



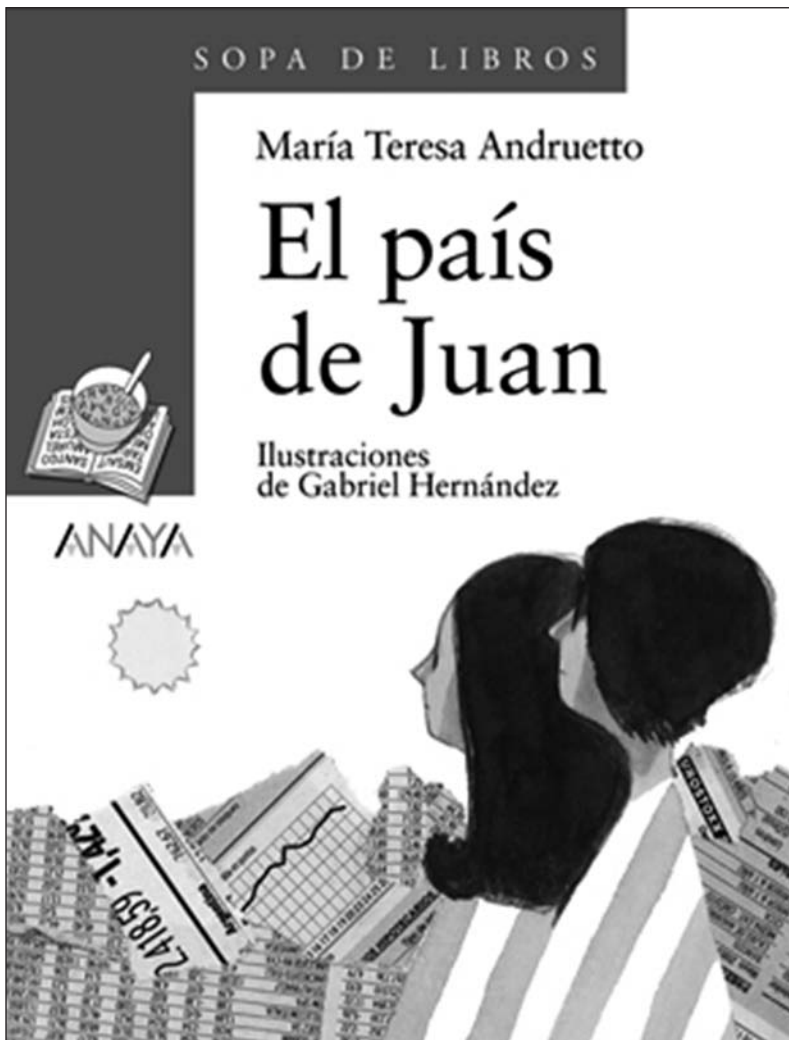
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María Teresa Andruetto: A Literature without Adjectives

by BEATRIZ ALCUBIERRE MOYA



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This article analyses the work of María Teresa Andruetto as a challenge to the notion of children's narrative as a genre as it traces how Andruetto uses a language strictly based on aesthetic purposes and beyond the traditional restrictions prescribed to children by parents and publishers. Andruetto's search along her own memory path leads to the construction of atmospheres centered in unusual issues in children's narrative, such as individuality, otherness, poverty, disability, politics, the macabre, and the grotesque: all of which are considered by her as essential to children's understanding of the world.

Once upon a time, there was a man who built houses. His name was Enós and was the best builder of them all: his houses were always the most beautiful, the perdurable ones. Once two apprentices approached him, and said:

“One day you will die and no one shall do what you do. Why don’t you teach us the secret of your art?”

Enós thought that their request was reasonable and he generously gave them all he knew.

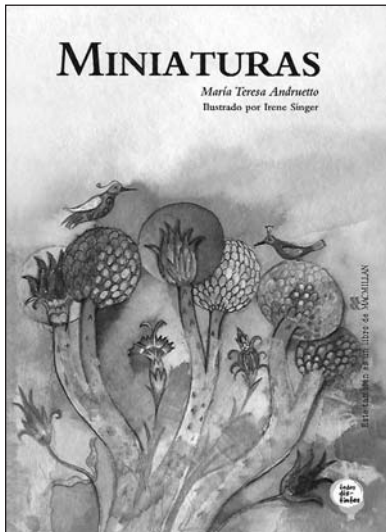
But once they had learned and thought they were already as great as the teacher, they despised him and walked away.

And when Enós charged eighty denarii, they charged seventy, saying that their houses were cheaper and equally resistant.

So people stopped appraising Enós and settled for the apprentices’ houses.

Enós impoverished to be lacking the most essential, but not even in misery accepted to build houses that were not perdurable.

“Enós and the Apprentices,”
from *Miniatures*, María Teresa Andruetto



As a historian studying the construction of children’s identity through cultural mediations (specifically through children’s books), I have become somewhat skeptical about the idea of understanding children’s literature as a genre *per se*. Therefore, I am not usually comfortable describing these kinds of cultural productions as examples of an aesthetic language spontaneously addressed for young readers, but rather as editorial, sometimes even mechanical, tasks. I do not mean to lessen their artistic value (when they truly have it), but instead, I mean to underline their socio-cultural, political and economic purposes. I am convinced that definitions involving genre contain serious limitations that sometimes darken more than illuminate the understanding of a particular cultural production. Therefore, I refer to children’s literature as a category not determined by the specific type of readers to which it is aimed; young children are unable to purchase their own books, so their choices are often guided by their parents’ agenda (taste, beliefs, preferences or a simple budget).

The first thing we have to understand when we use such an ambiguous (and sometimes arbitrary) expression as “children’s literature” is that its first use came considerably later than many of the pieces that it includes: Perrault’s *Mother Goose Tales*, Galland’s *Arabian Nights*, Aesop’s *Fables*, Swift’s *Gulliver*, etc. None of these classics were originally conceived for the amusement of an audience exclusively formed by children. Accordingly, before adding any adjectives or assigning any use to these stories, we have to first remember that they are just representative of literature (without adjectives). The concept of children’s literature is based on the existence of a certain kind of device, specially

designed for children's handling. Therefore, traditionally, a children's book is an object equipped with both textual and formal features aimed to attract the attention of a preconceived reader with a certain socio-cultural background, belonging to a particular age group. This means that children's literature is not just the work of authors, but of publishers who observe children as an expanding market, and create formulas that can be repeated indefinitely as long as the product being sold is profitable.

When I first read the Argentinean writer María Teresa Andruetto, I found myself in front of a whole new approach to the idea of literature "for children" that turns around most of the premises I just described. As Andruetto declares, her writing is in search of "a literature without adjectives" (*Hacia una literatura sin adjetivos*). Aware of the risks involved in the tendency to specify a unique kind of reader as the definitive audience of her work, she undertakes the task of creating a language guided by an aesthetic purpose, in which the children's response is pursued not as a primary intention, but as an added result. As shown in the short piece that appears as an epigraph to this article, Andruetto rejects preconceptions that determine the child or youth in a general way by ignoring the individuality of taste, which responds to personal experience. She avoids the traditional patterns and topics of children's narrative by exposing her own individuality and breaking the barriers between genres. In a free interpretation of her tale "Enós and the Apprentices," she explains that several issues are shown in this sort of parable from her early days: "creation, teaching, the quality of a job, the loyalty to oneself, opportunism, corruption, degradation of what we do, value and price, appearance and essence, the fleeting and the enduring. I did not know then, nor was my intention to give light to those truths, but I ascertain through the years that around this parable turns everything a writer writes and all that he does afterwards with his writing" ("Enós, los aprendices y la escritura perdurable" 2).

Literature, as she says, is born of the writer's flesh and memory. It is a language faithful to its own search that resonates within the reader's mind, establishing a commitment between the reader and the author. She recognizes the danger that relays in the pursuit of correctness, in the development of mechanical skills, in the search for professionalism, and even in the gain of recognition, all of which often end up killing spontaneity and art itself. Therefore, Andruetto believes in a moral language that digs into the deep feelings following the desire to understand a certain aspect of the human being. That desire is not for sale, even if the writer, like Enós the house builder, is lacking the most essential. We repeatedly hear certain catch phrases—about the brevity and easiness of writing for children, the temptation to edit, the need for money—that try to justify the denigration of writing. But no



*As Andruetto declares, her writing is in search of "a literature without adjectives" (*Hacia una literatura sin adjetivos*).*

one talks about the vile, corrupted essence of so many books in circulation, or the immoral use of certain topics, texts that are written (not with one eye but the entire body) having the customer in mind. (“Enós, los aprendices y la escritura perdurable” 7).

Andruetto’s work is so much more than children’s literature, and that is precisely why I consider it some of the most dignifying sort of reading that we are able to hand onto our children. Andruetto was recently awarded with the Hans Christian Andersen Award, becoming the first Hispanic-American writer to gain this distinction. The jury based its verdict on her masterful writing of important and original works “strongly centered on aesthetics,” recognizing a clear literary base in her deep and poetical works. “Her books,” as jurors stated, “refer to a great variety of topics, as migration, interior worlds, injustice, love, poverty, violence or even political topics” (“IBBY Announces Winners”).

Andruetto was born in Arroyo Cabral, Argentina in 1954, a descendant of immigrants from Piedmont, Italy. For the last thirty years, she has been involved in the field of children’s literature. Some of her works are considered “crossover literature,” composed of stories that appeal as much to adults as they do to children or young adults. These books serve to provide a transition

for trained readers towards a greater complexity; these books can also be read by adults. Two of Andruetto’s most important publications, *The Girl, the Heart and the House* (2011) and *Stefano* (2012), are representative of specific cases of this type of “crossover literature.”

The Girl, the Heart, and the House presents a journey into the deep feelings of Tina, a five-year-old-conflicted by a big question: why she is not able to live with her mother, who lives in another house in a different village with Pedro (her older brother). Tina and her father live with grandma Herminia and visit mother and Pedro every Sunday without exception. In these fraternal meetings Tina feels blessed, but she always has to say goodbye at dusk: “The girl waits for a kiss from her mother, and when she gets it, she asks for another one *so I can keep it ‘til next Sunday*” (*The Girl, the Heart, and the House* 15).

She loves her mom and brother, although he is small and fragile. She does not quite understand why she is not allowed to play with him every day. The boy has Down Syndrome, and it is amazing how Andruetto manages to include this feature in the book from the perspective of a five-year-old struggling to understand the situation:

Carlota [Tina’s friend] asks: *Why does your mom has to stay and take care of your brother? Because he is sick. What does he have? He was born with straight eyes*, says Tina, as she pulls her eyes with her fingers to show her friend. *His eyes are like Chinese and he needs to be taken care of very very much, because he can’t do everything alone, so I can’t live with my mom, you know?* And Charlotte says yes, she understands.

In this story, Andruetto presents a journey through the memory path. Although she is not telling her own story, she evokes the psychological atmosphere that we all once had as children, and have left behind. She displays a deep understanding of childhood and renders it to the audience with surprising ease. In doing so, Andruetto reflects real feelings through a fictional character. In her own words, “Is in fiction, under the artistic form of lying, how you can tell a truth” (“Enós, los aprendices y la escritura perdurable” 3).

The journey through the author’s history,



using her family's memory and her own, is a more central issue in *Stefano*, a novel about an immigrant boy and his voyage from Piedmont to Rosario, Argentina.



Although *Stefano* does not narrate the life of my father, there is plenty of it in the book, scattered here and there, especially small anecdotes and familiar features like “old Moretti” playing his mandolin, or the ghost of hunger that harassed immigrants forever, or meals we ate at home, or the songs that were sang at the port,

Immigration is a central issue in our society today, both metaphorically and literally.

or the names of certain villages that I know he crossed, or the title of the book that reproduces his name (*Stefano* 102).

Immigration is a central issue in our society today, both metaphorically and literally. Immigration not only addresses the painful reality of exile, but also opens an interesting line of thought by pointing out the gap between self and others, the known and the unknown, childhood and maturity, holding on and letting go: the lifelong process of determining our own

identity. This conflict becomes tangible as the narrative is divided in two overlapping voices: the first narrator is omniscient and tells the story of Stefano chronologically, from his departure in Italy to the end of his trip in Argentina, while the second narrator is a grown Stefano, telling the story to his wife “Ema,” who is expecting a baby. This narrative is less about the plot, and more about the inner life of the title character. Therefore, just as in our memories, its path is not linear and orderly, but full of jumps, twists, and turns in time:

Now that we are having a child and reviewing our life to continue it together, I understand my mother, her words.

She followed me all the way here, repeating what she used to say back there, banging my memory like water. . . .

I always dreamed with her, standing far away, at the door of our house, with her hand raised; but last night, Ema, can you believe it? I dreamed she was coming to us and hugged me. (*Stefano* 99)



A few years after the creation of *Stefano*, Andruetto addressed the issue of both migration and poverty from a local point of view. In *Juan's Country*, she depicts a round trip, from the countryside to the city and back again, in the indirect

context of Argentina's 20th century history.

In this poetic novel, two parallel stories are told about Juan and Anarina, who meet halfway through the narrative to comprise a love story. Each of their families has always lived in the field, mastering their respective crafts: Juan's family keeps cows, while Anarina's sell wool. However, natural disasters, corrupted governments, and thieves, make them gradually lose everything. Finding themselves impoverished and hopeless, they march to the city in search of a better future. In "Villa Carton [Cardboard Village] things were not good, but then they got worse":

Villa Carton is located where it is since the beginning of the world. Nobody knows who gave it that name, nor when, but long ago someone put the first sheet and the first cardboards and someone else placed stones and bricks on the roofs so they did not fly away.

Those who come from the north seeking for work in the city end up in Villa Carton. And to that place Juan and his parents arrived.

And they became cardboard collectors, as everyone in the village, for there even the youngest children separate healthy cartons of broken, the wet ones from the dry. And sell them. (*El país de Juan* 19-20)

In *Juan's Country*, children cannot afford to be fragile, so instead, they become heroes. As in folk stories, there are difficult obstacles to overcome, but there is also a homecoming and, somehow, a happy ending. The piece intends to narrate "poverty in a fairytale tone" ("Leer y escribir para comprender"). It is a mixture of painfully real facts and a poetic, musical language: a taste of a "magical realism" that impregnates Hispanic American narrative, and popular mentality.

In Juan's Country, children cannot afford to be fragile, so instead, they become heroes.

One day Juan and Anarina meet each other in the street, play together, fall in love, grow old and get married. A certain kind of happiness and an unknown sense of hope filter timidly into their lives. Tired of poverty, social injustice, military government and political persecution, they eventually realize that the city is far from being the best place to start again, so they go back to the field to sell wool and keep cows, in order to re-master their crafts.

Magical as it is, Andrueceto's realism is not conflicted with popular "fantasmagoria." She believes that horror stories, which are as old as the world itself, were born out of the necessity of expressing deep fears and confronting them through language, because words that frighten people can also cure them: "Men and women were more fearful in the beginning of times, when lots of things did not have any explanation (thunder that breaks through the sky, a bone fluorescent light over wet

soil, a wood cracking in the heart of the night. . .). They were more fearful and also more respectful of nature and the non-explored, because fright is a feeling that warns about danger and it often manifests before the unknown” (*Miniaturas* 7).

The Vampire Woman is a collection of horror stories Andruetto has taken from Argentina’s oral tradition. Surprisingly, some of these stories are even familiar to a Mexican reader, such as myself. It seems as if these baroque ghosts have traveled through time and space along the whole continent, from Patagonia to Río Bravo, hunting travelers and young children, century after century. I specifically recognized “the lace glove,” despite the local variations that place it in Cordoba’s pampa. It is very close to a story that I heard from a friend one night at the road when I was nine or ten years old, a story which kept me from sleeping alone for almost a week:

Once, a villager from La Aguadawas riding a car, with his son, through the road from Capilla de Garzón to Pampayasta. When they were crossing Zárate’s field, a young woman in a party dress stopped them. Though it was deep at night they glanced at her from the distance, because the moonlight was intense and her dress was bright white.

“My boyfriend got mad at me and left me alone in the middle of the field,” she said when the car stopped. “Could you take me to Pampayasta’s entrance? I live there.”

“Of course, Miss” the villager answered, as he and his son made room for her in the car.

For a while they traveled in silence, until they began small talking, more because of kindness than for really having something to say. She then confessed she liked to dance, and that her name was Encarnación. . . . When they got to Pampayasta, close to Severo Aranda’s bowling alley. The villager stopped the car. The girl skipped out and ran into a house in a corner, in front of the crossroad.

Father and son continued their travel. After a few leagues, the boy discovered a white lace glove, laying in the car’s floor, and showed it to his father. They decided to go back and return it. They stopped in the corner, in front of the crossroad and got down, as the father clapped his hands.

“Hail, Holly Mary!” he shouted, as villagers use to.

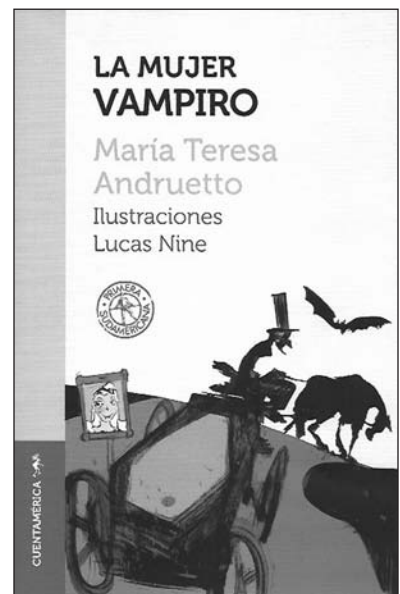
At first, his call was answered by dog barks. Then, by a voice of a man, grasped away from sleep.

“What do you want?”

“Does a young woman called Encarnación live here?” asked the villager.

The house owner opened the door. He was pale and stared at both strangers without saying any word.

“We come to give her this glove back. She left it in our car.”



The man kept staring in silence.

“Don’t take us wrong” the villager insisted, “she had a fight with her boyfriend and asked us to bring her here.”

The boy kept extending his hand, cramping from offering the glove to the man, until he finally spoke:

“She is my daughter, but she died... Twenty years from yesterday.”

“But she told us she was returning from a ball...” remembered the surprised villager.

“Twenty years ago...” told the father. “It was Santa Rosa’s day, she died dancing in the patronal feast. Her heart, you know?”

The man and the boy turned around mumbling excuses. But the girl’s father claimed:

“The glove... please. I have to take it to her tomb. Every year, during Santa Rosa’s feast, she forgets something somewhere and it has to be returned.”

The boy gave him the lace glove. Then he reached silently to his father, who was already sitting in the car, harnessing the horses. (*La mujervampiro* 39-43)

That fright, often mixed with a little sense of humor, should not be exclusive to adults, because it has therapeutic properties...

Andruetto has no shame in confessing her taste for macabre stories: “I liked them as a little girl and as a grown up, even in the times when I thought (what nonsense!) They were harmful” (*La mujervampiro* 58). It seems so ungenerous to deny our little ones the joy of experiencing that unique sort of fear that runs through our back and comes out as a cold sweat to liberate our deepest feelings. That fright, often mixed with a little sense of humor, should not be exclusive to adults, because it has therapeutic properties, which every living person can benefit from. Most of all, these stories simply provide pleasure, which takes us back to the aesthetic value of what these pieces have to offer.



In Andruetto’s earlier books, inspired by fairytales, there is a unique sense of beauty that comes from the grotesque: a poetical distortion that arises as a tragicomic effect, reaching out to scurrilous or even monstrous images. Among the stories told in *The Enchanted Ring* (2010), I discovered the unexpected master piece “The Woman with the Bow Tie,” filled with musicality, eroticism and gothic horror:

Not long after Longobardo won the battle of Silesia, the nobility of Isabela decided to organize a costume party in his honor.

The ball had place the nigh of Pentecost, on the terraces of the Purple Palace, and all women in the kingdom were invited.

Longobardo decided to disguise himself as a pirate, so he would not hide his wild and bold spirit.

He crossed the hills in green tights and a white silk shirt that showed off his victorious chest. He was riding a black filly with a beating heart, like his own.

He was among the first to arrive. As corresponds to a pirate, his left eye was covered with a patch. With the free eye, he prepared to look at the young women who came hidden behind their costumes.

Along came a nymph wrapped in gauze.
Along came a moraine gypsy.

Along came a beggar in rags.

Along came a peasant.

Along came a courtesan who had a red velvet dress tight to her waist and a lifted skirt with petticoats of starch.

As walking by Longobardo, she made a slight bow in greeting. That was enough for him to decide to invite her to dance.

The courtesan was young and beautiful. And unlike the other women wore no jewelry but just a black ribbon in the middle of the neck that ended in a bow.

Laughter.

Confidences.

Mazurkas.

She turned into the arms of Longobardo. And when the music stopped she reached out her hand for him to kiss it. Until she was carried away in the whirlwind of dance to a corner of the terrace by the steps. And gave up to that powerful embrace.

He stroked her neck, the birth of the shoulders, the pale neck, the black bow tie.

“No! She said. Do not touch it!”

“Why?”

“If you love me, you must swear to never unleash this knot.”

“I swear,” he said.

And he kept up stroking her.

Until the desire to know what secret was there took away his peace.

He kissed her forehead.

Cheeks.

Her fruity tasted lips.

Always haunted by the black bow tie.

And when he was sure she had fainted to love, pulled the ribbon.

He pulled the ribbon.

The knot was undone.

And the girl’s head rolled down the steps. (*El anillo encantado* 2010)

As a historian studying the construction of children’s identity through cultural mediations (specifically through children’s books), I know about the darkness inside original fairytales, about the scatological, sexual, and bloody

features that were gradually erased from them to make them “suitable for children.” Paradoxically, children played a central role in the earliest recollections of these stories. As Robert Darnton explains, in modern central Europe, the strong bond between aristocratic or bourgeois children and their peasant nurses became a huge doorway for cultural transfers (Darnton 1985). They shared a similar mentality and a symbolic language, the same fears of the unexplained. Andruetto knows about this too, and she is not afraid to return those dark images back to their original owners.

She also knows that stories came first as oral speech; that the tissue of myths, legends, and folklore is knitted by mnemonic strategies, as cadence and rhyme, that allows the story teller to narrate once and again the same plot, with as many variations as he or she wants to introduce. These interwoven strategies are why traditional tales are neverending: they provide content for each other and keep changing through time, preserving their essential plot. It is a tremendous, impossible challenge to reproduce this



feature in written language, because printed word has somehow threatened oral tradition and its profoundness. However, Andruetto is not intimidated by this challenge, as she manages to deliver in most of her works a sense of endlessness; she creates the notion of a circular timing in

stories that repeats and contains itself, as in Juan's homecoming, Stefano's memories, Encarnacion's night hunting, or little Tina's explanations of the world.

In closing, I offer one of Andruetto's never ending stories; "Footprints in the Sand" is a time paradox that repeats and contains itself through infinity, much like Scheherazade's Arabian nights:

At the edge of the desert a man and a woman meet for a trip.

The man is called Ramadan, the woman Suraqadima, and the journey they undertake seems more like a runaway.

Before it is dissolved by the wind, one can see the pattern of their feet on the sand: the footprints crossed the desert to the oasis where men and beasts drink together.

They sit next to the coolness of water. She loosens the strip that girds her waist, unties her sandals and drinks. He moistens his temples, his chin and chest. Then he wets the back of her head.

They have abandoned their homes, their children, her husband, his wife, and spend the afternoon making plans. After one walking day they will get across the dunes, to a town where Ramadan has friends and money. All the shadows will remain behind them.

Suraqadima looks up and sees a skull and an inscription that tells about a crime. She imagines that the one who died is a woman and thinks she perhaps also abandoned her husband and children to meet a man who has friends and money in a city across the dunes. And if the wind had not blow, one could still see their footprints in the sand, the trip across the desert, the man's feet following hers to the green spot, to the side of the water, where he, she thinks, might have killed her.

Ramadan asks what she is thinking. She points out the skull and tells a story:

"Once a woman abandoned her house, her husband and her children to follow a man. She made a trip through the desert after him, searching for an oasis of pure and green water. When they found it, for some unknown reason, the man killed her at the side of the water."

She tells that story, born from her lips, not knowing why, and stares into the eyes of her beloved one.

And then he kills her for the second time. (*Huellas en la arena* 1997)

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The text written by Luisa Mattia is strongly metaphorical and the title as well is used in a metaphorical sense. **Per filo e per segno** is an Italian idiomatic expression meaning “to tell in great detail,” but at the same time the title plays on the word “filo” [thread]. The whole story is indeed based on threads which become sheets of paper and, eventually, a book. Each and every one of these threads represents the stories collected by Silva, a child who loves to listen to stories. With the threads she first collects from a tailor, Silva creates a net to hold all the stories, so she could tell them again and again. Everyone who has something to tell knows that Silva would be ready to listen to them. And she collects so many stories that the threads are not enough anymore. That is when Silva asks for a white cloth and squid ink to write the stories down. Once again this is not enough, thus she decides to cut every story as a paper and sew the pages together to create a book. The text is beautifully enriched by Vittoria Facchini’s stylistically original illustrations which combine black and white drawings with colour photos.

Melissa Garavini



Luisa Mattia

Per filo e per segno

Illus. Vittoria Facchini
 Roma, Italia: Donzelli editore, 2012
 28 pp.
 ISBN 9788860366962
 (Picture Book, 5+)