Introduction[1]

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A few months ago, I taught a class on children's cookbooks in my module on food and health in children's and YA literature. Of course, I wanted to show a specimen of children's cookbook to my students, and I chose my ancient, battered, egg-stained 1980s copy, translated into Italian, of Angela Wilke's *Usborne First Cookbook*. In Italian, the title is "Imparo a cucinare", "I learn how to cook".[2] Asking myself why I was choosing that book, instead of buying one for the occasion, I found out the answer was: because, to me, it is special. It is the book that guided me through my first cooking experiments as a child, my first attempts at making food for myself and others (sometimes with disastrous results, to which my mother would patiently try to remedy). It also introduced me to the idea that people around the world eat different foods. Leafing through the book, I see the recipe for "Hamburger all'americana" (American hamburgers in original), with a big USA flag flapping in one corner and one of the iconic little cooks, dressed like a cowboy, recommending the reader to accompany their burger with ketchup and a roast potato (*Imparo a Cucinare* 16). The French flag is stuck on the recipe for "Soufflé al formaggio" (Cheese soufflé in original), where the very first lines explain the meaning of the French word "soufflé" and invite the aspiring cook not to feel intimidated by this "capolavoro dell'arte culinaria" (*Imparo* 18).[3] Finally, a little man with thick, black handlebar moustaches proudly waves the Italian flag over the "Spaghetti alla Bolognese", just above the lines explaining how to cook spaghetti "al dente" (*Imparo* 20).[4]

However we may perceive these representations today, back then they conveyed to me the sense that some recipes were Italian, and some belonged to different people, with different eating habits and cooking techniques, and that I, an Italian child, could learn how to cook them.[5] Over time, this awareness developed into curiosity and passion, as well as into a growing collection of cookbooks dedicated to specific cuisines – Irish, Caribbean, Chinese, and Indian, among others – that exceeds by far the true capacity of my bookshelf. So, I showed to my students *Imparo a cucinare* because it is connected to food memories and practices that are part of my story and my identity, including my use of food as a tool to learn about the world. It allowed me to open a channel of communication between myself, an Italian woman, and my Irish and American students.

Cultural Identity, Encounter, and Conflict: Theoretical Background

The interconnection between food and identity – cultural, but also individual – and food's power as a symbol of cultural encounter or conflict have been a matter of academic discussion since the 1980s.[6] Massimo Montanari summarised this interconnection and this power in the axiom "food is culture" (xi). At the core of Montanari's conception of food as culture is the idea of choice: of what food to eat, how to prepare it, and when and how to consume it. So interwoven are these choices with the background of the people who make them, Montanari asserts, that their strengths as cultural signifiers, as vehicles and vessels of culture, can be compared to that of languages (133). Perhaps, he suggests, food can be even more effective a vehicle of cultural exchange than language is because, while it effectively encapsulates the other's culture, "[e]ating the food of the "other" is easier […] than decoding the other's language" (133).

Montanari's idea of understanding the "other" by eating their food successfully applies to the daily practices and cultural tools – including literature – that adults use to regulate the relationship between themselves and young people. Adults use food as an enculturation tool to ensure that young individuals "belong", fundamentally by conforming to the rules of their (adult) culture; and young people use it as an age-specific identity-making tool, with a parallel set of rules that sometimes contrast with adult eating practices (Ludvigsen and Scott 433).[7] In this regard, it is helpful to turn to Wendy Katz's (justly) much-quoted words from her seminal article *Some Uses of Food in Children's Literature*. Proposing an approach to children's literature that would "[yield] a sort of sociology of childhood", she suggests: "understand the relations between the child and food […] and you understand the workings of the world of the young […] an examination of what's eaten, by whom, when, and where gives one a portrait of children's manners, problems, and preoccupations" (192). In this sense, Katz's observations resonate with Montanari's reflections on food as a vehicle for cultural exchange, in this case between young people's and adult culture. Katz's words invite us to remember that this exchange is to be understood not only in terms of adults enculturating the young, but also in terms of the young creating their own eating culture, which adults must endeavour to understand, if they want to truly understand young people. Kara K. Keeling and Scott Pollard's *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature*, the first collection of essays entirely dedicated to this subject, added a further layer to our understanding of food as a cultural signifier in young people's literature. Food, they argue, not only is a cultural sign to be read, but is endowed with the energy of an action catalyst: "[f]ood makes things happen. It is acted upon (cooked, elaborated), but as a cultural force it also acts" (13),[8] moving the plot forward.

Katz and Keeling and Pollard help us understand the capability of food to signify and "project" culture towards an onlooker in young people's literature, acting as a cultural bridge; other studies, by contrast, highlight what could be defined the "shadow" side of food in general, and in young people's literature in particular: its power to enculturate,

and mark clear distinctions between "us" and "them" in terms of conflict. After all, cultures can meet, but they can also clash. Tapping into some of the harsher aspects of food consumption in this genre, Carolyn Daniel summarized the enculturation aspect, that is, the capability to convey – or even create – cultural identity in children's literature with the help of food: food scenes, she asserted, teach the reader "what to eat, what not to eat, or who eats whom" (4). From this perspective, by learning how to eat one learns how to *be* in the world either as "one of us" or not – an idea that conflates the symbolic and material power of food to "make" an individual, perhaps best represented by Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's most famous aphorism: "Dis-moi ce que tu manges: je te dirai ce que tu es" (8).[9] It also clarifies that, depending on the position of the onlooker, one can be eater or food, in both metaphorical and literal terms. This idea is also key to Bridget Carrington and Jennifer Harding's 2014 edited volume *Feast and Famine*, which reflects on responses to food and its absence in young people's literature, on its capability to empower or displace characters, of immediately marking them as "one of us" or "other", as eater or eatable. This need to assert boundaries, to clearly mark who eats what (or whom), can be tied to young people's literature's function as a tool to convey *national* identity. Reflecting on the role the concept of nation plays in defining people's identity, Kit Kelen and Björn Sundmark identify the "[making] and [education of] future citizens" as one of the key-tasks of young people's literature (1). While "culture" does not always necessarily coincide with "nation", food as a cultural element can be powerfully connected with matters of nation, nationalism, and nationhood, becoming a ground for both encounter and conflict.

Why "Eating Cultures"?

It must be remembered that texts for young people are seldom, if ever, written by the young. Consequently, it is a literature that expresses both nostalgia for and adult concerns for what children eat – physically and metaphorically. The way these preoccupations interlace with the relationship between food and culture is at the center of the reflections collected in the present volume. The collection investigates how the child is positioned as the recipient/eater of the "cultural food" in narratives from different national contexts, and it also highlights some elements that are to be found in more than one national menu, so to speak – that are, in fact, transnational. Each chapter explores what it means to serve a cultural meal to a young person, identifying the discourses that are added to the recipe, cooked, and served to them. By analyzing authorial or translational choices, the different chapters unpack the thematic and ideological roots of the stories that authors, illustrators and translators offer their young readers. Within the narratives here explored, young people are represented as the eaters who are fed the food culture, including its nightmares and fantasies, by the author. Through these books, adults imagine (or perhaps remember themselves as) children reflecting on food and eating; they make these imagined children approach the matter of food philosophically, connecting it to ontological reflections on

who they are and what makes them *them*, with a sort of Kristevan awareness that anything I ingest will become (part of) me, hence I must care about what I ingest.

The first section of the book focuses on narratives with a strong "enculturetion" aspect: Canani observes how anxieties about changing foodscapes and political measures for food regulation merge with concerns about changes in traditional family roles in 1980s England in Susan Townsend's *Adrian Mole* series; the strong connection between traditional family roles, food policies, and nurture is also at the core of Waddilove's analysis of post-war English children's literature. In both cases, the parents' ability to nurture their children, to present appropriate cultural (food) models represents a core concern in food scenes in the texts. Food as a marker of cultural identity in narratives from contexts with strong concerns about their political and economic autonomy, tinged with nostalgia for a glorious past, is at the centre of Myers's comparative analysis of two specimens of British and Italian children's literature. In this case study, food's power to define "us" versus "them" is key to understanding these narratives within their national and political contexts.

The second section is dedicated to inter/national and transnational nightmares, as in, narratives addressing the supreme threat lurking in young people's literature: being eaten. Analyzing the figure of the man-, or rather, all-eating giant, Kalogirou notes how this figure transcends national boundaries – and sometimes the boundaries of the page – to signify ingestion anxieties at all levels. The ability of ingestion anxieties to travel across space, time, and art forms is the starting point of de Rijke's analysis of a story that begins where many – at least in nature – end: a prey is devoured by a predator. Children's literature, however, provides an imaginative space where tragedy becomes opportunity, and notions of death, consumption, homely and un-homely are subverted. Subversion is also at the core of Gordon Ginzburg's analysis of consumption images in nonsense poetry from the two sides of the Atlantic Ocean, in which death by consumption – which the poet bestows on the consumed and on the consumer with equal jollity – happens at a crossroad between dread, threat, and laughter. A similar ambiguity about consumer and consumed, and laughable or nightmarish matter emerges from Orestano's study of images of the child as pig in the Victorian context. Analyzing these representations of fat children as both desirable and undesirable (as fatness was interpreted both as a sign of good health and as a sign of greed), Orestano also examines how they changed after the development of fat studies.

The closing section is dedicated to dreamed and imagined food cultures across and within national borders, where food emerges in all its catalyst energy and transforms societies. Kérchy's chapter analyses food in the Alice books and in their adaptations across a variety of media, highlighting how the nonsensical food of Carroll's texts has proven itself a powerful tool to imagine, and sometimes materialise, cultures of eating both monstrous and wonderful over time in different cultural contexts. In juxtaposition

to the nonsense-embracing creativity explored by Kérchy, in Löwe and Planka's chapter the analysis of food systems in cli-fi dystopias both produced and set in different national contexts highlights how the interaction between food systems, food culture and climate change poses questions to the young reader about possible futures where food shortage is a global reality. Plenty, on the other hand, is at the heart of Wieczorkievicz's chapter on dreamed banquets of Arcadian British authors and how this motif translates into different languages and food cultures. The analysis focuses on the key-feature of food in children's literature, that is, dreams of abundance, and zooms in on what happens when one food culture's concept of "abundant delight" must be translated into another language – or even if this can be done at all. Sundmark's chapter on Astrid Lindgren's books offer a different perspective on abundance and its opposite, hunger. The chapter explores how Lindgren's distinctive humorous approach to both plenty and lack of food becomes an occasion for showing empathy, building a community and creating occasions for encounter between different lifestyles. These elements also emerge from Travagliati's analysis of the Italian picturebook *Storia di panini*, where the sandwich, symbol of unseen female labor within the domestic environment, becomes a powerful trigger of change in the hands of a little girl, enabling her to bring about a more equal society. The collection closes with an afterword by Peter Hunt, where Hunt explores the complexity inherent to any attempt at formulating an overarching theory of food in children's literature, based on the "symbiotic" connection between food and culture, using British children's literature and food culture from the Victorian era to the present as a case study.

Enjoy.

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Notes

[1] The contributions included in the present collection, and part of the research presented in this Introduction, were part of the "Food and/in Children's Culture International Online Conference – National, International and Transnational Perspectives" hosted at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in April 2021, which had received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 840686.

[2] My translation.

[3] Literally, "masterpiece of the culinary art." In original: "A soufflé looks like a masterpiece but is surprisingly easy to make" (Wilkes, *The Usborne First Cookbook* 16).

[4] In original: "It should be soft but with a bit of 'bite' to it" (Usborne 18).

[5] In fact, the Italian translation attributed a nationality to dishes that either did not have one or had a name that would not be familiar to an Italian audience in the original English: "Perfect Rice" (*Usborne* 20) becomes "Riso alla cinese" (Chinese-style rice) (*Imparo* 22) and "Kebabs" (*Usborne* 23) become "Spiedini alla turca" (Turkish-style skewers) (*Imparo* 25).

[6] For an overview of the development of food studies as a field, and its interrelationship with children's literature, see Kara K. Keeling and Scott Pollard, *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature*.

[7] In a study analysing "children's food culture" among British children, Ludvigsen and Scott and note the contradiction between adult expectations about healthy eating in childhood and adults' "collusion" in fostering cultural expectations about children preferring "food that tastes good (sweet, salt and high in fat)" (433). In general, their investigation found that children's food culture stems from young people's need for agency, and for a way to differentiate themselves from the adults around them (433). The study performed by Fitzgerald et al. to ascertain the extent to which Irish children's food choices were determined by awareness of health matters reached similar conclusions (292–96).

[8] In their most recent collection of essays, *Table Lands: Food in Children's Literature*, published in 2020, Keeling and Pollard reflect on their decade-long work, addressing its developments and changes.

[9] Literally: "Tell me what you eat: I will tell you what you are."