

Reading emotions. Marie-Aude Murail's stories as salvific narration

MARIA TERESA TRISCIUZZI*

RIASSUNTO: Narratrice nota e pluripremiata, Marie-Aude Murail da circa quarant'anni incontra i suoi lettori, sperimentando sul campo che la letteratura per l'infanzia e per ragazzi costituisce una via d'accesso privilegiata alle emozioni e ai possibili conflitti presenti nell'attuale cultura europea, come pure a rilevanti tematiche della nostra contemporaneità.

Murail scrive e pubblica romanzi per ragazze e ragazzi (Gramantieri, 2016; Chérier, 2011; Filograsso, 2015; Trisciuzzi, 2016, Trisciuzzi 2018), storie di formazione – Bildungsroman (Moretti, 1986; Lopez, 2011; Bernardi, 2011; Trisciuzzi, 2014) che narrano, con ironia ed autenticità, i legami familiari, l'adozione, la sessualità, la violenza sulle donne, l'aborto, la malattia, la morte, perché, come afferma lei stessa "i giovani lettori non vogliono essere protetti, servono l'onestà di non nascondere le cose e la volontà di lasciare un po' di speranza" (Murail, 2016).

La scrittrice raccontando storie di bambini e giovani adulti che trovano il coraggio di seguire i propri sogni e ambizioni, i propri sentimenti e desideri, di aprirsi e dare ascolto alle loro emozioni, senza arrendersi a soluzioni standardizzate, rifiutandosi di uniformarsi anche ponendosi contro le aspettative familiari e sociali, permette ai suoi romanzi, considerati ormai crossover e perciò per tutte le età, una "narrazione medica", una soluzione narrativa salvifica alle ferite della vita.

PAROLE-CHIAVE: Letteratura per l'infanzia, pedagogia delle emozioni, narrazione, cura, Marie-Aude Murail.

* Fakultät für Bildungswissenschaften – Freie Universität Bozen.

ABSTRACT: Marie-Aude Murail, a famous and award-winning storyteller, has been meeting her readers for almost forty years, experiencing in the field that children's and young people's literature is a privileged access to the emotions and possible conflicts present in today's European culture, as well as to relevant issues of our contemporaneity.

Murail writes and publishes novels for girls and boys (Gramantieri, 2016; Chérier, 2011; Filograsso, 2015; Trisciuzzi, 2016, Trisciuzzi 2018), coming of age stories – Bildungsroman (Moretti, 1986; Lopez, 2011; Bernardi, 2011; Trisciuzzi, 2014) narrating, with irony and authenticity, family ties, adoption, sexuality, violence against women, abortion, illness, death, because, as she says, “young readers do not want to be protected, they need the honesty not to hide things and the will to leave a little hope” (Murail, 2016). By telling stories of children and young adults who find the courage to follow their dreams and ambitions, their feelings and desires, to open up and listen to their emotions, without surrendering to standardised solutions, refusing to conform even by going against family and social expectations, the writer allows her novels, now considered crossover and therefore for all ages, a “medical narrative”, a salvific narrative solution to the wounds of life.

KEY-WORDS: Children's literature, pedagogy of emotion, take care, storytelling, Marie-Aude Murail.

1. A writer is born

Daughter of the journalist and teacher Marie-Thérèse Barrois and the self-taught poet Gérard Murail, Marie-Aude was born on 6 May 1954, the third of four children: Tristan, who became a composer and professor of composition at Columbia University in New York; Lorris, Marie-Aude and Elvire, all three established writers, each in their own genre (Cherier, 2011, p. 8). Inside her room in Le Havre and later in Paris, where the family moved when she was seven, Marie-Aude began to create the stories she writes for her younger sister, Elvire. The young Murail fills the silences with imaginary characters and languages: the fireplace becomes a mountain, the bathtub an ocean, the corridor a skating rink. The room becomes a whole universe, the books are used to make car circuits and the stuffed animals give life to dra-

mas and comedies. They take from their father's library, perhaps without permission, collector's books such as *Tintin*, *Arsène Lupin*, *Les contes et légendes Fernand Nathan* and even 'forbidden' books and begin to write fantastic stories in small notebooks: the *Journal de Zip et Zop*, is an authentic journal intended for children aged seven to twelve (ivi, p. 11).

Marie-Aude then began studying literature and chose to pursue it at the Sorbonne. For her doctoral thesis, she chose an unusual topic, children's books, and entitled her research: *Poor Robinson! Or how and why to adapt classic novels for a children's audience*. In the academic sphere, perhaps because of her non-conformism, she does not have much success, but she does not let it get her down and continues on her way, arguing:

“Que les vrais classiques de l'enfance, ce ne sont pas ces livres imposés par les adultes pour ton bien, mais souvent des livres dérobés aux adultes par les enfants comme une part du feu et qui deviennent chefs-d'œuvre chaque fois qu'un enfant y échauffe son imagination et qu'ils éclatent, comme un fusée d'artifices, en rêves et en jeux”¹ (ivi, p. 15).

During her studies, at the age of nineteen, in April 1973, she married Pierre Robert, an official at INSEE, her first and only love and favourite reader. They will have three children: Benjamin, Charles (in honour of the writer Charles Dickens) and Constance. Pierre, who in his youth was studying to become a priest, is taciturn like her, writes well, reads her drafts and corrects her typing errors, and is the first to laugh and cry with Marie-Aude's novels.

So, it comes down to today, indeed, the author has won the Hans Christian Andersen Award 2022, the highest international recognition given to an author and an illustrator of children's books. Quoting Murail: “I am on cloud nine. I am on a cloud, which allows me to have a little chat with René Guillot (1900-1969), the last and only French writer to date to have received the Andersen Prize. That was in 1964. René Guillot was born in the village of Courcoury, in Charente, the village where my husband and then our three children spent their summers” says Muriel. “When, while still a very young author, I heard the fate of Mr Guillot, for whom a street

1. “The true classics for children are not those books that are imposed by adults on children for their own good but are often those books stolen from adults by children that become masterpieces once a child sets his or her imagination in motion and makes it explode, like fireworks, in dreams and games”.

in Courcoury is now named, I thought: ‘I too will get the Hans Christian Andersen prize!’ I know that my readers will rejoice with me, and especially the young Italians whom I had the pleasure of meeting again recently at the *Festivaletteratura* in Mantua. Italy supported me, I know, and my publisher Giunti did a really good job in making me known to the Italian public. It is so nice, when you are happy, to be able to say thank you!”².

2. The pedagogy of encouragement

In 2002, Marie-Aude met Christine, her daughter Constance’s teacher, at the Guillaume Apollinaire school in Orleans. The two women began working together on their dream, a shared passion for the “pedagogy of encouragement”, “le pédagogie d’encouragement” (Cherer, 2011, p. 31): no longer work with the class, but with twenty-five individuals, each of whom has something worth encouraging. Together they develop a new reading method called *Bulle* (ivi, p. 33) which will be published in France by Bordas Publisher in 2008. Marie-Aude continues to work at Guillaume Apollinaire as a teacher coach, noticing the changes that the quiet provincial school in Orleans is experiencing: it is changing colour. African asylum-seeking children enter the school and she openly takes their side, supporting their demands, organising parent groups, self-management and inclusive pedagogical initiatives involving all her fellow artists.

One of her famous novels *Vive la République!* (*Cécile. Il futuro è per tutti*) published in 2005 as part of the Extra Series that won the Andersen Prize for Best Fiction Series in 2012, was inspired by this very story: “When I heard on the radio that, in a small town in eastern France, parents and teachers had occupied a primary school to protest against the expulsion of a very well-integrated Algerian family, I knew I had to put a story like that at the centre of *Vive la République!*. It was urgent” (Murail, 2019, p. 9).

Today, the French writer has her own public following and has found her place in the literary world: twenty years on, she has published more

2. [https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cultura/libri/ragazzi/2022/03/21/premio-hans-christian-andersen-2022-vincono-murail-e-lee_d97e7cb4-3b5f-4150-9644-6046d8742139.html#:~:text=BOLOGNA%20%2D%20Sono%20la%20scrittrice%20francese,nella%20sezione%20autore%20e%20illustratore.\[05/05/2023\].](https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cultura/libri/ragazzi/2022/03/21/premio-hans-christian-andersen-2022-vincono-murail-e-lee_d97e7cb4-3b5f-4150-9644-6046d8742139.html#:~:text=BOLOGNA%20%2D%20Sono%20la%20scrittrice%20francese,nella%20sezione%20autore%20e%20illustratore.[05/05/2023].)

than a hundred volumes, including novels, stories, short stories, essays and articles in periodicals, translated into German, Spanish, Catalan, Chinese, Korean, English, Italian, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, etc., celebrated, awarded, reprinted, including the triumph of *Oh, Boy!* which won the *Jeunesse France Télévision* prize and the *Tam Tam* awarded at the Salon de Montreuil in 2000 (Cherer, 2011, p. 20), and the coronation of *Simple*, four years later, which garnered awards and reprints. In 2005, she received the highest form of recognition from the government: she was the first French children's writer to be awarded the title "Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur française" for services to literature. In Germany, she was awarded the *Jugendliteraturpreis* at the *Frankfurter Buchmesse* in 2008.

Marie-Aude is a hard-working woman, "travaille partout, en train, sous la douche, dans la rue..." (ivi, p. 36), infatti la sua editrice Geneviève Brisac afferma "qui me frappait c'était son entêtement, dans sa manière d'être comme dans sa manière d'écrire. C'était pour moi une conteuse, quelqu'un qui aura toujours du travail et toujours du succès parce que nous aurons toujours besoin d'écrivains comme elle. Quelqu'un qui inspire une confiance absolue"³ (Ibid.).

In short, Murail belongs to that category of "subversive" writers who have never forgotten that they were children.

In the novel *Maité Coiffure (Nodi al pettine)*, Murail tells the story of Louis, a young 14-year-old boy who has an affectionate little sister and a mother with very supportive qualities, almost as if to compensate for his father's obtuse and severe character and attitude. At school, which Louis attends reluctantly, he is given the opportunity to do a week-long internship, at the choice of each student, in companies, offices, shops; anywhere, in short, where children can do a job or assist in doing it.

The protagonist's father, an ambitious surgeon, does not understand and does not share the boy's choice of an internship at a hairdressing salon in the city, the *Maité Coiffure*. Louis is a shy and awkward boy and, although intimidated by the confident and determined people there, he works hard from the first day of his internship. It only takes a few days for the boy to realise what he wants in life, what he needs and what he does

3. "What struck me was her stubbornness, both in the way she was and in the way she wrote. For me she was a storyteller, someone who will always have a job and will always be successful because we will always need writers like her. Someone who inspires absolute confidence".

not need. Maité Coiffure, in less than a week, changes the boy's life, giving him hope, a goal, the joy of knowing what one is capable of and wanting to pursue in doing it, a place where he can be himself without hindrance or guilt. Louis discovers in himself a strength he never believed possible, a resilience given by the awareness of the emotions he has experienced, a determination that leads him to defend his talent, his abilities, his ideas against those who do not support him, such as his friends, or who even try to prevent him from realising them, such as his father, a figure dominated by schemes and preconceptions, by gender and class stereotypes and prejudices that want destinies already written.

Nowadays, the publishing scene for girls and boys is very reminiscent of the 1980s and 1990s, when in Italy series such as Gaia Junior and Frontiere told young readers about love, sexuality, violence, mental distress, homosexuality and families. The credit goes to Series such as Camelozampa, which publish stories such as *La fille du docteur Baudoin* (*La figlia del dottor Baudoin*), by the French writer. Alice Bigli and Simonetta Bitasi argue that the value of series like Camelozampa "is to seek new ways of addressing girls and boys without false moralism, ill-concealed educational intentions or simply pandering to the market. And thus consider them worthy recipients of a literature dedicated to them" (Bigli, Bitasi, 2023, p. 54).

Murail explains the reasons that, from her point of view, led her to talk about particularly uncomfortable topics that are little accepted by current morality, referring to an interview by Carla Poesio. The question was: "What drives you to tackle hot topics in some of your books for teenagers, such as abortion in *La fille du docteur Baudoin*?"

The French writer replied: "The subject of the novel imposes itself as an emergency. I *have to* talk about it. [...] *La fille du docteur Baudoin* I would not have written it if I had not met a girl who had just experienced this challenge. Which in France touches 10,000 adolescents a year and one in two women during her lifetime. Yet, we hide it, it is taboo. So, it becomes urgent to talk about it and suddenly this burns my lips.... So, here, I write to say what is kept silent" (Poesio, 2009, p. 45).

In the novel, surrounding the central figure of Violaine, the daughter of Dr. Baudoin, along with her dramatic events, revolve the stories of her entire family and other characters, each of whom is portrayed without stereotypes, giving each the dignity of their actions and experiences. Especially, Murail also focuses on Dr. Baudoin's patients, their physical and

existential sufferings, their hopes, their loves. These are not strange or fantastic characters, but real and authentic people.

Their actions are like those we perform daily in life, but the portrayal of often extreme situations gives the reader a strong sense of *otherness*, bordering on the *unheimliche*, the perturbing. The lives of others, illness, pain, love, sex, old age, the same everyday relationships, observed from close, give us the opportunity to experience diversity: a diversity that is disturbing because it is so close to us and so like us. Existences permeated with marginality represent the *topos* of her narration: we find these forms of otherness frequently and explicitly in different typologies, from Simple's disability to the refugee lives of the Baoulé children, in Siméon's illness to the domestic violence to which Barth's neighbour is subjected.

She states: "I feel it is necessary for children's books to introduce them to the complexity of our human nature, the ambivalence of feelings, the plurality of beliefs. The older we grow up, the more books must tell us that there are no good guys and bad guys on one side, that the border between good and evil is not completely defined, and that it is we ourselves who are traversed by these tensions. The older we grow, the more books must teach us courage, the courage to talk about anything, without fear and without taboos, and not hide from us the harshness of our human condition" (Murail, 2019, pp. 8-9).

3. Narrating challenges, reading to find courage

Marie-Aude Murail's stories are innovative and, in some ways, revolutionary because they propose original and at the same time divergent points of view and values very different from those of the adult world, focusing on the existential reality of children and young people. Her novels offer a path towards change, towards a social and democratic coexistence where diversity, all diversity, is welcomed and integrated.

The French writer presents difficult, sometimes disconcerting realities that tend to free us from predictability, conformism and custom, leading the young reader to emancipation by making him capable of facing the unexpected, the unknown and everything that causes fear in him.

Murail succeeds in engaging us because she opens up to the issues of contemporary society and the thousand questions that young people ask themselves: her stories are of great interest precisely because they de-

scribe, through the moments of social growth of her protagonists, the lives of teenage readers.

For instance, in *Oh, Boy!*, the protagonist Bart belongs to that category of young people who, although they belong to the age group of twenty to thirty, nevertheless behave as if they were teenagers, displaying almost the same tendencies, desires, and worldviews that belong to the younger generation. It is as if some young adults, instead of growing up, extend the time of their youth to full adulthood, thus postponing the responsibilities and commitments that come with adulthood.

In the novel *Simple (Mio fratello Simple)*, through the description of the vicissitudes of a boy with disabilities, the author explores new territories in which borderline images and elements of strong marginality appear. Murail considers identity as a place of relationship with others and their imagery. The novel focuses on meeting, on recognising each other, on being together without prejudice to overcome possible fears and stereotypes and to create relationships of friendship and mirroring that go beyond the anxiety that diversity generates.

Barnabé Maluri, called Simple, has a special otherness of his own: suffering from a severe intellectual disability, the boy grows physically (he is twenty-three in the novel) while remaining at the mental age of a three-year-old. Like Peter Pan, although not voluntarily, Simple stops 'growing up', continuing to see the world from a point of view that for him will be eternally 'other', different from that of his peers (Grandi, 2012; Trisciuzzi, 2018).

"But", the author wonders, "how can we talk about, for example, mental disabilities or abused women without losing the lightness of tone and without making this young reader lose hope. I have two resources at my disposal: my humour and my characters. Humour is a way of looking at the world and it is a way of life. In *Simple*, humour makes it possible to empathise with the hero who has a mental disability, just when any form of difference is frightening, especially at an age when you want so much to be normal. ...Humour is a self-recovery, [...] a weapon, a strength, an armour. This allows me to remain [...] light in my writing, even when the emotional load is heavy, even when the social criticism is biting. ... Now, I write, I remind you, so that my reader learns about complexity, ambivalence and plurality" (Murail, 2019, pp. 10-13).

The novels tell stories in which the characters change, evolve, diversify in terms of age, profession, social class, gender and sexual orientation,

and each of these is the bearer of a story that is significant to the narrative itself (Gramantieri, 2016). Reading Murail's novels is like leafing through the lives of others, glimpsing the unfolding of events and imagining at the end their old age and disappearance. The author reveals unknown events and allows us access to barely glimpsed or unknown worlds.

As in the latest novels composing the *Sauveur & Fils* saga: the first, *Lupa bianca, lupo nero*, published in Italy in 2019; the second, *Flipper*, released in 2020; the third, *Niente cravatta*, published, again by Giunti, in 2021. In France, the series consists of seven volumes, the last one published in April 2023, and the release of the eighth has been announced. Through the story of a psychologist, Sauveur Sant Yves, a forty-year-old black man of Antilles origin, who receives patients in his home office in Orléans and his son, the author brings us into contact with difficult, often traumatic and suffering worlds.

Murail states: "Since I have been seeing Sauveur, I feel much better. Patients of all ages and from all walks of life parade through his office, self-harmers, suicidal, hyperactive, depressed, transgender, school phobic, mythomaniacs, bipolar, people who hear voices, paranoid, obsessive compulsive, hikikomori addicted to video games, possibly autistic, more or less sociopaths, suffering from post-traumatic stress, believing in voodoo magic and neuro-linguistic programming, disoriented in this upside-down world, looking for love where they are sure not to find it, all have something to teach me about my humanity. The first person I teach when I write is me" (Murail, 2019, p. 15).

4. In conclusion, for a pedagogy of emotions

In Marie-Aude Murail's novels, we find many references to stories, to the need to narrate them, to the part they seem to play not only in the characters' affairs, but also in our lives. They are human stories, full of empathy and emotional richness. Just think, for example, about the story of school-teacher Cécile. Young and new to the teaching profession, Cécile was a shy and reserved child, and shy and reserved she continues to be. Story-telling in the classroom helps her to focus the children's attention on her.

Steven, however, is a child who falls asleep whenever Cécile narrates. She worries about this, being afraid that she is an incompetent teacher,

but her apprehensions are dispelled by Steven's therapist: "The therapist gave an astonished smile. «You give him an outstanding gift. You allow him to fall asleep to the sound of a narrating voice. His mum never did that to him».

Cécile was unable to articulate a single word for a while, busy holding back tears as best she could. Then she murmured: «You are the one who gave me an exceptional gift» (Murail, 2010, p. 143).

The classroom atmosphere can therefore offer support from the emotional and social relationship. In this case, it is possible to call the school an "affective atmosphere" (Goleman, 1996; Dato, 2019).

By bringing "emotional education" into the classroom, Cécile offers her pupils an emotional training, teaching them to listen and recognise themselves, their emotions in relation to the world around them, to talk about them and to relate to them in a conscious manner (Contini, 1992; Trisciuzzi, 2016).

The "emotional teachings" learnt during the early stages of life – childhood and adolescence – can lead our emotional responses: there is therefore an urgent need to operate from the earliest years of childhood, deepening emotional education, as mentioned above, in an affective atmosphere. Contini maintains, indeed, how essential it is now to have, within training programmes, spaces reserved for learning emotional communication (Marone, 2006), for training in listening to and recognising one's emotions, in dialogue and conscious confrontation (Contini, 1992). We would therefore refer today to an "affective schoolteacher" (Cambi, 1998), or even an "emotional schoolteacher" (Dato, 2004), no longer a teacher with unilateral and pre-established teaching techniques, but a teacher who wears the clothes of a facilitator of learning processes, valuing his or her pupils and listening to their emotional needs in their multiple forms.

Think about the success of the film *Inside out*, where children, through colourful characters, understood that there is sadness, that there is happiness, that there is anger, and that each of those emotions is important.

Through her stories, Marie-Aude Murail communicates the message of the importance of reading as an education in emotions to all audiences, young and old. During an interview, she states: "Literature is often depicted as the graveyard of the dead; instead, it is the nourishment of the living" (Terranova, 2016). She continues, because "reading means putting yourself in brackets, and within those brackets you can learn to live" (Ibid.).

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