

*Menino, Menina*, by Joana Estrela. Carcavelos: Planeta Tangerina, 2020, 48 pp.

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Children's literature has a profound impact on children's holistic development, as it fosters their understanding of different cultures and of their sense of self. It nurtures their cognitive abilities, develops their emotional intelligence, and contributes to shaping their social interactions and interpersonal skills. When writing for children, we have to bear in mind that the books should be age-appropriate, sensitive to the developmental stage of the readers and crafted with a clear intention to educate, inspire, encourage open dialogue and entertain, rather than imposing particular beliefs or viewpoints (Amante *et al.* 2019).

In light of the above, many books have recently been challenging traditional gender roles and norms, breaking down barriers, promoting diverse representations and offering young readers new perspectives on what it means to be human (Madalena & Ramos 2022). The narrator(s) and characters provide a fresh lens through which readers can examine societal expectations that are related to, or that defy, masculinity and femininity, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of the world around us, and empowering girls and boys equally (Amante 2023). I subscribe to Levitt's conceptual framework of gender, which encompasses the intertwined elements of gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality:

[M]y thesis is that genders are social constructs that cohere sets of personal qualities that are either associated with physiological sex or developed in response to existing genders. Genders function to address unmet psychological, interpersonal, and cultural needs. They support people's needs to (1) coalesce sets of gender characteristics that provide a sense of authenticity and fit with their sense of selfhood and positioning in relationship to others, (2) create cultures that value characteristics that were stigmatized and denied within prior gender norms, (3) communicate affiliation and status to moderate safety, and (4) embody these characteristics via an erotic aesthetic that fuels sexual attraction and self esteem. (Levitt 2019, 60)

In this context, my aim is to discuss the representation of gender in Estrela's writing, by reviewing her picturebook *Menino, Menina* (2020). Thus, in the next few pages, I will explore the subjectivity of the writer and illustrator in portraying diverse characters, with a particular focus on gender, highlighting that they are not necessarily confined by their physical appearance or societal expectations.

In *Menino, Menina*, we find, right on the first page, the question “Menino ou menina [Boy or Girl]?”, and we are shown a baby boy lying in a cot with blue bedding, dressed in a blue outfit, almost as if challenging us to think about the deeply ingrained societal constructs and expectations surrounding gender. In fact, the first page underscores the immediate association between the color blue and the male gender identity; hence, the question leads us to reflect critically on the ways in which early childhood representations may inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes. The phenomenon of gendered color association manifests itself during the prenatal period, when expectant mothers and fathers, friends and family often select clothing and accessories in either blue or pink as soon as they ascertain the sex of their unborn children. Such prenatal expressions of gendered colors contribute to a complex tapestry of gender socialization, raising questions about the extent to which these seemingly innocuous choices may shape and perpetuate gender stereotypes throughout an individual’s lifetime (Gieseler 2017).

Interestingly enough, in a world of binomial constructs, such as the binary gender system, we are struck with the question that follows on the second page: “Traquina ou traquina [spirited or spirited child]?” The repeated use of a neutral<sup>1</sup> adjective here is intentional to show that there are no differences in the nature and attitude of the two kids, and it puts into perspective the need to embrace a more inclusive and nuanced perception of gender, one that recognizes its fluidity and diversity beyond the traditional binary framework.

The pages that follow continue to explore various scenarios, either by depicting two young characters sharing the middle part of a blue and pink ice cream bowl and asking, “Azul ou rosa [blue or pink] / Guloso ou gulosa [sweet-toothed]?”, or by portraying a blue character cutting his/her hair, paired with the question “Curto ou comprido [short or long]?”, and then “Calção ou vestido [shorts or dress]?” We cannot help but notice the fact that now we have a gender-specific adjective to refer to the sugar-loving kids, but we cannot really tell who is what, and one willingly chooses the inner, purple part, while the other awaits his/her turn with a smile.

The rhythm and rhyme that connect each pair of pages are also important, one complementing the other, as part of a symbiosis, revealing a perfect balance and profound interconnectedness. When two pages make a single panel, such as the one where there is a “Ponta de lança [striker]”, the next pair complements the former – “ou génio da dança [dance prodigy]?” – both in terms of rhyme and sensitivity, one more sporty, the other more artistic. And if we could possibly and immediately associate soccer with boys and maybe the performative arts with girls, we are once again challenged and asked “Precisas de saber se é rapariga ou

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1 In Portuguese and in many Indo-European languages, unlike English, adjectives are typically gender-specific, meaning they agree in gender with the nouns they are modifying. However, there are also epicene adjectives, like “traquina”, meaning that they remain unchanged regardless of the gender of the noun.

rapaz [Do you need to find out whether it's a girl or a boy]?" No conclusive answer is provided: "Só olhando nem sempre és capaz [Just by looking, you cannot always tell]". Further on, we read "Já dizia a minha avó... [My grandmother used to say]" / "'Entre gostos e cores, cada um com seus amores' [Among tastes and colors, everyone has their own flavors]" / "Pois caras vemos, / O resto não sabemos [for faces we see, / the rest is a mystery]."

That is exactly what we are shown later in the book, where we find a gender-ambiguous character, with short hair, hairy legs, and a flower held in between his/her lips, like a toothpick. Despite wearing a skirt, his/her relaxed posture suggests a freedom of expression that transcends typical gender norms, a transcendence aligned with the pages that follow and that question not only body appearance and one's actions but also draw attention to the blurring of lines regarding self-expression and societal expectations, because, after all, "A resposta não está debaixo da roupa [The answer is not beneath one's clothing]", that is, "Não há só dois tipos de pessoas [There are not only two types of people]..." / "Que entre si são iguais [who are equal to each other]", because each one is special and unique, and their uniqueness goes beyond just a single trait or characteristic. In other words, there is more to them than meets the eye, as we are told: "As identidades são múltiplas [Identities are multiple]" / "Somos todos muito mais! [We all are much more]", emphasizing the complexity and multifaceted nature of each person.

Thus, this picture book reminds the reader that the truth does not lie in the eyes of the beholder but within oneself. We are the ones who know ourselves best, and we should forge our own path, as depicted through the complex and intricate network of routes and pathways found in the last pages of the book.

Transcending cultural and linguistic boundaries, this book illustrates a universal message, one of self-discovery. Using exactly the same pictures, Jay Hulme, a British writer, poet, and LGBTQ+ activist, adapted it to an English version entitled *My Own Way* (Estrela & Hulme 2022), inviting readers from different linguistic backgrounds to enjoy this visually captivating, rhymed message.

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