



National Fantasies

—Nancy L. Canepa

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On the whole, Italian children's literature has been studied less frequently than its British and American counterparts. Lindsay Myers's recent reading of children's fantasy in Italy considers a wide spectrum of texts, in some cases little-known ones, and suggests interesting correlations and tensions between these texts and various moments in Italian history, from the Unification to the present day. It is organized in a systematic manner, and the author presents her arguments with clarity and accessibility.

The subset of children's literature that Myers considers—the fantasy—is, in the words of Maria Nikolajeva (quoted by Myers), “a narrative combining the presence of the primary and the secondary world, that is, our own real world and some other magical or fantastic imagined world” (Nikolajeva 54; qtd. in Myers

9). It may include myths, legends, folk and fairy tales, horror stories, romance, and other narrative forms. It typically features a child protagonist with whom its readers can identify easily and ends often on a happy note. As Myers notes, fantastic genres in which the laws of verisimilitude are suspended in general afford greater freedom both for engaging with controversial social and political questions and for treating sensitive domestic problems related to young readers' own lives. Writers have frequently turned to this genre in times of historical crisis and transition, and the period that Myers treats (1870 to 2010) has been one of the most turbulent in Italian history. In particular, Myers argues that children's literature played a central role in the nation-building process in Italy as it informed and formed future citizens.

Myers adopts a “typological contextual approach,” distinguishing it from noncontextual approaches such as Vladimir Propp’s formalist “morphology” as well as from “monographic contextual approaches” that engage cultural and ideological considerations of a single text or author. She defines her critical mode as one that “involves identifying groups of texts which share common structures and examining the extent to which these texts reacted and responded to the socio-political climate in which they were created” (15), noting that although this approach has been adopted in criticism of the English-language fantasy, it is new to the Italian tradition.

Myers identifies nine fantasy sub-genres, organized chronologically and according to the “type of protagonists, the kind of secondary world(s), the plot structure and the nature of magic” (16). These are the Memoir Fantasy (1870–1896), which “focuses on the life stories of animals or inanimate objects” (16); the “Monello” Fantasy (1897–1908), with its rascally protagonists; the Microcosmic Fantasy (1908–15); the Quest Fantasy (1915–18); the Surreal Fantasy (1919–29); the Superhero Fantasy (1930–39); the Community Fantasy (1945–50), which “describes the lives of communities of anthropomorphized animals and plants” (17); the Pinocchiesque Fantasy (1950–80); and the Compensatory Fantasy (1980–2010), which “uses magic to offset suffering and unhappiness in the primary world” (17). Each of these chapters is

organized in nearly identical fashion, proceeding from a general historical overview of the period to a discussion of the structural features of the fantasy in question and of its cultural, social, and political contexts, and ending with a consideration of the “structure and purpose” of the fantasy type. The central section of each chapter consists of a sampling of three or four texts, each of which is used to illustrate one or more aspects of the various socio-political contexts; Myers typically considers the influence of other texts and traditions as well. The analyses of the relationships between the texts and their contexts also yield many interesting insights, some of which I summarize below.

The Memoir Fantasy that was popular in the first decades of Italy’s history as a unified nation was a sort of didactic *Bildungsroman* that featured animals or objects acting as vehicles for the nineteenth-century bourgeois values of politeness, obedience, diligence, and humility. Yet it also investigated complex and highly topical issues such as class division, child abuse and prostitution, and women’s social status, perhaps not surprising since, as Myers reminds us, many of the creators of these works were teachers or authors of manuals for parents. Examples of this fantasy are Ida Baccini’s *Memorie di un pulcino* and Contessa Lara’s *Il romanzo della bambola*.

The “Monello” Fantasy, prevalent at the turn of the twentieth century, coincided with a more prosperous national economy and the advent of Italian colonialism



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and parodies some of the dominant tropes of two of the most popular literary genres of the time, the adventure novel and the science fiction novel, by “creating outlandish and comical ‘monelli’ and sending them on far-fetched adventures” (46). Carlo Collodi’s *The Adventures of Pinocchio* was of enormous influence on this sub-genre (one of the texts discussed is Egisto Ghiselli’s *Il fratello di Pinocchio*), whose authors engaged in a form of social satire that targets scholastic, medical, and legal institutions but also expressed their fascination with the latest technological developments of industrial capitalism.

The Microcosmic Fantasy was a product of changing attitudes toward children and childhood, in part inspired by Giovanni Pascoli’s view of the regenerative, emancipatory role of the child in society, as expressed in his *Il Fanciullino*. This brand of fantasy uses “contrasts of scale to explore the differences between the visionary world of the child and the cynical world of adults” (68), and the miniature worlds explored by the protagonists of works such as Giuseppe Fanciulli’s *L’Omino turchino* or Paola Lombroso Carrara’s *Un reporter nel mondo degli uccelli* offer utopian or dystopian parallels to human society, thus reflecting on collective, communal values and political systems.

Missions and challenges, and the means of completing and overcoming them, structure the Quest Fantasy, which borrows fairy-tale structures to create contemporary narratives that evoke the First World War and its trials while at the same time keeping the realistic horrors of war at a reassuring distance. Works like Arturo Rossato’s *L’aeroplano di Girandolino* and Enrico Novelli’s *Ciuffettino alla guerra* feature child heroes whose encounters with combat and conflict are suffused with moral certainties, and inevitably lead to happy endings.

The Surreal Fantasy coincided with the first decade of fascism, when a certain degree of freedom from propagandistic constraints was still possible. In fact, both experimentalism (in some cases in the form of engagement with futurism and other avant-garde movements) and an interrogation of authority and its institutions mark the “surreal, nonsensical and psychologically disturbing fantasies” of this period (117), examples of which are Annie Vivanti’s *Sua Altezza!* and Massimo Bontempelli’s *La scacchiera davanti allo specchio*. Ultimately, as Myers hypothesizes, these works may have had the double scope of helping their young readers “to work their ways through a dark and difficult period in Italian history” (139) and “responding to the existential crisis which lay at the heart of European modernism” (140).

The period of the Superhero Fantasy coincided with the most heavy-handed “fascistisation” of the Italian state, in which propaganda shaped public rhetoric and cultural organization, especially involving youth. Not surprisingly, the ideal Fascist attributes of virility, dynamism, and absolute leadership are translated into the realm of children’s literature, in which heroes become “prototypes of the ‘Italiano Nuovo’” (156), language simulates Fascist discourse, and Fascist symbols and allusions abound, even if this facade perhaps masked, in at least one case Myers discusses (Giovanni Bertinetti’s *I pugni di Meo*), a subtly anti-Fascist stance.

As Italy emerged from the war and the *ventennio* of Fascism, aesthetic canons changed radically, as is evidenced by one of the most important post-war cultural movements: neo-realism. In the realm of children’s literature, the Community Fantasy shared the preoccupation of neo-realism with questions of social justice; works like Dino Buzzati’s *La famosa invasione degli orsi in Sicilia* and Gianni Rodari’s *Le avventure di Cipollino* juxtapose dystopian (dictatorial) and idyllic (democratic) societies, investigating processes of peaceful social change in their depictions of how the former might transform into the latter.

The Pinocchiesque Fantasy that dominated the next thirty years included texts informed by postmodern combinatory zeal, in this case expressing itself in the tendency to “self-consciously deconstruct and reassemble” Collodi’s classic text while at the same engaging with contemporary political and social themes (188).

The Compensatory Fantasy of the final period considered (1980–2010) featured ordinary child protagonists who depart from recognizable settings and voyage to magical secondary worlds in order “to compensate for social, environmental or personal short-comings in their own life” (208). The works of this category, examples of which are Susanna Tamaro’s *Il cerchio magico* and Silvana Gandolfi’s *L’isola del tempo perso*, engage with the widespread changes in Italian society of these years, from the alteration

of the traditional family structure to the spread of consumerism.

This overall structure of the book gives readers precise coordinates and makes the book quite accessible and easy to read. At the same time, though, the rather compartmentalized categories that the author constructs, both temporal and generic, can give the impression that Italian literary production underwent absolute shifts in form and in content from one period to the next (the author frequently underlines how each fantasy she analyzes “had become the dominant sub-genre” in its designated period [46]), and that at any given moment there was much less tension than there actually was (and is, in any literary tradition, in any country) between various genres, ideologies, and voices. The final two chapters, especially, cover the last half century, during which Italy has undergone momentous transformations, and the scant thirty-five pages and two umbrella categories dedicated to this period seem rather reductive. That said, Myers does recognize in her conclusion the shortcomings of a rigid taxonomy, stressing that hers “is neither exhaustive nor comprehensive” but aimed above all at “bridging the gap that exists between Anglophone criticism and Italian criticism” and introducing a diverse sampling of Italian children’s texts to English-speaking readers, which it certainly does (225–26).

Although Myers’s analysis includes many classic Italian children’s texts, it might have been useful to

consider some larger and more conventional generic categories such as the fairy tale and their intersections with the fantasy “sub-genres” mentioned. In particular, the intense activity of collecting, studying, and anthologizing folk material in the last decades of the Ottocento (by Giuseppe Pitrè, Laura Gonzenbach, Vittorio Imbriani, Gherardo Nerucci, and many more) provided a huge treasure house of primary materials that were used by authors like Luigi Capuana, Emma Perodi, and others in their creative revisions of fairy tales and other fantastic narratives. And even when they were collecting in the field, the master compilers of the nineteenth century were no less influenced by the socio-political climate than the authors that Myers treats, as is eminently clear, for instance, from a reading of Pitrè’s discussions of the objectives that drove his interest in folk traditions at the very moment in which Italy was struggling to articulate a political but also a cultural identity at the national level.

Finally, in an analysis that argues so strongly for the important role of these children’s texts in educating and inculcating social values in children, it would be quite useful to have a more precise idea about readership, specifically the changes in readership over time. How widespread were the effects of these works? Who read these books in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when only a fraction of Italians could actually read, write, and speak standard Italian? What sorts of mentions exist of this literature in contemporary

paratexts and/or criticism? Finally, how do the visions of the child and the models for educating and acculturating children that emerge from the texts Myers considers intersect with contemporary pedagogical philosophy, such as the groundbreaking work of Maria Montessori?

This said, *Making the Italians* has many merits. It introduces an English-speaking audience to a

wide selection of Italian children's literature, and even for those who specialize in Italian literature, it sheds light on a number of unfamiliar texts. Most importantly, it advocates for a socio-historical reading of works that, although they may be written for young people, provide fascinating clues about changing aesthetic and ideological categories in society at large.

Works Cited

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