

# **AT THE END OF THE PATH**

Italian edition published by EDIZIONI PUGLIESI Srl in 2008  
Italian editor Cosimo Rodia  
Translated by Sabrina Righetti, with the collaboration of Claudia Emma Pasi

# Introduction

by

**Cosimo Rodia**

If we just slow down, and spend some time thinking about literature, we will realize how also children's books have recently turned into business, above all in the opulent parts of the world, where they have become subject to – and have started relying on – the market laws of advertising, commercials, and testimonials.

Disney's classics, together with *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* are typical instances of this state of things.

In addition to this, cultural research upon the negative effects of homologation as a consequence of globalisation and “bestsellerisation” of children's literature has been carried out for a long time.

In this respect, the most worrying outcome would be that children and young adults may – as they probably already do – fall as prey to consumerism. In other words, as a consequence of massification and homologation, children would be classified as potential consumers rather than readers.

In this perspective, we confirm that Giovanna Righini Ricci's novels still offer some glimmer of hope, and represent a reassuring alternative.

Giovanna Righini Ricci (1933-1993) wrote several works, showing extraordinary ability in picturing children's turbulent developmental stages, and describing at the same time many aspects of a complex social environment.

Her novels are able to meet young people's expectations and longing for adventure, as well as their hunger for positive feelings and good relationships, whilst at the same time, they do not fail to deal with social, political, and cultural matters.

The reader will perceive a perfectly balanced mix of reality and likelihood in the various narrative motives, which is something young people are usually very pleased with.

From a general point of view, Mrs. Ricci's plots offer all the typical topics of children literature such as travelling, discoveries, funny encounters, and mysterious characters without overdoing it.

I would describe the author of *At the End of the Path* as a complete figure and a *round-angle* character, meaning that the subjects that are dealt with in her several different works – that have all been published by prestigious houses – are the typical issues of the best literature for young people.

Besides the themes of love and sensitivity creating a pedagogic and literary background, the author demonstrates a full awareness that every step of a child's growth corresponds to a different phase in the development of intellectual competence, and this is exemplified by her accompanying variations in language.

This is why Righini Ricci is said to have been able to write books for different age groups.

The author's literary trend is a relatively new one among children literature experts, and is based on the assumption that in order to be allowed into the world of young readers, novels must be dynamic and adventurous, dealing with the fantastic to some extent, but above all hiding didactic intents.

It is quite a complicated task to identify her best novel, and though we can define *At the End of the Path* as one of the most interesting and fascinating works, having to do with issues that despite the remarkably fluent and simple narrative style, could somehow let it fall within the wide group of bestsellers.

*At the End of the Path* was first published in 1985, when the author had already published important thematic novels about environmentalism and integration. In this new work, she deals with ethnic minorities crushed by the so called *civilization process*, thus rising – as stated by some critics - to a forerunner of multiculturalism. In the very beginning of this novel Ernesto and his children Chiara and Matteo are flying to Canada to meet Ernesto's brother Luigi who lives in Quebec with his Native American wife Kateri and their daughter Valentina.

Immediately after the first meeting between the two families, little Matteo talks to his sister about aunt Kateri's skin tone, claiming that it actually doesn't look so red, thus revealing a lot about his prior expectations. Kateri explains to the boy that Native Americans are simply called "Red Skin" because they traditionally paint their faces during ceremonies, and certainly not due to their reddish skin colour.

This passage marks the very beginning of a prejudice dismantling process which gradually unfolds in the narration, with Kateri's world taking shape through the eyes of a young girl, the protagonist Chiara.

Step by step, the girl is confronted with the striking difference between real things in the new context, and local people's lives as she had imagined them. She is the first one in the novel to identify and to overcome prejudice.

As they arrive at Kateri and Luigi's cottage, the Italian family catches a glimpse of a tiny round face, two little almond-shaped eyes, and a black- hair fringe. It is Babik, the Eskimo child of reported missing by parents, who is temporarily being looked after by the Reservation School Teachers.

During their stay, Chiara and Matteo visit the Native -American Reservation, where little Matteo offers Kateri another golden opportunity to wipe away stereotypes and prejudicial views about Native Americans. Matteo longs to meet an Indian saying "HOW", smoking the peace pipe and doing the war dance, but Kateri informs him that this only occurs in American movies, and that in the real world most Native Americans are just poor people.

Kateri's assistant "Madmoiselle Costance" is worried about the disappearing of the rebel Aigle Noir (Black Eagle). However, one day our protagonist Chiara runs right into an individual with furtive dark eyes and long hair, attached to a thin olive face; it is Aigle Noir, the novel's co-protagonist.

Kateri explains to her that Aigle Noir's rough behaviour is due to his failure to accept the rules and constraints imposed by the whites on his people, and that had Aigle Noir been born in the past, he could well have been a chieftain.

Not only does the truth slowly unwind before Chiara's eyes, but also the reader's.

The young rebel's story tells us the drama of all those who are consciously losing their own identity, and are not able to conform to a new culture.

The Italian family encounters another important experience during their visit to *grand mère and grand père*, Kateri's Native American grandparents. Young Chiara is very surprised to find a colour TV in such a poor and barren house, but it serves as a clear sign of changing times.

Later that same evening, Brother Novak keeps guests amused with his tales, and by means of the tale- in- the- tale technique, the reader enjoys the magic and unique atmosphere of ancient times.

During the night a storm erupts, and Chiara is very worried about Aigle Noir, wondering whether he will be able to find shelter.

Kateri tells her that he had first been very eager to learn and experience new things, but later, discovering the truth about his people's history, he started feeling deceived and his attitude changed completely.

The following morning, on their way home by helicopter, the group rescues Aigle Noir.

In order to spend some time with his brother, Luigi temporarily entrusts his Indian friend Katanna with the running of his firm, but Ernesto finds it very unwise and wonders how his brother can be so imprudent to trust a Native American. Luigi kindly explains to him that Native Americans are among the most efficient workers and that most of them are serious, quick and silent. Finally, Luigi claims that Katanna is like another brother to him, because when he first arrived in Canada from Italy, and had nothing but a few dollars in his pockets, his Native American friend took him to the yard, helped him find a house, and introduced him to his beloved Kateri.

Luigi's explanation allows the reader – who possibly identifies with Ernesto – to wipe away all prejudices, doubts, and stereotypes.

Adventures follow one another without a break. One day, the whole group goes fishing to a torrent nearby. Chiara wanders away, gets lost and injures herself. As usual, Aigle Noir appears out of nowhere and rescues her from the impervious place. Mutual affection pervades their hearts, while Chiara's sensitivity gradually reveals us more about the wild boy's personality and about the reasons for his rebellion. Aigle Noir sadly recounts stories about the past, when the whites came and seized their meadows, woods, and resources, they chased Native Americans away to the Reservations and let them die like stray dogs. He tells her how Native Americans were infected with previously unknown diseases, which were fatal to the young and the old, and how they burnt Native American soldiers' brains with alcohol, like they're presently destroying young people with drugs. Aigle Noir's miserable truth is this when it comes to Native Americans people. There can be neither peace nor justice.

Other adventures cause the mutual affection and empathy between the two young people, to grow stronger. After visiting *The Wood Hospital* where injured animals are healed, Chiara arrives at the village of the chieftain Bella Bella.

Bella Bella is old, and still devoted to traditional customs. Due to this, he is considered as a sort of picturesque tourist attraction.

Kateri tells Chiara that both Aigle Noir and Bella Bella are actually suffering from their failure to accept the Laws of History. She hopes that Aigle Noir may sooner or later accept the Laws of History, that he may finally stop wandering along the path of his past, and find the courage to live his life in the present. But she also believes that he will have to go through this process on his own, to avoid mistaking her or anybody else's intentions.

Kateri's ultimate purpose is to help him overcome the dark wall of misunderstanding that keeps their people apart from the rest of the world, whilst Aigle Noir's task is to help her reconcile the old with the new.

In fact, Kateri is the kind of person who loves and respects the world she comes from and does not forget her roots, but she believes in the coexistence of tradition and modern life. She speaks several languages and can use a computer; she embodies the idea of a perfect balance between old and new models, between identity and progress.

In the meantime Babik's parents return safe and sound to hug their child again. When they meet him, however, they notice his nice clothes and healthy look and decide to leave him with Kateri at the Reservation School.

The novel turns into a thriller when Aigle Noir is charged with murder and taken to jail. Chiara promptly offers to attest to his innocence, claiming to have been in the boy's company during the night in question. After a long examination, Aigle Noir is released and the upsetting adventure comes to an end.

It is finally time to leave and for the family to weigh the pros and cons of this meaningful experience. They all feel somehow different now, they have experienced new situations and seen a different reality, their minds are full of pictures, voices, colours, and previously unknown emotions. Aigle Noir feels different too; he has finally reached the *end of the path* and has taken the *main road*. The promise made to Chiara – "*I will come over to Italy someday*" – is the evidence of his change and/or of his acceptance of human changes.

In this extremely enjoyable novel, Righini Ricci also confirms her basic narrative strategy by presenting ethnic minorities as wealth sources rather than problems. The author emphasizes the mysterious and primitive side of the Native American culture, supporting ancient cultural motives in a socially and economically difficult background. After reading the book, we get the feeling that human conditions, habits and customs, as well as individual features are the necessary tesserae to complete the mosaic of humanity.

Another key feature of the novel is the critical attitude – expressed in the words of *Aigle Noir* – towards the common tourist practices of visiting ethnic minorities. Today, we are all so eager to run away from our stressful everyday life for a while, that we see these organized trips as perfect responses to our escape needs. In this case, however, the true motive of the trip is existential and relational dissatisfaction. However, temporary forays into different existences will never impose a real life change and consequently confer to these excursions, a sadly playful character. I personally share this point of view. The concept of travelling is strictly connected with the wish to change a whole reference framework. Travelling means to ideally collocate spiritual and material possessions into a kind of *epoch* where we can possibly come to life again and discover the essence of humanity. As tourists, we are probably very far from wishing to rewrite our own personal history and are therefore not in the right state of mind to perceive any of the “diverse” or “primitive” elements of “the other” world. Also, in this perspective we can define the author as a precursor.

Righini Ricci knows well that the future depends on what we sow and the way we have sowed it.

She had noticed that with the coming of the third millennium, a rather cynical, brutal, and sometimes even cruel and shocking idea of adventure was spreading wider and wider, especially in wealthier societies. She decided that her work would deal with an emotional kind of adventure with moral and educational purposes. The selected topics are tackled so enthusiastically, that the author is often considered as a forerunner in the way she provides a human and Christian answer to the aberrant standardization processes.

*Cosimo Rodia*