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## Article

# “Saving Venice”: Local, Global and Transnational Perspectives on Cultural Heritage in Children’s Fantasy

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**Abstract:** Children’s literature has always been heavily influenced by the local and national climate in which it is produced, the birth of this literature having coincided in many places with the formation of the nation-state. Over the last 50 years, however, the effects of globalization have radically transformed the relationship between authors and their markets, and a new tension has arisen in children’s texts between the local and the global. Celebrating commonality across boundaries while simultaneously safeguarding the tutelage of cultural heritage can be particularly difficult, especially when (as is the case with Venice) that heritage has been singled out by UNESCO as being under threat. This essay undertakes a close reading of three 21st-century fantasies for children set in Venice: Mary Hoffman’s *Stravaganza: City of Masks*, Laura Walter’s *Mistica Maeva e l’anello di Venezia*, and Michelle Lovric’s *The Undrowned Child*, all of which have been translated into other languages and reached audiences far beyond their places of origin. It asks what we mean when we speak about cultural heritage conservation in children’s literature today and the extent to which the preservation of Venice’s cultural heritage is being depicted in this literature as a transnational phenomenon.

**Keywords:** children’s narratives; cultural heritage; citizenship education; fantasy; Venice

Children’s literature has always been heavily influenced by the local and national climate in which it is produced, the birth of this literature having coincided in many places with the formation of national identity<sup>1</sup>. Over the last fifty years, however, the supremacy of the nation-state has come into question, as modern communication technologies have made it easier for people, goods, financial capital and ideas to cross national borders<sup>2</sup>. Cross-border flows have created new social, political and cultural spaces that cannot be superimposed on the geographical space of the nation, and traditional representations of identity, once heavily reliant on discourses of “othering”<sup>3</sup>, have begun to give way to new, transnational forms of belonging that reflect the multiple ties and

<sup>1</sup> See Margaret Meek, *Children’s Literature and National Identity* (Meek 2001), Emer O’Sullivan, *Comparative Children’s Literature* (O’Sullivan 2000), Lindsay Myers, *Making the Italians: Poetics and Politics of Italian Children’s Fantasy* (Myers 2012) and Maria Truglio, *Italian Children’s Literature and National Identity* (Truglio 2018).

<sup>2</sup> See Valentina Mazzucato, “Transcending the Nation: Explorations of Transnationalism as Concept and Phenomenon” (Mazzucato 2004), pp. 131–62.

<sup>3</sup> As the recent volume on *Imagining Sameness and Difference in Children’s Literature* (2017) clearly demonstrates, children’s books have always been about the construction of identity (both on a personal and on a collective level), and the construction of that identity has almost always by necessity been formed through discourses of “othering”.

interactions that link people across the borders of nation-states<sup>4</sup>. This is not to say that patriotism has disappeared in modern children's books; as Meek has observed "local cultures are the strongest social bonds" (p. 5). International children's literature and children's book criticism have begun, however, as Bradford (2011) and O'Sullivan (2017) have observed, to recognise that "a nuanced understanding of the what and how and why of portraying sameness and difference is critical to an appreciation of the role of children's books in promoting social change" (O'Sullivan, 2017, p. 2)<sup>5</sup>.

Nurturing the development of cultural bonds across national boundaries while simultaneously safeguarding the tutelage of cultural heritage in an increasingly globalized world is not easy<sup>6</sup>, especially when (as is the case with Venice) that heritage has been singled out by UNESCO as being under threat. This essay undertakes a close reading of three 21st century fantasies for children set in Venice: *Stravaganza: City of Masks* (Hoffman 2002a) by Mary Hoffman, *Mistica Maeva e l'Anello di Venezia* (Walter 2006) by Laura Walter and *The Undrowned Child* (Lovric 2009) by Michelle Lovric, all of which have been translated into other languages and reached international audiences<sup>7</sup>. It asks what we mean when we speak about cultural heritage conservation in children's literature today and the extent to which the preservation of Venice's cultural heritage is being depicted in this literature as a transnational phenomenon.

Venice, a city that lies at the crossroads between Western Classical Heritage and the Oriental Dream, has always had a transnational culture, and the city which has occupied a central role within the cultural imagination ever since the 16th century (Meinig 1979; Pemble 1995; Cosgrove 1998; Pfister and Schaff 1999; Plant 2003; Schama 2004; Hewison 2009 and O'Neil et al. 2012) now ranks as one of the most visited tourist destinations in the world. The worldwide fame that the city has enjoyed has, however, brought with it innumerable challenges. The number of tourists now far outweighs that of the resident population on any given day, and the 118 islands that comprise the region have become so polluted by the massive influx of tourist traffic that the entire lagoon—an area that was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1987—is in danger of being destroyed if serious measures are not put in place to protect its fragile ecosystem<sup>8</sup>. It is not surprising, therefore, that children's authors (both Italian and non-Italian) have been drawn to Venice as a setting for their books and that, over the last 20 years, several of them have created utopian alternatives in order to celebrate its unique cultural heritage and free it from its impending demise<sup>9</sup>. Not all of the novels that have tackled the transnational crisis that the city is experiencing, however, can be said to contain transnational perspectives.

<sup>4</sup> See Gupta and Ferguson (1992).

<sup>5</sup> Recent critical works which explore transnational aspects of children's literature include *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations* (Bradford et al. 2007) and *From Colonial to Modern: Transnational Girlhood in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Children's Literature 1840–1940* (Bradford et al. 2018).

<sup>6</sup> As Arjun Appadurai has noted, "the central feature of global culture today is the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another and thus to proclaim their successful hijacking of the twin Enlightenment ideas of the triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular" ("Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy", (Appadurai 1990, p. 308)).

<sup>7</sup> Lovric's *The Undrowned Child* has been translated into Italian and Laura Walter's *Mistica Maeva e l'anello di Venezia* has been translated into Dutch, while Hoffman's *Stravaganza: City of Masks* has been translated into many different languages. See Hoffman 2002b, Lovric, 2011 and Walter, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Venice now has more than 140 visitors per inhabitant (Settis 2014<sup>6</sup>). At its height, the population of Venice peaked at 164,000 inhabitants. Today, that number has sunk below 60,000 (Kingston 2009). In 2015, several heritage protection organizations in Venice and Italy were so concerned about the damage that tourism was posing to the city that they asked experts from UNESCO, RAMOS and ICOMOS to engage in discussions with the city management in order to address some of the most pressing threats.

<sup>9</sup> These include Andrea Molesini (1998), Cristina Brambilla (2009), Pierdomenico Baccalario (2006), Cornelia Funke (2000), Silvana Gandolfi (2000), Ian Baucom (2013), Moony Witcher (2002) and Kai Meyer (2005).

*Stravaganza: City of Masks*, *Mistica Maeva e l'anello di Venezia* and *The Undrowned Child* all revolve around utopian versions of Venice. Although all three fantasies encourage their young readers to cherish the city's unique cultural heritage, the perspectives that they afford on the city could not be more different. *Stravaganza: City Of Masks* effectively re-invents the city, playfully appropriating its symbolic position within the global imaginary, *Mistica Maeva e l'anello di Venezia* takes the reader on a journey through the city's folklore in an attempt to rescue its threatened, cultural authenticity, while *The Undrowned Child* leads its readers away from the popular tourist spots and into the city's lesser-known squares and historic buildings in order to emphasise the pivotal role played by cultural memory in the construction of collective identity.

*Stravaganza* tells the story of Lucien Mulholland, a terminally-ill British teenager, who is given a magical, Venetian notebook by his father and who uses its incredible powers to travel between his London bedroom and the magical city of *Bellezza*, an alternate version of 16th-century Venice. The Republic of *Bellezza* is under threat from the powerful Di Chimici family, and over the course of the novel, the young boy and his Bellezzan friend, Arianna, work together to prevent the city's enemies from seizing control of the government and assassinating its ruler, the elegant and imperious Duchessa Silvia. They are helped in their task by the Duchessa's right-hand advisor, Rodolfo Rossi, a man who, like Lucien, has the power to travel between dimensions. The novel continually encourages its readers to compare and contrast the elegant and harmonious city of *Bellezza* with its 21st-century counterpart, a city which the book's protagonist views as markedly less impressive.

*Mistica Maeva e l'anello di Venezia* recounts the fantastical adventures of two Venetian children who find a magic passage concealed in one of the city's lesser-known historic buildings and travel back in time to 16th-century Venice to save their 21st-century city from flooding. In order to put an end to the floods, the children must locate the masked, *commedia-dell'arte* character, Arlecchino, steal the ring from under his hat and throw it into the sea, and this they do on the occasion of the *Festa della Sensa*. They are assisted in their quest by Mistica's grandmother and a retired university professor, and it is the children's ability to engage with their city's past by acquiring the folkloric knowledge of their elders that enables their success.

*The Undrowned Child* centres on the adventures of Teodora Gasparin, a young girl who arrives in the novel's 19th-century Venice from Naples with her parents on the occasion of an environmental conference. While the girl's parents are using their scientific knowledge to address the city's ills, she and her Venetian friend, Renzo, embark on a supernatural journey to save the city, a journey which sees them travel *per le fodere* (between the linings) in a hunt for Bajamonte Tiepolo, a Venetian noble who was exiled from the city in 1310 after he tried to overthrow the Doge and the Great Council of Venice and who is searching for his Spell Almanac in a bid to try again. In order to defeat the insidious villain, Teodora and Renzo join forces with a colony of mermaids who have been protecting the city and its citizens for centuries, and the monumental battle which takes place at the end of the novel stands in many ways as a metaphor for all of the sea battles in which the city and its inhabitants have been involved throughout history as well as for the city's 21st-century struggle against mass tourism (an invasion which, the novel subtly suggests, is not entirely dissimilar from the many previous ones).

Venice for the tourist is often reduced to a few key places (St. Mark's Cathedral, the Doge's Palace, The Bridge of Sighs, the Rialto Market and the three islands of Murano, Burano and Torcello—islands which can be conveniently visited on a round trip on the *vaporetto*), iconic objects (*gondolas*, masks, lace, and mosaics) and lavish, public spectacles—of which The Venetian Carnival, The Biennale Art Festival, The Venice Film Festival and the more recently resurrected Marriage of the Sea ceremony are the most important—and Hoffman's imaginary city of *Bellezza*, like her description of the real city on which it is based, does not go beyond the traditional *topoi*. Lucien, a protagonist who defines himself as “a tourist, in time and space” (p. 87), views both cities with ‘a tourist gaze’ (Urry 2002). He spends much of his time sipping *cappuccinos* in cafes, drinking *prosecco* in terraced gardens and generally enjoying the luxurious life-style of a rich visitor, and the contrast which the author draws between the utopian city of *Bellezza* and the damaged and doomed city of Venice creates a “them” and “us” binary that reinforces popular cultural stereotypes about Venice

and its inhabitants. Lucien and his parents who hail from the affluent district of Islington in London have little time for the local Venetians, and their criticism of the gondolier who “stages” Italianness in order to make more money is ironic, given that Lucien’s father has effectively paid the man extra to perform this act:

On their last evening, Dad had hired a gondola with lanterns and they had been serenaded in the manner of an ice-cream commercial.

“You have to pay extra for the singing”, whispered Dad. “I wonder how much extra you’d have to pay to get him to stop” (*Stravaganza*, p. 235).

Lucien spends a considerable amount of time before they take their gondola ride, examining the gondoliers in order to pick out the best-looking one, and his declaration that it would be distracting if the gondolier was ugly (p. 235) is emblematic of the often un-realistic desire of the tourist to find perfection on all fronts.

Venice in Lucien’s eyes will never be “perfect” unless everything in it is beautiful, and it matters not to him that his fictitious *Bellezza* is founded on capitalist exploitation (the motto of *Bellezza* is “*Bellezza è Moneta*” p. 44) or that its ruthless Duchessa, a lady who uses young girls as body doubles in all her public appearances, cares more for spectacle than she does for her subjects. It is the tourist idyll that Lucien wants and not the modern-day Venice with its challenges and signs of capitalism, and it is easy for the non-Italian reader to share his nostalgic desires. As Hewison has noted (Hewison 1987), the heritage industry, which has become a powerful commodifier of cultural “pasts” ever since the 1850s, is fuelled by these very nostalgic impulses, and Venice with its symbology of aesthetic decline is the quintessential “heritage city”.

The Italian words that Hoffman uses to describe the utopian city of *Bellezza* (many of which connect the city with Venetian delicacies and luxury souvenirs) reinforce the notion that Venice is primarily a city “to be consumed”<sup>10</sup>. *Bellezzan* gondolas are called *mandolas*, because of their almond shape, the island of *Torcello* is called *Torrone* (the name given to Italian *nougat*), while the island of *Burano* is called *Burlesca* presumably to conjure up images of burlesque theatre and mask-wearing. Little consideration is paid in this novel to how these terms might be viewed by a Venetian readership, and it is hard not to read the name that the author gives to the utopian city—that of *Bellezza*—as a negative commentary on the inherent beauty of Venice against whose lesser beauty the city is compared.

The culture that the tourist imbibes is primarily a culture of material objects—these things being far easier to consume than is intangible culture (history, traditions, literature, legends, culinary traditions, dialect etc.). In order to survive, however, a culture cannot be divorced from its traditions and folklore<sup>11</sup>, and it is the threat that the modern ‘touristification’ of the city is posing to the city’s immaterial, cultural heritage that lies at the heart of Walter’s fantasy<sup>12</sup>. *Mistica Maeva e l’anello di Venezia*, a novel which appeared in Italy four years after Hoffman’s novel was published (and one

<sup>10</sup> On the topic of “bellezza”, it is noteworthy that the final pages of Settis, study of Venice’s future, *Se Venezia muore*, stress that if the city is to survive, her beauty must not be understood as “una pesante eredità del passato” (a heavy inheritance from the past) but rather as “uno straordinario dono per vivere il presente e una straordinaria dote per costruire e garantire il futuro” (‘an extraordinary gift for living in the present and an extraordinary dowry for building and guaranteeing the future, p. 154).

<sup>11</sup> This is why in 1992, UNESCO on the understanding that ‘cultural landscapes are at the interface of culture and nature, tangible and intangible heritage, biological and cultural diversity—they represent a closely woven net of relationships, the essence of culture and people’s identity’, recognised three categories of cultural landscapes of outstanding universal value for world heritage listing. See Rössler (2006), Van der Borg et al. (1996) and Minoia (2017).

<sup>12</sup> Most of Venice’s supermarkets, industries, hospitals and other essential community services are located on the mainland of Marghera and Mestre, and the resident Venetian population has fallen dramatically over the last twenty years, not least because it has become both too costly and too challenging for working-class Venetian families to live in the city centre.

year after it was translated into Italian) can, in fact, be seen, in many ways, as a national counterpoint to *Stravaganza: City of Masks*. The children in this novel are not “outsiders” but *Veneziani doc*, and the alternate city that they discover is populated solely by Venetian courtiers and Venetian *commedia-dell’arte* characters, masked figures whose literary fame can be traced back to the works of the 18th-century, Venetian playwright Carlo Goldoni.

In contrast to Hoffman’s text that centers around the San Marco district and the city’s well-known tourist landmarks, this novel is set in the un-named *calli* that lie in the city’s interior, and the children get to the parallel dimension by travelling through a magic passageway in the *Scala Contarini del Bovolo* (a building with which many non-Venetian readers would be unfamiliar). The children who live and go to school in the city spend a lot of time in the presence of Mistica’s grandmother and, over the course of the novel, they learn from her how to cook local dishes such as *sarde in saor* and *bigoli in salsa*. Local knowledge is depicted in this text as a rich patrimony, and it is significant that the manner in which the children save the city from the ecological threat posed by the rising tidal waters is by re-enacting the traditional Venetian *Festa della Sensa* (Marriage of the Sea ceremony).

The manner in which *Mistica Maeva e l’anello di Venezia* addresses the city’s current crisis is not, however, any less nostalgic than is that of Hoffman, for while Hoffman effectively avoids tackling the contemporary issues that the city is facing, by having her characters take refuge in a perfect, alternative version of the city, Walter evokes strong and celebratory images of an idealized, “authentic” past in order to critique and alter the present. Her story, which invites its readers to preserve an “old” Venetian way of life rather than to enact a new one, does not offer a realistic portrayal of the 21st-century city and its problems but rather idealizes her past. It should be noted that the criticisms that the novel makes of modern tourism are by no means balanced, given that Mistica Maeva’s mum owns a souvenir shop, and the conversation that takes place between Baciolo, the cat, and Pastrocio, the pigeon, (while not voiced by humans)—a conversation which reflects the feelings of annoyance that the local population often feel about the modern “hit-and-run” tourists who visit the city, consume its beauty and go without leaving anything behind—is fundamentally racist:

“Bah, selfish tourists, little food, little work”

“Did you stand by your *credo*?” asked Baciolo”

“Yes I did. Shitty tourists—shit for the tourists. I bombarded half a dozen”, replied Pastrocio, puffing out the feathers on his chest with pride (p. 22)<sup>13</sup>.

This novel’s view that local culture is somehow more “pure” than is the tourist culture—just because it has been passed down over the generations—is not, of course, historically accurate. As Mike Crang underlines in his *Cultural Geography* (Crang 1998):

The quest for authentic national cultural identity often results in efforts to reconstruct a lost national ethos as though it were some secret inheritance or that cultural identity were a matter of recovering some ‘hidden music’ Tradition appears as a coherent body of practice handed down over generations—but this is retrospectively imagined. These invented traditions reinforce the idea that identity can be passed down over generations as though it were some precious essence and that the rituals are a container for a pre-given national identity (p. 172).

It is surely significant that the only other language into which this novel has so far been translated is Dutch, given that the canal-based city of Amsterdam is experiencing a very similar crisis to Venice’s. Would this novel be understood by an anglophone reader in quite the same way? The question is

<sup>13</sup> “Bah, turisti poco generosi, poco cibo, molto lavoro”. “Hai tenuto fede al tuo motto?” lo interrogò Baciolo. “Eh, sì. Turisti di caccia, caccia ai turisti. Ne ho bombardati una mezza dozzina” confermò Pastrocio, e gonfiò le piume del petto per l’orgoglio” (p. 22). The English translation is my own.

worth considering, not least because there may well be limited value in drawing attention to the threat that global tourism poses to Venice's local culture if this testimony goes no further than local (or already sympathetic) contexts.

The best way to avoid the kinds of cultural relativism of which both Walter and Hoffman's texts are guilty, is to recognise that cultures by their very nature are fusions; they are not bounded entities but rather are blends of the cultures with which they come into contact. They are tools (like the languages through which they operate) of communication and trade and as such they cannot be placed into a binary which equates the foreigner with the consumer, global product and the local with the pure, intangible producer<sup>14</sup>.

Lovric's *The Undrowned Child*, which takes its readers on a tour of the city's lesser-known Venetian interior, does not set out, like *Mistica Maeva e l'anello di Venezia* to address an exclusively Italian readership. Nor does it engage primarily with the symbology of Venice in the global imaginary. Rather, it interweaves the local and the global, deconstructing, as it does so, the many binaries on which this dynamic is constructed. Lovric's two protagonists, Teodora and Renzo, have very different cultural backgrounds—Teo was brought up in Naples by Neapolitan parents, while Renzo is the son of a Venetian gondolier—and the friendship that develops between them lies at the heart of the novel's hybrid perspective. Renzo, does not initially have much time for Teo, being of the opinion that only local Venetians should be able to save the city: "you're from Naples' he pronounced finally, "how is it you understand our dialect?" there was an excluding sort of emphasis on the 'our' and a disparaging one on the 'Naples' (p. 85). Teodora, who is initially taken aback by his haughtiness—a behavior which she knows fits the stereotype of the Venetian saying: "*Veneziani, gran signori*"—does not, however, judge the boy for his beliefs but rather challenges him on them whenever she can and, over the course of the novel, she eventually transforms his attitude into admiration and affection. By showing the reader how the views of the protagonists change as a result of their encounters with each other, Lovric effectively breaks down the "local" versus "foreigner" binary that lies at the heart of the other two texts I have discussed.

By emphasizing the international elements at the heart of Venice's maritime culture, Lovric also collapses the global/local binary even further. The mermaids (creatures whom Lovric, herself, has stated are representative of the working-class Venetians who have been forced out of the city in recent years) are not "pure" ethnic nationals but hybrid creatures who eat curries and heavily spiced foods (a diet which acknowledges the city's once prominent position on the spice route. They live in mosaic-lined grottos akin to Turkish Baths (a tribute to the connection that existed for so long between the Venetian and Ottoman Empires) and they speak in working-class London accents—a form of speech which Lovric chose in order to convey the roughness of their tongue, a form of speech which came from eavesdropping on visiting sailors<sup>15</sup>.

Historian John Urry has observed that "social identities emerge... out of particular structures of feeling that bind together three elements—space, time and memory" (p. 436), and rather than concentrate on the material or intangible elements of the city's culture, Lovric's novel uses sites of cultural memory to remind the reader how heritage is "a continuously evolving narrative composed of plans, glances, gestures, skills and memories" (Settis 2016, p. 36). The *lieux de mémoire* that the author builds into her narrative are not the well-known tourist structures but lesser-known buildings and monuments, and it is not coincidental that the site of memory around which the novel's plot is built—the Column of Infamy that was made to commemorate the Tiepolo conspiracy and removed not long after it was erected—is effectively a *lieu d'oubli*. For, as Guy Beiner (2018) has observed: "there is an evident need for major historical studies of *lieux d'oubli* to counterbalance the

<sup>14</sup> It is significant that Teodora defeats Bajamonte Tieoplo by shouting curses from a Spell Almanac written in many languages to him. These curses, which the book's arch-villain has inscribed on her skin, ultimately make her a transnational, cultural repository *par excellence*.

<sup>15</sup> Mermaids are not traditionally linked with Venice, but the mythical sea goddess, Venus, has long been part of the symbology of Venice. The idea that the Venetian people might be associated with mermaids is thus not as ludicrous as it might initially appear. For more on this topic, see Luchs (2011).

studies of *lieux de mémoire*" (p. 29). Venice's history, of course, has many unsavoury aspects, and the city's involvement in both the slave trade and the Inquisition is something that Teo finds extremely shocking. Ultimately, however, she has to accept that the past cannot be changed—and that it is only by accepting the bad with the good that they can build a better future. Renzo tells her: "Don't be a baby Teo. Nothing in this world is perfect. Only a spoilt child expects it to be. [...] you're a Venetian now. You have to take the good with the bad. But there is more that could be perfect about Venice than there is about any other city. That is what I believe and I hope you can believe it too" (p. 331).

In contrast to *Stravaganza: City of Masks* and *Mistica Maevae l'anello di Venezia*, both of which engage in performative nostalgia, *The Undrowned Child* does not look back to an idyllic past. It operates instead in a fictionalised, 19th century that contains elements from later time periods (the author takes the liberty of shifting several events that actually took place later to her past setting)<sup>16</sup>, and it is this merging of past and present which enables the author to use Bajamonte Tiepolo's fictionalised attempts at revenge to comment ~~at one step removed~~ on the threats that the city was facing at the time of writing. That the villain in this novel is a metaphor for modern consumer culture is clear from the similarity that Lovric draws between his name, "Bajamonte", and the "Baja-Menta" ice cream that he uses to lure the tourists and the locals alike into supporting his cause<sup>17</sup>:

"See the sign on the side of the trolley. It's called Baja-Menta Gelato. Don't you see? Menta as in mint'. 'It's certainly going down a treat. Look at those people trying to get more', exclaimed mother. They're going mad for it! [...] Teo cried out, 'It's as if you've all been enchanted by this ice-cream'. [...] And the people around the edges of the square clutched their cups of green ice-cream, seeking comfort in its sweet taste. Their eyes were glazed with craving. They pushed it into their mouths greedily. The more they ate, the more they wanted" (p. 192).

Tiepolo's campaign has brought grey sharks to the Grand Canal, and the damage that these unwanted creatures are causing to the *flora and fauna* of the lagoon is by no means dissimilar to the damage that the huge cruise liners are currently causing to the city and its fragile ecosystem<sup>18</sup>. Recent years have witnessed the establishment of a strong anti-cruise liner campaign within the city, and the handbills that the mermaids print on their Seldom Seen Press and distribute around the city, pushing them into railings and tucking them into flowerpots, bear an uncanny resemblance to those that were distributed around the city in the early years of the 21st century by the *NO grandi navi* committee in an effort to raise public awareness about the environmental damage that was being caused by the visiting cruise liners<sup>19</sup>.

The Mayor of the novel, a figure who ignores the threat that Tiepolo poses until it is too late, has much in common with the Venetian Mayor, Giorgio Orsoni, who was elected Mayor a year after the novel was published and who was subsequently arrested for his corrupt handling of the MOSE project, a project that was heavily financed by international organizations and which it was hoped would go some way towards protecting the lagoon from the effects of the tidal waves caused by the lagoon traffic. The Mayor in the novel is more interested in the profits that tourism brings to the city than he is in protecting her heritage, and it may well not be coincidental that both this Mayor and his

<sup>16</sup> She moves the historic flood of 1966, which caused much devastation to the city, for example, to 1899 so that she can use this as the reason why Teodora's parents are in Venice at an environmental conference.

<sup>17</sup> And it is telling that Lucien and his family in *Stravaganza* enjoy icecreams in St. Mark's Square, while the parents of Giaki, *Mistica Maeva's* friend in the eponymous novel, own a successful gelateria on the Zattere.

<sup>18</sup> As Whigham (2014) notes, "large cruise ships have come to symbolise the struggle to prevent tourism from monopolising the Venetian economy. Currently, cruise ships literally pass through the city in order to enter or leave the port of Venice, crossing the Giudecca canal and brushing up against St. Mark's Square" (p. 128).

<sup>19</sup> Lovric discusses the work of this committee in her blog post, "Suicide by greed: the monsters looming over Venice", written on the 10 December 2017.



real-life counterpart, were involved in the organisation of the Biennale festival (Orsoni was Director of the Festival from 2000-2003).

Tiepolo's campaign, of course, is an effective strategy for talking about the ways in which rampant greed can undermine a city, even if the reader is not familiar with these contemporary allusions, and it is clear from the way in which Lovric sets up her novel that she was not writing for one particular audience but rather for as wide an audience as possible. It is for this reason that when it comes to determining who should save the city, *The Undrowned Child* is more inclusive than are either Hoffman or Walter's texts. The city in this book is saved by a collaborative effort between the locals and the non-nationals,<sup>20</sup> and it is the combination of Teo and Renzo's magical victory and the decisions that are taken by the environmental experts (Teo arrives in the city because her parents have been called to an international congress on the city's ecological future) that ultimately averts the crisis.

The very act of writing a novel about Venice today is, of course, necessarily a questionable act, given that its dissemination is bound to attract readers to the city. This is, however, something of which Lovric is astutely aware:

My own deployment of Venice begins to worry me. What can I give back to the city? Well, love and respect are part of my novels. Venice is always a character in them, not just a setting. I also know of children who have nagged their parents to take them to Venice because of my books. I have even devised tours of Venice based on my stories. But is that a good thing for *La Serenissima*? Do I add to her serenity? No. Although my books take people to islands, squares and hidden cloisters far from the madding crowds of San Marco, Venice doesn't need me to bring any more tourists than the 22 millions she suffers annually. By writing for children, and embedding some of the city's lesser-known history, do I perhaps educate? Or do I merely entertain?<sup>21</sup>

When it comes to self-reflexivity, Lovric's novel is, thus, more aware of the responsibilities that it has towards the city than are the other two. Unlike *Stravaganza: City of Masks*, which effectively seeks to colonize Venice for a select few tourists who possess talismans (who incidentally happen to be British) and *Mistica Maeoa e l'anello di Venezia*, which seeks to keep Venice for the Venetians, *The Undrowned Child* invites all its readers to put the interests of the city uppermost, providing them with a transnational reading of the city that has much in common with the "moral" transnational vision of which Randolph Bourne (1916) spoke over a hundred years ago.

The radically different portrayals of Venice that can be found in these texts undoubtedly stem, in part, from the state of local and global debates about the future of the city's cultural heritage at the times in which they were written. Lovric was not only living partly in Venice at the time when she penned her novel<sup>22</sup>, but she was also engaged with Venetian society and politics, a position which enabled her to write four later children's novels set in Venice as well as several blog posts about the city and its intellectual community on the collaborative writers' website *The History of Girls*<sup>23</sup>. The

<sup>20</sup> The flotilla of creatures that fight Tiepolo and his evil forces at the end of the novel are assisted by several international figures as well as by mythical sea creatures from Great Britain and a group of dolphins from the South Seas.

<sup>21</sup> Michelle Lovric, "The real deal or the raw deal", *The History Girls*, 10 January 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Venice is also always a character in her novels and while *The Undrowned child* did have a sequel it was not originally envisaged as the first novel in a series about different Italian cities as were both Walter's and Hoffman's novels (See Hoffman, 2008 and Hoffman 2010 and Walter 2015a and Walter 2015b). When a sequel did appear it was set in London (the other city in which she resides) in order to explore the connections between the two cities that have always fascinated the author. See *The Mourning Emporium* (Lovric, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> See *The Mourning Emporium* (Lovric 2010), *Talina in the Tower* (Lovric 2012), *The Fate in the Box* (Lovric 2013a) and *The Wishing Bones* (Lovric 2019) are all set in Venice while: See, for example the following articles: "Suicide by greed: the monsters looming over Venice" published in *The History Girls*, on December 10, 2017 (Lovric, 2017), and "If Venice dies" published on March 2018 (Lovric 2018) and "The real deal or the

authors' own biographies may, however, also have been a contributing factor, for while Hoffman and Walter are English and Italian respectively, Lovric is an Australian-born author whose background—a blend of Irish and Serbian—led Pino Cottogni to describe her as “un gran minestrone fatto di ingredienti diversi ed esotici” (a big minestrone soup made up of varied and exotic ingredients)<sup>24</sup>. Does it take a transnational author to write a transnational book? Whatever the answer to this question might be, there can be no doubt but that, when viewed together, *Stravaganza: City of Masks*, *Mistica Maeve e l'anello di Venezia* and *The Undrowned Child* serve as a powerful illustration of the ways in which discourses about Venice's cultural heritage crisis are evolving. Lovric's novel, in particular, with its deep reflections on the multifaceted nature of this crisis, offers hope for the future of Venice—a city which this author suggests could easily be saved if the citizens of the world could only find a way to work together in a climate of mutual respect<sup>25</sup>.

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raw deal” (Lovric 2013b) all address, all of which deal with the issues that lie at the heart of *The Undrowned Child*.

<sup>24</sup> Pino Cottogni, “Michelle Lovric e la sua Venezia”, *Fantasy Magazine*, 30 Marzo 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Since writing *The Undrowned Child*, Lovric has written three more novels for young adults which explore the challenges that Venice is currently facing even further: *Talina in the Tower* (2012), *The Fate in the Box* (2013) and *The Wishing Bone* (2019) as well as a sequel to *The Undrowned Child*, *The Mourning Emporium* (2010) in which the protagonists of the first novel save London from the baddened magic of Bajamonte Tiepolo.

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