ESSAY

The Truth About Pinocchio's Nose

Pinocchio, by Enrico Mazzanti, the first illustrator of "The Adventures of Pinocchio."

By John Hooper and Anna Kraczyna

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Pinocchio, that lying rascal, would seem a ready-made icon for an age of fake news and bots, of alternative facts and internet trolls, of doubts about the reliability of conventional media. Can it be a coincidence that two of the world's leading movie directors are at work on productions inspired by the famous

puppet? Guillermo del Toro, who directed the Oscar-winning "The Shape of Water," has chosen the Pinocchio tale for the subject of his first animated film, and Matteo Garrone, the director of the widely acclaimed "Gomorrah," is also planning one about the marionette, to star another Oscar winner, the Italian comedian Roberto Benigni. (A third Pinocchio film, a live-action remake of Walt Disney's 1940 cartoon, is currently under discussion at Disney.)

What del Toro, who has spoken of a lifelong fascination with Pinocchio, doubtless recognizes, and what Garrone as a cultured Italian would not need to be told, is that the original story is a work of considerable complexity, comparable to "Alice in Wonderland" or "Gulliver's Travels" and much darker than Disney's cheery fable about the price of youthful mendacity. First conjured into existence 138 years ago, in the pages of a newspaper for children, Pinocchio was the invention of the Italian writer Carlo Collodi, who published the puppet's escapades as "The Adventures of Pinocchio" two years later. The book's intended message has largely been lost under the coating of saccharine that Hollywood spread over it.

Carlo Collodi was the pen name of Carlo Lorenzini, a journalist and satirist who made ends meet as a government office worker. Born in Florence in 1826, he was a prolific contributor to political and cultural periodicals and a tireless critic of his country's leaders, frequently rebuking them for their indifference to the poor and socially disadvantaged. Why he began writing for children in the mid-1870s is unclear. His motives could probably have been deduced from his correspondence, but his brother Paolo burned his letters after discovering, in the words of a nephew, that some "could have compromised ladies who were still alive and very well-known."

One theory is that political satire had become incompatible with Lorenzini's regular job as a civil servant. But that cannot be the whole explanation since he continued, on occasion, to use his pen to lampoon the authorities. It seems more

likely that he had a specific objective in mind.

Lorenzini had been a passionate supporter of Italy's liberation from foreign rule and its unification, proclaimed in 1861. Twice, he put his life on the line for the nationalist cause, enlisting to fight the Austrians in Italy's first and second wars of independence. But, as his many articles show, he became profoundly disillusioned with the new state that emerged from unification under its first king, Victor Emmanuel II. The country's governments were increasingly corrupt and cynical, its administrators, in Lorenzini's view, largely untroubled by the desperate circumstances of the majority of Italians.

Some of his disenchantment can be discerned in the very first lines of "The Adventures": "Once upon a time there was … 'A king!' my little readers will no doubt say in a flash. No, kids. You got it wrong. Once upon a time there was … a piece of wood."

A king compared to a lump of wood. Lorenzini was sailing mighty close to the wind when in 1881 he began his serialization that way. What follows is a "fairy tale" devoid of princes and princesses, valiant knights and frail damsels. It is set in an environment the author knew well from his childhood: the harsh world of the rural poor that most of Italy's politicians were only too happy to ignore. Lorenzini's cynicism about the new Italy runs through Pinocchio's story like a trickle of acid. When the puppet goes to court after being robbed, the judge — an ape — sends him to jail as punishment for his gullibility.

Despairing of his contemporaries' values, Lorenzini appears to have decided that the best contribution he could make to his country's future would be to invest his talents in improving the ethical caliber of future generations. How so?

[Sergio García Sánchez illustrated a tribute to the 19th-century tale of a puppet who dreams of becoming a real boy]

Ask people the moral of the Pinocchio fable and doubtless most will say it is a cautionary tale about lying. Yet the puppet's famously extending nose does not feature as a lie detector at any point in the original series, which ended in grim fashion with two villains hanging Pinocchio from a tree to die. Such was the popularity of the puppet's story that Lorenzini was asked to resume the series. It was only in the second run that Pinocchio's nose grew when he told a lie — and not always then.

In fact, the driving theme of the story is the importance of education, for which Lorenzini was a passionate advocate. What leads Pinocchio from one misadventure to the next is his reluctance to go to school. The consequences of not getting an education in late-19th-century Italy are shockingly exemplified in one of the most sinister episodes of "The Adventures": Pinocchio and a friend go to Toyland, thinking of it as a kind of paradise. But once there, they are turned into donkeys. Pinocchio narrowly escapes being slaughtered for his hide, but his friend is worked to death — the fate that, in a less dramatic form, awaited many unskilled laborers in Lorenzini's day.

In Italian, the word for donkey is applied both to those who are worked to the point of exhaustion, or, indeed, death, and those who don't do well at school — not necessarily because they are stupid, but because they refuse to study. Lorenzini's point is that being a donkey at school leads to working like a donkey afterward. The only way to avoid living the life (and maybe dying the death) of a donkey is to get an education.

Education is also fundamental to the story's fairy-tale conclusion, in which Pinocchio ceases to be a puppet and becomes a boy. Seven chapters from the end, he goes to school, excels at his studies and is promised his humanity. But it's then that he makes his near fatal mistake: choosing to go to Toyland, where he is turned not into a person but a donkey. After a further series of terrifying

misadventures, he begins studying again, but it is only when he starts to take responsibility for himself and those he loves that he earns the right to become a human being.

The moral of the story, then, is not that children should always tell the truth, but that education is paramount, enabling both liberation from a life of brutal toil, and, more important, self-awareness and a sense of duty to others. The true message of "The Adventures" is that, until you open yourself to knowledge and your fellow human beings, you will remain a puppet forever — other people will continue to pull your strings. And what, in these increasingly authoritarian times, could be more ardently relevant than that?

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