

Review

It's science after all, Homer!

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Within just a few months, new releases in the world of publishing have seen two books dealing with science and *The Simpsons*, one published in the US and the other in Italy: last spring, *What's science ever done for us?* by Paul Halpern (John Wiley & Sons, New York 2007) and, this autumn, *La scienza dei Simpson* by Marco Malaspina (Sironi Editore, Milano 2007).

The Simpsons is the longest-running television series to date: over four hundred episodes aired for eighteen seasons in a row from 1989 to 2007, with an audience of 60 million viewers per week in over seventy countries, where it has been translated or imported. This year, *The Simpsons Movie*, a feature-length film, was released worldwide on July 26.

The sitcom is about the adventures of its titular family: Homer “the greatest American of all time”, his wife Marge “the stereotype mother”, their sceptical and rationalist daughter Lisa and Bart, the most ordinary brother one could ever imagine, warts and all. And also the little Maggie, always sucking on her ever-present comforter. Commonplace is probably what epitomises best *The Simpsons*, without falling into rhetoric and indulgent interpretations. The ordinary life of a post-modern, traditional family, united and unbelievably quarrelsome, is also made of fathers unsuitable for their jobs and irresponsible, of mothers influenced by television and by the most vulgar common sense, of children avoiding any behavioural rule, underachievers, at most. All of this is plunged into the environment of a small-medium town like Springfield, threatened by an ever-imminent environmental disaster and ruled by influential people always caught in a conflict of interests.

So, everything is very modern, yet everything is also very involving. Indeed, the writers of this TV programme have a look on Springfield, its inhabitants and especially on the Simpsons, which strictly belongs to an onlooker – at the events and the dynamics –, but also to an accomplice – with their awareness of the situation. The characters are human beings, after all, and therefore limited and laden with flaws just like everyone of us. The couple sternness-awareness (flavoured by some affection) tells us that the look authors have is a scientific one: certainly surgical, yet very interested in the events they lay their eyes on.

It could not be otherwise, since the writing team of *The Simpsons* have for the most part a scientific education. In fact, there are over one hundred writers that have contributed at least a script for an episode, but if you take a close look at the CV of the most productive ones, noticeably many of them are scientists: they got an education from Berkeley, Harvard, Princeton and other scientific faculties in the Ivy League.

According to Halpern, *The Simpsons* can teach us physics, robotics, biology and, in general, the entire universe! Many episodes in the series are real science classes; the legs of an educational and equally amusing journey: a real mastery edutainment. That is how Halpern found an inspiration to illustrate some biology, physics, robotics and astronomy. *The Simpsons* turn into an occasion to present scientific information in a stimulating and amusing way, to remain in the readers' mind precisely because coloured with the typical “yellow”.

Then, the goal of *What's science ever done for us?* is to turn this rhetorical question into a real question and *The Simpsons* into a learning subject for the readers. In the best chapters of this book, scientific topics are found amid the vicissitudes of the Simpsons, which provide the elements supporting the explanation. Elsewhere, the series is the starting point for an illustration, then it features only as an evocative reference.

The interpretation of science Halpern presents is not through *The Simpsons*, but starting from *The Simpsons*. Any event (for example, a three-eyed fish) may be selected, described, observed and it inspires Halpern to deal with topics such as pollution-related mutations. The same applies to nuclear energy, the chaos, GMOs, the weather and evolution. This approach envisages finding science in

everyday life; only this everyday life is the “yellow” life in Springfield, an effective trick to keep the reader’s attention alive. This book does not mention, or overlooks, the issues involving science and society, the controversial matters, ethics. The environment, communication, development are the background to strictly scientific issues Halpern explains to readers in order to make them understand.

Malaspina interprets *The Simpsons* from another viewpoint. First of all, he highlights their ordinary life as a family. If the Simpsons really exist – and they do, for there are 60 million viewer every week! – their existence must be sociologically viable. It means that this (American) society is one in which the Simpsons can really be citizens. And this society is pervaded by science at all levels of life.

At *school*, obviously, because it is where science is taught, but also because school is the setting to much of the clash between science and faith (hence, better to persuade them young than to linger on...). In the *workplace*, because Homer works in a power plant where the workers’ disputes intertwine with the need for energy of the Springfield citizens and with the reasons of profit embodied by the businessmen Montgomery Burns. *Outdoors*, because the environmental issues are always involved, from the energy concerns to pollution, the GMOs and waste disposal. In the *hospital*, where Homer has a kidney removed to be transplanted in his dying father and Marge undergoes cosmetic surgery; or when the GP treats Bart’s Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). In the *media*, i.e. either newspapers, radio or television, which frequently witness or spur scientific and social controversy.

But most of all, science is *in the family*, at the Simpsons’. Round the table, in front of the telly, when back from school, children and parents take home issues ranging from the science-faith relation to the rotation of the water going down the sink; from food to air and water pollution. The family is the setting to discussions degenerating into real fights where the members play the typical roles in any science-related conflict. Nonetheless, conflicts at the Simpsons’ are frequently ended by declarations of family love that overcome all different visions (without tackling them) to protect the cohesion of the family itself: possibly a post-modern and quarrelsome household, but most of all, a traditional and united one.

Quite interestingly, the two authors provide two different interpretations of the same episodes, and frequently they are very distant. The former sees teaching occasions in them, the latter sees sociological cross-sections. The two viewpoints, by Halpern and Malaspina, mirror two different looks on science. For the American writer, science is something that has to be taught; there are some facts that stands out for their scientific character. The Simpsons are there to wink at you, spies of scientific references that penetrate everybody’s language and knowledge. Nothing like an in-depth knowledge, just comfortable and alluring hooks where to hang an explanation, coloured in “yellow”. *What’s science ever done for us?* sees science from the outside, with its deductive chains and its angular mathematics.

He does not interpret science as part of the TV series but identifies it in some of the episodes of the TV series. Malaspina goes further into depth. He does not try to teach anything – his is just an “unauthorized guide”, not a manual for sure! – but simply to make us acknowledge that the relation the Simpsons – and, more in general, Springfield citizens – have with science is nothing but the one we all have. A relation not aimed at understanding an event, rather one that feeds on feelings, fears, ungrounded trust, irrational expectations and feelings under your skin. Not even a relation anymore, but a correspondence to life.

Life in Springfield is just like life in our cities and in them both science enters your home from the window, the TV, the mobile phones, the schoolbag of your children and especially from their words and thoughts. Malaspina has a careful look on all of this; Halpern thinks everyday life is a source for some good lessons. In conclusion, the Italian release is a Simpson-logy essay acknowledging the centrality of science in our lives, whereas the American book is a science manual based on *The Simpsons*.

Translated by Massimo Caregnato