



Shaping Young Minds: Examining Children's Literature Through Wonder and Agency

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What if a rainy day isn't a ruined plan but the beginning of a new adventure? While adults often trade wonder for life's responsibilities, children are full of curiosity, seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary. Author **Nadia Abdilla** and Senior Lecturer **Dr Giuliana Fenech** are exploring the power of wonder through children's literature.



Nadia Abdilla
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

Children have the capacity to see the world through the lens of wonder and curiosity – an ability which adults have seemingly long forgotten. A downside to growing up is that the wonder and curiosity children are naturally attuned to seems to then wither in the eyes of the grown adult. Yet, in children's literature, this wonder persists, aiming not only to educate children as they grow, but also to enrich their everyday imagination.

CRITICAL THINKING IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Maltese children's author Nadia Abdilla has always been fascinated by how children navigate the world

through the lens of wonder. Working as an Equity Coordinator at the University of Malta, Abdilla's job is quite different from her passion for writing children's literature. In the past, she used to teach young children at summer school, and now, she is the mother of a two-and-a-half-year-old. Abdilla's passion for children's literature aligns with her motherhood. As she watches her daughter grow and observes her budding curiosity, she finds inspiration for her writing.

'I write because I find that the extraordinary hides in the ordinary – the same perspective as children,' Abdilla says. 'There is a distinct kind of rawness in how children observe and absorb everyday life.'

Published by Klabb Kotba Maltin, Abdilla has a series of children's books featuring *Nina n-Nokkla*. Her books engage curiosity by subtly inviting children to think critically about everyday experiences with some adventurous twists, of course.

For example, in *Nina n-Nokkla u l-Avventura Riĥ Riĥun*, Nina is expecting her cousin to come visit for a picnic and to play in the field. Nonetheless, the day turned out to be quite the opposite of what she had planned – rainy, dull and windy. Her cousin arrives, and they sit down and stare until Nina



Nina n-Nokkla u l-Avventura Riĥ Riĥun
Photo courtesy of Nadia Abdilla



The authors connecting with young readers – through stories, creativity, and shared experiences.

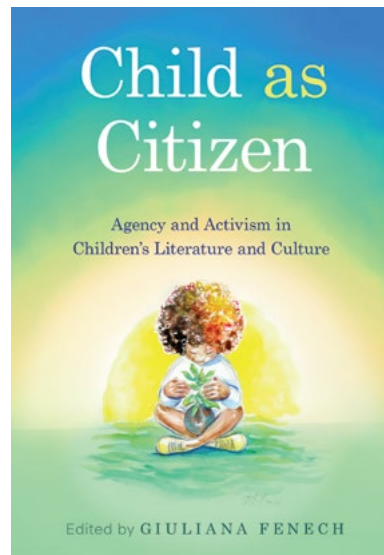


Dr Giuliana Fenech

remembers that she has a box full of things in her room. Together, they build a kite and end up still having a great time outside. In this story and others in the Nina n-Nokkla series, Abdilla highlights the importance of stopping to reflect, thus guiding children on how to calm down and be present.

CHILDREN'S AGENCY THROUGH LITERATURE

Dr Giuliana Fenech, a senior lecturer in UM's Department of English, has been researching children's literature for almost two decades. Her journey started when she decided to explore how imagination inspires real-life change.



Child as Citizen
Photo courtesy of Dr Giuliana Fenech

Her recent research for the three-year EU-funded project, *Seen and Heard: Young Adult Voices and Freedom of Expression* (featured in **THINK** Issue 45), is an example of how literature can invite dialogue on whose voices are most often heard in society and whose voices get left out. In reading children's literature, children are allowed to have agency over themselves as they relax, reflect, and imagine worlds. 'Storyworlds for children are becoming more complex, still harnessing the imagination, but also engaging children in social,

cultural, and political spheres more actively,' Fenech states. As such, not only are children's minds developing through imagination, but they are also in the process of becoming adults.

In her latest publication, *Child as Citizen*, Fenech discusses the importance of children's voices being expressed and heard. Children see themselves in the books they read, which allows them some agency and builds their self-confidence. Abdilla, too, agrees with these thoughts. 'The message is that you exist – you matter,' she says. Fenech suggests that instilling these ideas in children allows them to become well-rounded citizens.

IMAGINATION IS A POWERFUL TOOL

Children's literature is a major part of children's upbringing. It is thus essential that parents incorporate reading into the everyday lives of their children, nurturing their imagination.

A child's voice should not only be valued as a marker for their own agency, but also as a reminder to ourselves as adults that we too should be more like children. To be a child is to see the world through this lens of wonder – every day. And we need that reminder. That the world is full of the extraordinary. **T**