but Kuijer himself and he is a poet, one who strongly wants to have a free outlook on life, one who dares to talk about everything, because he has a creative mind, thinks on his own, finds his own words and never allow words to come to an end; but, most of all, because he is not afraid. And he shares this inner impulse with everyone of us, avoiding any kind of distinction.

Growing up, or we could say evolving, is a complicated affair and it is not only about children, but actually about everyone who decides to live his life and not simply survive; growing up means becoming poets. *The book of everything* deals directly with the discovery of humanity that starts from a dangerous question “Am I happy? Am I going to be happy in the future? Is it my true intention?”

The answer may cause a chain reaction, total change, as we have already seen. For this reason not everyone is allowed to read this book unless they are willing to put their life at risk. “Here are only allowed those who can make humans evolve towards humanity”.