

*Le amiche che vorresti
e dove trovarle*

My Best Literary Friends
and where to find them

by

Beatrice Masini

with illustrations by
Fabian Negrin

Partial English translation by Lucy Rand

DIFFERENT, PRIMITIVE, OURS

Receiving Fabian Negrin and the publisher's invitation to take part in this project, which grew out of Fabian's pictures and his desire to move through this gallery of females in his own way, turned out to be both an opportunity and a command: to reread. Which is never a bad thing. I wonder how many books there are, over the course of my lifetime, that have influenced me? It's probably best not to try and count them! But I know it is the books that are brought to life by the friends you'd like to have (or we would've liked to have, would like to have had, still would like to have!) that are the most powerful. And some more than others. For me, one springs to mind immediately: *Wuthering Heights*. Naturally, inasmuch as I love it to pieces, it has been the most difficult to confront here.

And so off I went, into the book shelves, the dust, the memories of my first reading. Digging up old books, trying out new versions, sometimes going back to the originals. There were novels for grown-ups and novels for children, all brought together in a glorious cauldron of voices, rhymes, symbols and senses. From Salgari, the guilty pleasure of my childhood, all the way through to Bibi who jumps on and off trains, and Pippi who jumps on and off closets. I wonder every so often what it will bring about. What a little girl will think and feel when she reads these colorful portraits. Or a little boy, a woman, or a young man. But to be honest, that's their problem. It's never good to think too much about the reader of a story, because sometimes there isn't one. There isn't just one little girl or one little boy. Thankfully.

And that's how this book was made: in total freedom.

Only near the end of creating it did we decide, in unanimous agreement, that our number one friend and cover girl would be Stargirl. She is free and nonconformist. You either love her or you hate her, as the narrator of Jerry Spinelli's novel knows all too well. He likes Stargirl, a lot, but it is so difficult, so uncomfortable, to accept her differences. Just as difficult as it is to not be like everybody else. And a girl who carries a mouse in her pocket, plays the ukulele and prefers eccentric vintage dresses to the uniforms of her generation is about as different as you could imagine. After all, "every once in a while someone comes along who is a little more primitive than the rest of us, a little closer to our beginnings, a little more in touch with the stuff we're made of."

And that's exactly it: all of our women and girls are a little more primitive, a little closer to our beginnings, made of a little more of the stuff we're all made of. Made of aspirations and contradictions, of dreams, of theories. Maybe we imagined them differently. It doesn't matter. There are tens, no hundreds, of different ways to imagine. For now let's reach out to them, look at them, listen to them. And if we want to get to know them better we can search in the books they live in. We can go to their homes. They'll welcome us in and surprise us, and make us want to keep going back. They'll always be there waiting, like real friends. Because that's what they are.

Beatrice Masini

A WORLD IN EVERY FACE

Drawing is a solitary occupation, so drawing faces is one of the ways illustrators make friends. Or, in other words, get closer to other humans. Of course it is not because humanity resides solely in our faces, but because the face is where our eyes instinctively drift when we interact with others, and thus where we believe (even if erroneously) we find a person's character, emotions and thoughts. In fact, drawing a face well is no harder than drawing a hand or a foot, or a tree or a hare. When looking at a drawing of a face, however, the spectator (with all the thousands or millions of noses eyes mouths ears hairstyles he has seen during his long or short life in mind) is capable of noticing one eye bigger than the other, a mouth that is too red, or a wonky nose. To make a real person appear in a drawing, just putting the right things in the right places isn't enough. We have to also, somehow, get into their life, and this, just like a good friendship, requires not only technical ability but also good fortune, or chance. Or the descent of the muse, if you will.

In the process of illustrating this book, I have tried to personally get to know twenty-two people that I knew only vicariously before. Twenty-two extraordinary protagonists of extraordinary stories, who swam against the current of their times, or lived outside of the box. Characters whose authors told me about their lives, miracles, secrets that were sometimes unspeakable (Flaubert's rumors about Madame Bovary!), things that even the characters themselves didn't always know. Armed with all this information I tried to give a face to each of these girls and women that I – like all of us – loved so much. I used various techniques, wondering

why India ink seemed a more appropriate medium for Jo March than for Mary Poppins, or which style would bring us closer to the times a certain heroine lived in. I sought help from the great artists of history, holding séance gatherings with Vuillard, Mucha, Sargent, Piero della Francesca, Keeping, Fontana, Warhol, Kolar and many others. It is really totally pointless, if you think about it, the task of painting portraits of people who exist only in books. Utterly absurd. What's the point in giving a permanent face to a character that every reader can imagine however they like? That each one of us can see with our mind's eye in ways that are more akin to our own sensibilities? In my defense, sadly, there is no definitive answer to this. To accompany texts with images – to draw – is a senseless activity that humanity just keeps on trying, in the same way we sample good wines. It is almost as if for some people it is a need that, if not primal, is at least highly compelling. Perhaps it's the exact same need that one of our heroines, Alice, has. At the beginning of her adventures she asks: "What is the use of a book without pictures?" This book has twenty-two pictures. Twenty-two wonderful friends. And what would be the use of a book without friends...?

Fabian Negrin

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MARY POPPINS

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A bag made out of a carpet. Remarkable, really.

I mean, a carpet is a carpet. It wasn't born to be a bag.

I wonder whether the carpet felt it had failed its mission in life as a carpet when it was turned into a bag.

Perhaps not.

Mary Poppins's carpet-cum-bag certainly hasn't failed its mission. It's happier as a bag than it was as a carpet, because a carpet has only a top and a bottom. But a bag has an inside.

And inside is the world.

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“From the carpet bag she took out seven flannel night-gowns, four cotton ones, a pair of boots, a set of dominoes, two bathing-caps and a postcard album. Last of all came a folding camp-bedstead with blankets and eiderdown complete.”

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MARY POPPINS

Mary Poppins

1934

Pamela Lyndon Travers

Julie Andrews’s Mary Poppins had a reassuring, sunny smile, and Emily Blunt’s a friendly little face and an impressive propensity for solving domestic woes. But why couldn’t we just imagine the Mary of the novel, the true Mary, ferocious to the point of indifference, brusque, enigmatic verging on mysterious? Pamela Travers was rather evasive when describing her after all: “rather like a wooden Dutch doll” doesn’t give us too much of her image. “Large hands and feet” helps a little more, however telling us she will stay until the wind changes isn’t awfully helpful. But we enjoy her while she’s here, and just as she is. When she arrives at Number Seventeen Cherry-Tree Lane, at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Banks (he’s a banker in London, imagine that) ready to replace the nanny who had just given up, she is literally a godsend. Especially for the children in the family – Jane, Michael, and

the twins John and Barbara (later to be joined by a baby girl) – who are suddenly given fantastic opportunities to get to know other worlds, and different, strange people who they'd never usually get to meet, like chimney sweeps and biscuit sellers, bizarre gentlemen who have tea on the ceiling, bird women, policemen and balloon sellers. She is taken away by the wind, but Mary returns by the string of a kite in the second book in the series. Pamela Travers, born as Helen Lyndon Goff in Australia in 1897 and died in London in 1996, was an actor, poet and journalist. She came up with the story of Mary Poppins during her recovery from a serious illness: “She came to me to amuse me, staying long enough for me to write her down.” The stories, naturally, weren't meant just for children “for who knows where childhood ends and adulthood begins?”

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SHAHRAZAD

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Two years and two hundred and seventy one days, or nights. Let's say nights, because Shahrazad slept during the day, exhausted by the long and worrisome nights. When she was sleeping she would dream up stories that, one by one, she would tell to Shahryar, who was the King of Persia and a cruel man determined to avenge a past betrayal by marrying a young girl every night and having her killed the following morning. It was an tireless femicide. He was a tyrant and he got away with everything. But Shahrazad had a plan. She was courageous and reckless, and stepped up to put an end to this massacre. She exchanged certain death for the enchantment of a good story, a story that she hadn't finished telling when dawn came. The king was so intrigued that he agreed to wait until the next night to hear how it ended, but then she would begin a new story and the pattern continued. For two years and two hundred and seventy one nights. One thousand and one nights. He was deceived by the power of words. Outsmarted by a storyteller.

Shahrazad won in the end. She won the love of the king, and he made her his wife.

She became the wife of a murderer!

I wonder whether she loved him, in the end. Whether she had a say in it. Whether she could still find stories. Or whether they dried up, and from that day on she ever dreamed again.

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“Yes, dear father, I know the risk I run, but that does not alarm me. If I perish, my death will be glorious; and if I succeed, I shall do my country an important service.”

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SHAHRAZAD

One Thousand and One Nights

Around 1400

The tales that fall into the frame of Shahrazad’s endless story come from many different worlds, including Persia, India, Greece, Egypt, and Turkey. They are all intertwined, sometimes blending together, taking turns in the spotlight. All the stories are united by this one ingenious girl’s phenomenal desire for life. She is an extraordinary storyteller, rich in imagination and cunning, and she uses this as her weapon. The details of her tales sediment like a delicious deposit into the bottom of King Shahryar’s story. There is Aladdin and his lamp from which a generous genie appears if it is rubbed in the right way; Ali Baba and his challenge against the cunning merchants; Sinbad the Sailor with his Homeric voyages against unpredictable enemies like Rocs, giant cannibals and monkeys. There is the glitter of gold and precious stones beneath the light of a lantern, and the scent of spices exchanged on long journeys across continents. Shahryar was betrayed by his wife,

so he killed her. Feeling hopeless and vengeful towards all women, he began to take one young girl in marriage each night and kill her the following morning. He continued this methodically until his vizier's daughter, Shahrazad, devised a plan to save herself and all of female kind. She would tell the king a story that didn't reach its end before daybreak, thus postponing her execution by promising to conclude it the following night. The sovereign was so gripped by her story and the storyteller's charm that he agreed to suspend her sentence. In the end he takes her as his wife; the woman who has managed to distract him, bewitch him, and ultimately melt his cold heart.

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EMMA BOVARY

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Handsome, clever, and rich. With a certain inclination to meddle in other people's business. Harmless, happy at the beginning and happy at the end. What a wonderful story, Emma. Wait, just a moment. I've got the wrong Emma.

The Emma who is beautiful etc. is Jane Austen's Emma, who came before you. Apart from wreaking havoc in her little society with the irritating manners of a person with so much good fortune, like trying to marry off a naïve friend to the wrong man and concocting some other charming disasters, she did just fine. She even married for love. Who'd have thought!

Some years passed – just decades, not centuries – before you came along.

Handsome? Rather attractive, with dark hair and vivid eyes. Unsettled. Never content.

Rich? Well-off, in terms of abundant tranquil country land. You married a doctor, you had bettered yourself. But not enough.

Clever? Clever is useless if you are not happy or settled. I'd even go as far as to call it a disadvantage. You didn't want a man who kissed you at set times. You thought you knew what you wanted. You dreamed of happiness, desire and passion, like in the novels.

But women who read are dangerous, especially unto themselves.

Poor Emma and the torturous spasms from the poison that would kill her.

Poor Charles. Nobody ever talks about him. But deep down you admitted it yourself: he was blameless. He did only good.

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“But how do you describe an intangible malaise which changes appearance like the clouds, swirls like the breeze? She lacked the words, and thus the opportunity, the courage.”

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EMMA BOVARY

Madame Bovary

1857

Gustave Flaubert

On trial for obscenity and immorality; acquitted; immense fame. That is the concise version of the story of Madame Bovary from serial publication in the *Revue de Paris* to the two-volume version that came out a few months afterwards. Inspired by a news story, the novel tells the tale of a handsome and restless country girl who married a well-intentioned and smitten, but clumsy, uncouth and widowed doctor called Charles Bovary. Despite the care and attention that Charles gives his young wife, indulging all of her whims brought on by ambition and dissatisfaction, Emma has read too many novels for happiness to be an option.

The birth of their daughter and a transfer that was intended to distract her are of no avail: Emma continues to be unhappy and listless. She engages in other relationships – with Léon the student, and Rodolphe the landowner who beguiles

her and lets her down, then back to Léon – and spends money she doesn't have, surrounding herself by useless objects in her insatiable quest for beauty. The only way out that seems possible – the only escape from debts, desperation, and provincial life – is death. So she kills herself in the most dreadful way: arsenic poisoning, condemning herself to a slow and agonizing death. Charles, after discovering his beloved wife's infidelity, dies in turn, crushed by the grief.

About the Authors

BEATRICE MASINI

Beatrice Masini was born in Milano where she lives and works. She has a degree in Literature and she works as a journalist, editor, and translator, in addition to writing books for children, young readers, and adults. She has been awarded the *Premio Pippi*, the *Premio Elsa Morante ragazzi*, and the *Premio Andersen-Il mondo dell'infanzia* as best author. With her novel *Tentativi di botanica degli affetti* (Bompiani, 2013) she was awarded the *Premio Selezione Campiello*, the *Premio Alessandro Manzoni*, and the *Premio Viadana*.

FABIAN NEGRIN

Fabian Negrin has been living in Italy for thirty years and has been working as an illustrator of children's books. He was born in Argentina and studied in Mexico. He has illustrated and has also written books for children for publishers in Europe, America, and Asia. In 2009 he won the *BIB Plaque* at the Bratislava Biennale and in 2010 he was awarded the *Bologna Ragazzi Award Non-Fiction*. He has been nominated in 2014 for the *Hans Christian Andersen Award* and for the *Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award* on many occasions.