



# **Prison Break - Promoting resilience through the arts**

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## **Abstract**

This paper elaborates some suggestions and intends to share some possible theoretical paths. Above all, it describes some very important experiences conducted in two Italian prisons. Those experiences were successful in terms of biographical resilience of young prisoners and in terms of promoting positive experiences for children visiting their fathers in prison. Two case studies were described, in particular: the Nisidiani experience (a group of famous writers working in Nisida juvenile prison) and the Millennium Ensemble concert in Frosinone's prison in 2022.

**Keywords:** *Social Work, Resilience, Music, Literature, Nisidiani, Millennium Ensemble, Veronica Maya.*

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## **Detained minors and the children of detainees: first and second childhood and first and second adolescence between wounds and traumas**

There are many works of social historiography, psychology, sociology of the family that have shown, especially since the 1970s in France, the United States and Italy, as well as in several other European countries, the devastating effects of traumatic events in early and late childhood as well as in adolescence. In addition to the general season of crisis and upheaval of the traditional family (which is also capable of being pathogenic for its children while maintaining its structure unchanged), it is necessary to consider (in addition to divorces, separations, bereavements, chronic diseases, drug addictions) as the major cause of the fractures of a serene line of development and construction of the identity of minors, In childhood as in adolescence, two factors: the first, which is not investigated in

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this article, is sexual harassment and the physical and psychological violence that minors may face; the second factor, on the other hand, is represented by the absence of parental or tutor reference figures due to prolonged periods of detention of one or both parents or of the child himself. In the case of early and late childhood and adolescence, we refer above all to the negative effects of the absence of one or both parental figures when they are under arrest; in these circumstances, their absence harms the reassuring and daily routines to which minors are accustomed, depriving them of the constant presence of parental figures, sometimes replacing them with technical figures who, although they are an expression of a welfare. But we are also referring, in the case of second adolescence and early youth, to the fracture of the relationship with the family that can arise when juvenile delinquents are arrested and are then removed from their daily lives and their usual spaces and transferred to a new and difficult place. This article attempts to highlight the importance of triggering rebirth dynamics in both types of situations described above. In particular, pausing to observe the liberating power of music and narration, this short contribution tries to offer suggestions in the wake of the theoretical works of Boris Cyrulnik, who have clearly highlighted the importance of promoting verbalization and all the multiverse languages within which it is necessary to convey the negative impulses resulting from traumatic events. triggering a new awareness of oneself and one's identity. When a subject undergoes a traumatic event, which in this case can be above all a forced detachment from a figure towards whom there is in any case a form of attachment and reassuring habit, promoting resilience means transforming the child from a simple prey to negative emotions of bewilderment and abandonment into a creative subject who slowly manages to mature a self-awareness and a self-story: within this almost literary operation of the psyche, the subject from victim and target of a trauma becomes, in his own eyes, a heroic figure capable of taking the reins of his own destiny in his own hands to change and grow. The promotion of other creative languages and moments of pure well-being through music proves to be the ideal solution also with respect to the preservation of the relationship between offspring and parenthood in the prison context.

### **First Case Study: The Liberating Power of Literature in the Work of the Nisidians**

Overlooking the sea of Naples, connected to the city by a thin isthmus of land, stands the islet of Nisida, which houses a juvenile prison and inside which, every day, school is held. Since 1984, Maria Franco, an extraordinarily stubborn and generous teacher, has been teaching here, who in an interview told how with each new group of young people, who express themselves in dialect and come from stories of blood and the street, she has not tired, for almost forty years, of reading, at the first lesson, Leopardi's *L'Infinito*. Each time they tell her that they haven't understood anything, but that they feel a disarming beauty. What sense does it make to bring classical poetry to young people who can hardly express themselves in Italian? Why not let them study directly in dialect? The choice of this teacher is courageous: to convey the estrangement of a high language, distant in its beauty; To choose the difficult path of leading them by the hand to a linguistic unknown that is beyond, right where the new self is that they must so be found. For over ten years, the voices of contemporary Naples writers have gathered around this woman: Maurizio de

Giovanni, Riccardo Brun, Valeria Parrella, Viola Ardone, Daniela de Crescenzo, Antonio Menna, Patrizia Rinaldi. They call themselves "I Nisidiani", and every year their literary adventures with the children become a book, thanks to the support of the Neapolitan publisher Diego Guida. From their testimonies, from their works, from the statements of the young people, we understand the value of duration: the long time of these interventions, diluted over the course of the year along a path of literature and growth, rewrites their horizon and makes them part of a story of reconstruction. Many arrive in prison at night, suddenly, and the weight of that instant in which their lives have changed seems to expand for a long time, crushing the flow of their consciences. The adventure of expression, of the encounter with these writers, of the narrative challenge, restores a healthy, growing, constructive relationship with a temporality that would otherwise be only a repetition of desperate instants, in the shadow of the instant that changed their lives by taking away their freedom. Through the work of these writers, on the other hand, the children conquer the flow of time by experiencing the limit: a limit that is not only deprivation, pitch on the wings of their youth, but is, above all, the containment of anger and the guardian of intelligence. The power of literature slowly, simply, rewrites their lives in the direction of new possibilities, and this circle of writers becomes the guardian of this process that ferries them from the immediate and inevitable to the mediated future, where a second chance to embrace life will open up before them. Maria Franco also recounts many failures, even deaths on the street, but most of the stories of these young people are positive stories: they verbalized emotions such as anger, abandonment, resignation and shaped them into a new existential possibility. It is a slow process of resilience, made possible through the narrative approach to their own biographical events, bringing literature into their lives. The case study of the Nisidians represents an educational model to be multiplied and disseminated in all juvenile prisons, through teachers of literature and authors able to excite the children. It would be naïve to believe that literature can fill the irremediable void left in these very young lives by the absence of positive parental figures, however the compensatory function played by educators and teachers remains undeniable: These can, by offering lively texts and opportunities for expression and dialogue, make them feel a presence in the absence of alternative adult references and, above all, trigger in difficult children a life purpose, an alternative vision of the dynamics of the world, an opportunity for commitment and intellectual challenge capable of making them discover talents that they did not know they possessed, thus promoting a renewed sense of self – so, from young lives doomed to destruction and failure, they might be able to become young people who open up to life, despite everything, with the desire to build a future for themselves.

### **Second case study: the liberating power of music in the work of the Millennium Ensemble with the voice of Veronica Maya**

This second case study also has to do with the liberating force of an important piece of literature: the fable and fairytale heritage. But it is an experience dedicated to an older age group, which mainly involves children between two and thirteen years old, and is accompanied by music. The Millennium Ensemble is a wind quintet composed of Fabio Angelo Colajanni on flute, Massimo Lamarra on oboe, Emanuele Geraci on clarinet,

Paolo De Gasperis on horn and Gaetano Lo Bue on bassoon. These musicians, through a melodic and onomatopoeic work at the same time, musically narrate Aesop's Fables and the Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm, mainly in schools throughout Italy, including the islands, but also in the pediatric wards of hospitals and prisons. The reference literature on the symbolic-cultural and educational-emotional function of the fairy-tale and fairy-tale heritage is boundless: Bruno Bettelheim, Marie-Louise Von Franz, Vladimir Propp, Gianni Rodari, Carl Gustav Jung... Grasping different aspects of it, all these authors have underlined the value of this great heritage that the popular imagination has transmitted from one generation to the next, sedimenting hypotheses, adventures, roles, moral teachings for centuries. A narrative-literary heritage that has given voice to the depths of the psyche but has also shaped pathological and salvific dynamics, elaborating a language that is apparently simple but full of suggestions, allusive, exhortative. In contemporary Italian society, especially in socially deprived contexts, the trusted adult who finds the time to tell stories is not a predictable and widespread figure as in the past, when communities, devoid of digital tools, multiplied the narratives of the world, to pass time. Even less obvious is, for the children of less fortunate Italy, the experience of live music. I would like to emphasize the didactic and emotional value of this project, which blends narrative aspects with the bodily experience of well-being triggered by music. Through the work on Maestro Schembari's texts, another musical instrument enriches the project: the narrative voice of the artist Veronica Maya. Thanks to her sensitivity, not only does the narrative unfold with its contents, but through a playful and emotional modulation by the actress a musical message and an allusive-imaginative game is built: the cold wind, the shepherd's laughter, the bleating sheep, the sounds of the Bremen musicians, the witch's fear and so on. The voice, a unique instrument because it is capable of singing words and language, envelops the children to the point of igniting in them the vision of an elsewhere from which they will return transformed, excited, ignited. The children, listening for the first time to the virtuosity of the flute or the funny sounds of the bassoon together with the vocal accompaniment, literally vibrate in their chairs, taken by the enchantment of the ancient and new game of narration. A project that is only apparently simple, which disseminates the salvific and normalizing power of music and literature intertwined at the service of society. Perhaps the most significant event is the one that took place in the prison of Frosinone on November 21, 2022, on the occasion of the anniversaries for the feast of St. Cecilia, patron saint of musicians. Veronica Maya, Alessandro Camilli and the Millennium Ensemble met the inmates with their families for a concert that saw the staging of the show "The Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm" with original music by Maestro Giuseppe Bonafine, in the presence of the composer. Among the most beautiful testimonies given to the protagonists at the end of the event, the one of a prisoner who repeatedly thanked the artists because it was the first time since he was in that place and received his family, that his children would return home with a smile. In a grey and frightening place like a prison, children are forced to see their parental figures mortified and forced: through this project, a moment of normality and beauty has become possible.

Perhaps these precious moments of well-being and simple normality should be further promoted and encouraged by the legislator, in defense of the need for innocence and sweetness denied to children whose parents are imprisoned, and in favor of the well-being and enthusiasm for life that all children should be able to feel.

### **Body and voice as tools to promote resilience: the art of Veronica Maya, enchanting mermaid**

When I interviewed Veronica Maria in order to prepare this article, I was immediately struck by her voice: a silky voice, very sweet and capable of modulating itself following the thread of emotions and the story. I was struck by her ability to use her as a dancing living body, able to draw real frescoes in his sound field, able to arouse in the interlocutor a lively, almost visual imagination of what he was telling. This is certainly due to a natural talent strengthened by years of study and training, including the good fortune of being the daughter of art, She is the daughter of an actress who has been directing a large school of theatre and musicals for decades and therefore has given her the opportunity since she was a child to play with the modular potential of the voice. A certain musical training has also led her to develop a sensitivity and ability in singing and, not last, A solid training as a dancer, both classical and contemporary, has allowed her to create a holistic and enveloping way of telling, in which the choreographic movement recalls the vowel movement and in turn this plays and reverberates between onomatopoeia and melody. I jokingly told her that I would remember her as an enchanting mermaid, for her uncommon voice and her green and iridescent eyes like the sea of Naples, but beyond the jokes the song of the sirens is the basis of the classic Mediterranean heritage and contains the magic ingredient that drives those who travel, and after all each of us is a traveler in life, to leap towards an unknown adventure. The sirens' song is the temptation of the new, it is the exercise of imagination with respect to a path already trodden - so much so that Ulysses' sailors wear wax plugs and only he, at the risk of risking madness, ventures into listening. So listening is the key to history, the key to every possible narrative, from the ancient one and Homer's, with its southern visions, to popular tales, which are mixed with choreographic movements, refrains and songs and sediment for millennia in the imagination of peoples even outside the meridian context. Difficult children, children whose parents are detained in prison, people who are recovering from a secret wound have in common the instinct and the need to listen; the educator, and even better if possible the artist, have the task of making the chords of the narrative vibrate with all possible tools. Such a theatrical, so engaging, at times even interactive approach because it is characterized by moments of exchange with the public, guarantees the traditional and ancient art of storytelling a charm and effectiveness that has nothing to envy to the augmented realities and special effects proposed by mass cinema, which amazes with colours and landscapes while impoverishing itself in semantics and words. In contexts of suffering, the spectacularization of the story proposed by cinema is not enough, while the impromptu interactive narration can really trigger a fuse of curiosity and change.

### **Theoretical considerations on the importance of fairy tales and fables in re-educational processes and in the construction of the self.**

Sometimes we forget that the most difficult task for minors, whether they are educators, teachers, parents, grandparents, is to help them search for meaning in life. The human being is characterized by a need for meaning to which he also responds collectively in the most varied ways, think of superstitions, the sacred, everything that happens in the magical thinking of primitive peoples, as well as in the beliefs of global citizens, who have not been prevented from relying on fortune tellers, horoscopes, and even pagan rituals in some areas of the West. In the case of minors, education cannot consist only in exposure to content, although at least since the 1700s there have been questions about the essential contents to be offered to generations and several times philosophers and pedagogues have tried to offer models of behavior, references, or a heritage of moral teachings through literature. But beyond the classics that can be proposed to children or the indispensable content that the school must bring to the learning of these young people, the fact remains that as a child grows up, he must absolutely learn to understand the world but also to understand himself well; The capacity for introspection makes him able to place himself among others in a more fluid and conscious way and possibly in the tiring search for a meaning to get up after each fall. Inner resources, before being an ethical and psychological issue, constitute the antidote to a destabilization and autonomy with respect to community life to which minors can easily fall prey and then seek compensation in violent attitudes or in the consumption of drugs and other kinds of addictions. Fairy tales and fables, in different ways, address the theme of choices and the connotations of identity and in doing so promote the overcoming of negative feelings and the experience and promotion of positive feelings; that is, they promote hope in the future, which will sustain them while facing adversity. Paradoxically, however, much of the literature dedicated to children, aimed at developing their cognitive skills, fails to stimulate and feed the difficult problems in the inner self. Increasingly, in the West, it seems to be in front of refined scholars who precociously specialize, use techniques but are then disoriented as people who have never studied. Information and specific knowledge applied to particular situations without cultivating a *weltanschauung* at the same time produce very fragile young people, informed but unable to read the book of life because they lack a sense of vision; The particularly Anglo-Saxon approach of *edufainment*, laudable in many respects and comfortable from a didactic point of view, has proved to be a negative boomerang with respect to the inner and linguistic awareness of the children. Inevitably, in a season of great acceleration, we discover that civilization, like a sea wave, sends us back to a rock where only an enchanting mermaid can help us rediscover the poetry of slowness, which preserves the being and the meaning of our lives.

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