

## OPEN LETTER TO THE EDITOR

FRANCESCA CAVALLO  
Children's Author

Dear Editor,

**M**y name is Francesca Cavallo, and I'm the co-author of two *New York Times* bestselling books named *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* and *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls 2*. Over the past 12 years, I have written 13 children's books published in more than 50 languages and the focus of my artistic exploration has been the decolonization of children's literature.

I am a queer woman, and I grew up in a small town in Southern Italy. I was always an avid reader, but I never stumbled on anyone like me in any of the many books my mother bought me, or in the ones I borrowed from my school library. I never saw anyone like me in the cartoons I watched with my sister. As a result, it took me 23 years to figure out a) that lesbians existed; and b) that I was one.

At about the same time I discovered I was a lesbian, I started reflecting upon the heritage of colonialism in my identity as a Southerner. I grew up in a town that is 2 kilometres away from a huge dump for "non-dangerous toxic waste" and 20 kilometres away from an enormous steel factory—both the dump and the steel factory are the biggest in Europe in each category. Like too many other factory workers, shortly after retiring my grandfather died of a kind of leukaemia that killed many thousands of people who spent time producing steel or just living close to those who did.

As I started opening my eyes to who I was, I started seeing more clearly where I was coming from. Things I had considered unworthy of attention, started to seem important ... crucial even. Not just for me, but for the entire world. But if these "things" were important ... why were they not in the books I was reading? The stories, the characters that had seemed so varied, so different from one another, suddenly started to appear irritatingly homogeneous. Why was I reading yet another book about a man who was braving the wilderness and finding a way to tame other men, other creatures, or an entire civilization to prove his value?

Why was I reading yet another story about a good-hearted, invariably beautiful princess unable to defend herself from the meanness of an ugly stepmother/stepsisters/husband/passing-by witch? Why was I reading yet another story that was inventive enough to describe in vivid detail fantastic animals, but somehow could not muster up the courage to get rid of a rigid class system? What else was missing from the stories I had been fed? And what were the effects on society, and kids in particular, of silencing all those *other* stories?

I knew what the effects of those voids were on me.

Because I was never presented with a queer character, I spent my entire adolescence and early adulthood feeling like there was something wrong with me.

Because the places I found in books always looked different from the one where I came from, I grew up thinking that we were not worthy of being in books. As embarrassing as it is to admit, I grew up thinking there was a reason why the dump and the steel factory were placed close to my town: what did we have that was worthy of being preserved after all? Not grass, not apple orchards, not cows, no castles ... just olive trees, sand and unfinished buildings.

Children's literature is imbued with colonialism not just for what is in the books, but also for all that's missing. The missing characters, the missing places, the missing stories teach kids what deserves to be in books, and what doesn't.

Historically, children's stories have always been considered instrumental in building the foundation of our society. There is a lot we can learn from children's books about the kind of society our ancestors considered desirable, perfect even. Children's literature has always been considered a lesser art because of its audience—many grown-ups consider children “humans in the making” rather than humans—and because of this moral aspect. Children's stories traditionally must teach something, hence—the thinking goes—it can't be as pure an art as “regular” literature which is free from these kinds of concerns.

We are all very familiar with the moral of some of the most famous children's stories of our tradition. Pinocchio? Lies get you in trouble. Little Red Riding Hood? Don't trust strangers. Three Little Pigs? Hard work is important!

Children's entertainment has changed significantly over time, and the moral of the stories our kids consume can't be nailed so simply

anymore. Let's think of *Frozen*, for example, a modern classic seen by tens of millions of children around the world. The moral of the movie is complex and modern: the story teaches kids about family love, but also about the importance of embracing one's true self; it even goes as far as questioning the importance of romantic love—unheard of for a story starring two princesses!

But the moral of the story is not all children learn when they read a story or watch a movie. In fact, the “message”, the thing that makes us—the grown-ups—feel good, and even tear up about what we are showing our kids ... in most cases remains of no interest to the kids. Kids tend to focus on much, much smaller details and experience stories in ways that are fundamentally different from ours. Understanding what happens in children's imagination when they are exposed to a story is crucial if we want to try decolonizing the stories we are offering them.

But what do I mean when I say “decolonize” in this context?

I mean making sure that our stories do not reinforce values that are fundamental to colonialism such as economic exploitation, ethnocentrism, racism, paternalism etc.

To go back to the *Frozen* example: despite the modernity of Elsa's journey of self-discovery, there isn't a single moment where the fact that she lives in a castle is put under scrutiny. Yet, we know very well that the social structures that allowed some of us to live in castles were based on economic exploitation.

When girls buy Elsa's toys to feel more like her, what they buy is the colonial ideal of beauty and success: her blonde, thin body, her castle, her beautiful gown.

The inner journey of this character may have changed, but the circumstances, the details, and the way the character is presented to kids haven't changed ... at all.

One of my closest friends in Sidney is from Sri Lanka. She and her husband have an incredibly smart daughter, who—one day—got home and announced she wasn't going to eat chocolate ice cream—her favourite—any more. When my friend asked her why, she said she wanted to be like Elsa ... and she thought chocolate ice cream would make her skin darker.

Children explore stories in ways that are different from ours, and their unique perspective has the power to reveal agendas we may not even be aware of, an imprinting we received and forgot about, one that we may be uncomfortable acknowledging.

By making a princess living in a castle the character worthy of such an important spiritual journey, we are *de facto* replicating the colonial idea that whiteness and wealth make people not only more powerful but also morally superior to other human beings.

This idea is rooted in us way deeper than most of us are willing to admit.

At this point, you may be ready to label as “wokeism” the approach I am describing. After all, adding marginalized people in TV shows and (to a lesser extent) in children’s books—even going so far as to change published works by deceased authors—seems to be the latest trend. However, the obsession with using the “right” words isn’t all there is. The right words matter when they allow our conversations to go deeper. If all they do is sanitize our communication with the hope that we don’t find ourselves in any uncomfortable places, we are simply failing to produce culture that matters. We are fabricating our own irrelevance, and by doing so, we are damaging our democracies.

The journey to decolonize children’s literature is a political and a spiritual one.

It starts with our willingness to look within ourselves, and to do the work that is necessary to free ourselves from the need to dominate others.

It’s not the topic we choose that makes a story “decolonized”.

It’s the kind of human we want to be after reading it.

I never write to teach children about something. I write to learn with them. I never start from “the message” because that is the kind of paternalistic concern used by colonial powers to hide (not just from others, but from themselves) their lust for domination. I ask myself difficult questions, and I share with my little readers—and with their families—the process of looking for answers.

I try to find ways to show children the world in all of its glorious diversity: I do not censor the presence of entire categories of people simply because they don’t serve the kind of narration I am comfortable with. I do my best to sit with my little readers before the complexity of the world, to hold their hand when it gets a bit harder, or even painful. As a children’s book author, my job is to be there, to make it possible for them to see, to wonder about the nature of life, to question our role in the creation of a just, peaceful world.

The idea that we can or should aspire to a world that doesn't trouble us, that never puts us on the spot, the idea that we should dream of a life that is tailored on our dreams and capabilities ... is at the core of most children's narratives. And it is a colonial one. Colonial powers justified all sorts of violence against humans and against nature by buying into the delusion that by bending nature, by coercing other human beings to comply with their desires, by appropriating as many resources as they could, they could bring their vision to life. Then, they sold us the idea that bringing our vision to life, no matter the cost, is what makes us heroes. That it makes us stand out. And that standing out is not only preferable to blending in, but the one thing that makes a life worthy.

When I wrote *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*, a book of bedtime stories where fictional princesses are replaced by tales of real women who took their destinies into their own hands, I worked hard to challenge that narrative. Many of the stories we selected were of women and girls most people had never heard of. Some of them were important scientists, or politicians, sure, but there were bakers, surfers, schoolgirls ... my goal was to show that many of these women rebelled not only against sexism, that their rebellion lay in the strength they showed to live life on their own terms, to explore themselves and the world not for the sake of success, but because of a much more powerful and enchanting force: curiosity.

Within the colonial mindset, curiosity without conquest is childish. Exploration without appropriation is the worthless exercise of people who "don't have what it takes". There is a quote that opens one of my favourite books of all times, *Da cosa nasce cosa* by the Italian master of design, Bruno Munari. The quote is from Lao Tsu.

Here it is:

To give birth, to nourish,

To bring forth without taking possession, To produce without appropriation,

To create without controlling—

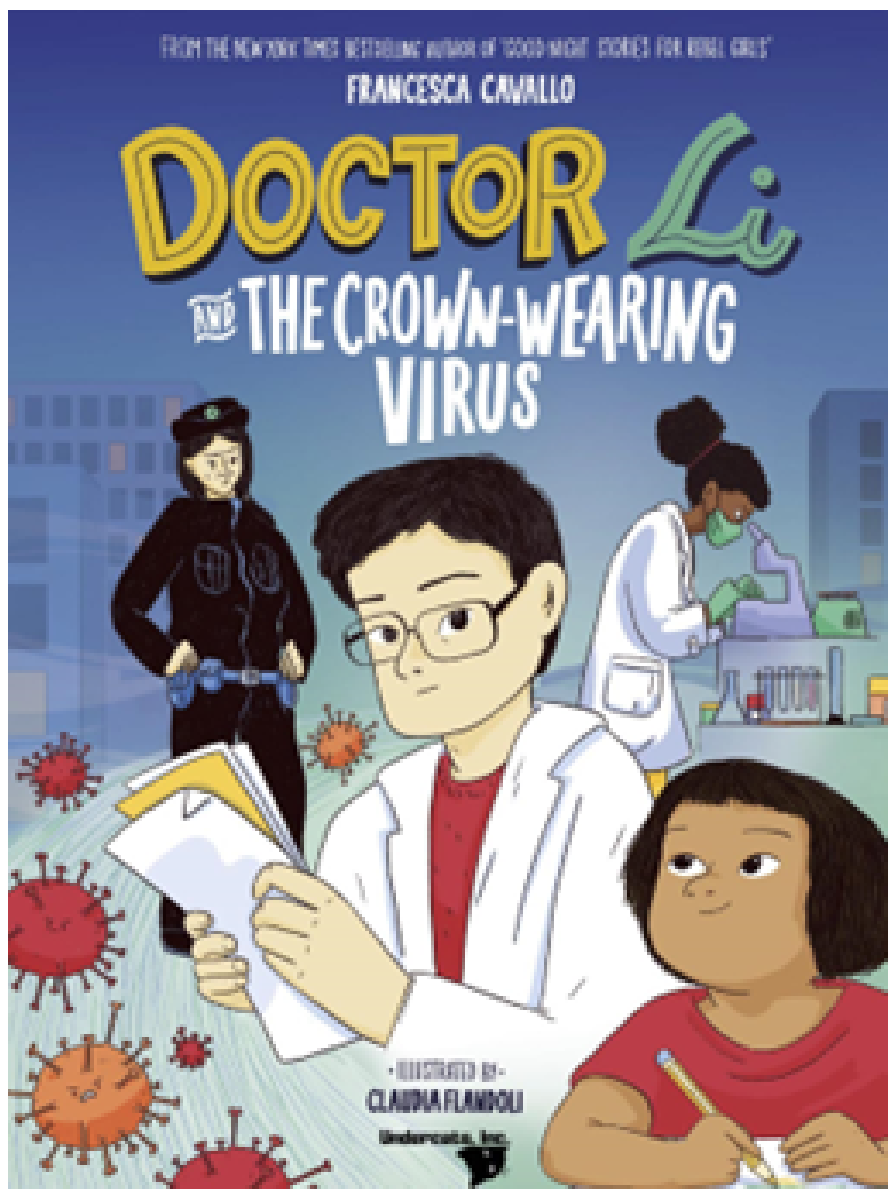
That is the hidden virtue.

Forget the moral of the story: what are the hidden virtues that are woven into the stories we tell our children?

I wrote *Doctor Li and the Crown-Wearing Virus* in 2020, during the first Covid lockdown and in the midst of a surge of anti-Asian racism. Donald Trump was referring to corona as the "Chinese virus" daily. Chinese authorities were monitoring closely whoever spoke about the virus. I felt

like no one was trying to explain to kids what was going on. We were consuming huge quantities of news to have a sense of where we were heading, but kids barely knew why they had been pulled from school. I didn't find that democratic, so I wrote a short story to tell them about Doctor Li Wenliang, the brave Chinese doctor who had challenged his government to tell the world about the virus spreading in his hospital.

I held their hand and spoke about neighbours cooperating and scientists looking for vaccines. I told my little readers what was going on, and tried to hold their hand. The story, which I shared for free on my website, went viral; it became the widest-read children's story during the pandemic, and it was translated by volunteers into 38 languages. It was also censored by the Chinese Government.



The books I wrote have been censored in Russia, Turkey, Georgia, Iran and China. Luckily, since children's literature is considered inherently harmless, they have always been censored AFTER they had been published.

The book bans in the United States, though, reveal that conservatives are trying to do everything in their power to prevent children to access a decolonized literature, because they realize—perhaps more than progressives—that if children grow up reading stories that challenge the way our society is structured, it will be incredibly hard to put the genie back in the bottle when they grow up and convince them that inequality is a necessary evil, or that LGBTQ+ people are a danger to society.

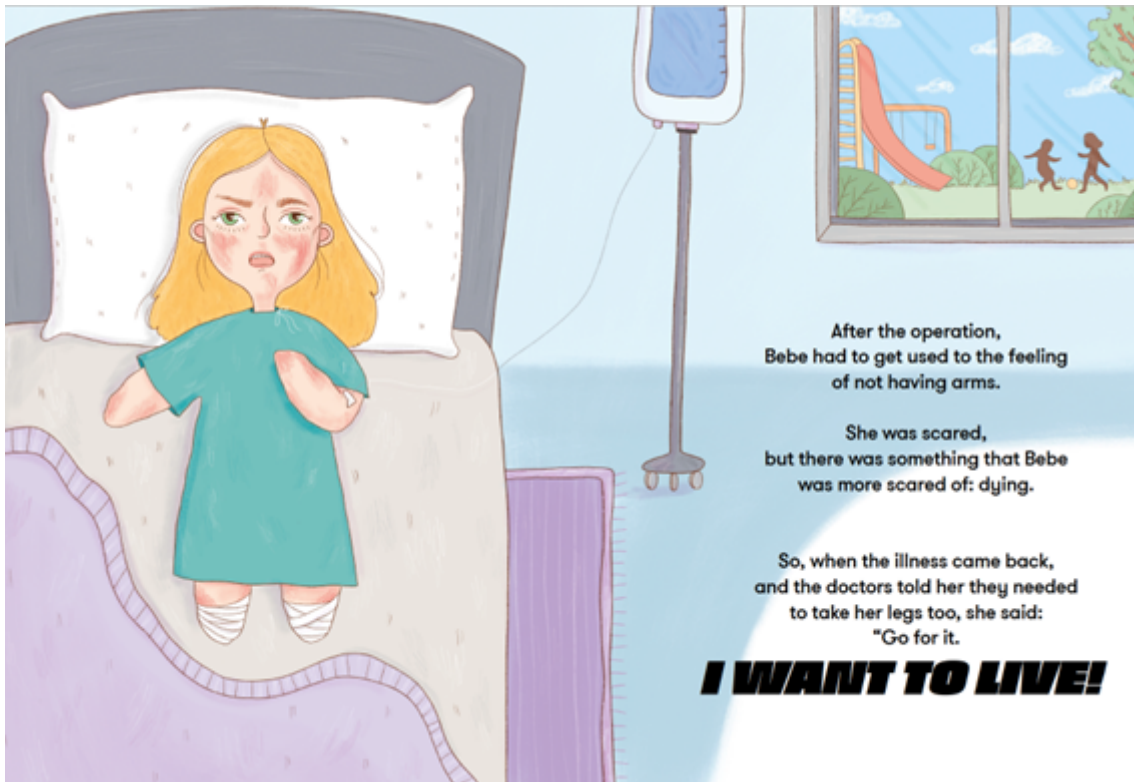
With “Paralympians”, my picture book series about some of the greatest paralympic athletes of our times, I focused on the portrayal of non-conforming bodies in children's books—often censored because we are primed to think that the stories of people with disabilities are inherently too sad and too dark to be told to children.

One interesting aspect of our fear to share stories of disability is that on the rare occasions when these stories are told, disability is almost always portrayed as a superpower. Portraying disabled people as superheroes though plays into the ableist narrative that, in order to survive with a disability, you must be a super-human. The key word in this view of disability is “despite”. “Despite her disability, look at what this woman was able to accomplish.” This approach—called “inspiration porn”—uses the stories of disabled people as a reminder for able-bodied individuals that “it could be worse” and that we should be grateful because we are not “like them”, and if they managed to accomplish so much “despite” being disabled ... well, maybe we should be able to find the motivation to lead more exciting lives.

The road to hell, they say, is paved with good intentions.

However, I did not become a *New York Times* bestselling author “despite” the fact that I am a queer woman. Similarly, the champions featured in the Paralympians series did not become champions “despite” their disability. They accepted their life journey, they made it their own, they refused to interiorize our pitiful looks and lived on their own terms. Sometimes, life is painful. Sometimes, it is hard. Sometimes, all we will have will be our pain, but still we can find meaning in our journey, and we don't need to have perfect bodies or a castle to do that. We can do that from whatever body we were born in, from whatever place. That seems something important for children to learn.





After the operation, Bebe had to get used to the feeling of not having arms.

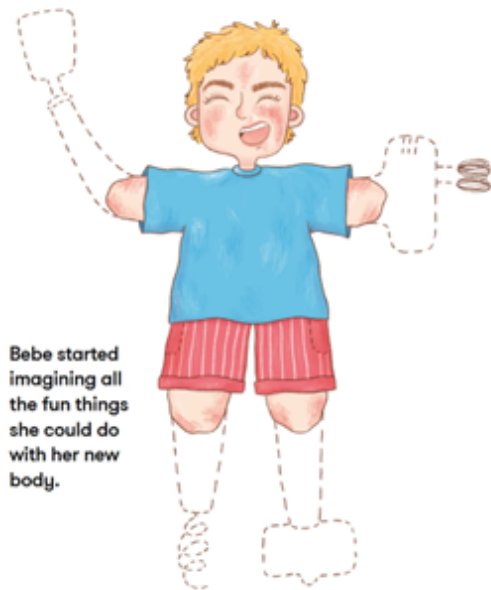
She was scared, but there was something that Bebe was more scared of: dying.

So, when the illness came back, and the doctors told her they needed to take her legs too, she said: "Go for it."

**I WANT TO LIVE!**

On Guard—by Francesca Cavallo and Arianna Giorgia Bonazzi, illustrations by Irma Ruggiero, published by Undercats in 2022.

In the meantime, her mum invented a new pair of waterproof legs for when she took a shower. Many focused on what Bebe couldn't do, but...



Bebe started imagining all the fun things she could do with her new body.



On Guard—by Francesca Cavallo and Arianna Giorgia Bonazzi, illustrations by Irma Ruggiero, published by Undercats in 2022.





Fastest Woman on Earth—by Francesca Cavallo, illustrations by Luis San Vicente, published by Undercats in 2022.



The Long Jump—by Francesca Cavallo, illustrations by Kezna Dalz, published by Undercats in 2022.

By challenging the traditional narrative and the traditional imagery associated with disability, we were able to create books that celebrate the beauty of these athletes' bodies, the strength of their character, and the breathtaking love that surrounded them and emanated from them throughout their journeys.

Decolonizing children's literature also means working with artists with different aesthetics than the ones we are used to associating with "quality": it means trying to make our eyes see beauty in different traditions, and it means challenging the artists we work with to think differently, to try new things, to unlearn some of what they learned in art school about what bodies are supposed to look like.

This is why I love to work on picture books: it is a form of art that can't sustain theory. Theory is necessary, but what we want to say must be so clear, so radiant, that it can bear to be expressed in pictures and in just a few simple words without losing an inch of meaning.

The path that leads us away from domination and toward peace is certainly a long one, and some may say that the creation of a better world is nothing more than utopia. But why write for children at all if we are not interested in the longest possible shot, in the widest possible horizon?

### **About the author**

**Francesca Cavallo** is co-author of the ground-breaking New York Times bestsellers *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls books 1 and 2*. The books have been translated into 49 languages and sold more than 7 million copies.

In 2018, Francesca received the Publisher's Weekly *StarWatch Award* in the United States, the *Australia Book Industry Award* in Australia, the *Wissenschaft Buch des Jahres* in Germany, the *Golden Book* in Italy, and many other international awards. In 2019, Francesca parted ways with *Rebel Girls* and started *Undercats*.

In 2020, she wrote and released for free the picture book *Doctor Li and the Crown-Wearing Virus* which has been translated into 38 languages and censored by the Chinese Government, becoming the most-read story for children about the coronavirus pandemic.

An advocate for gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights, Francesca has spoken at the House of Lords, the Women in Tech Conference in Warsaw, the Nobel Museum in Stockholm, the Massachusetts Conference for Women and in many other venues all over the world.

For further information, visit: [www.francescatherebel.com](http://www.francescatherebel.com).