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Title	Historicized fiction or fictionalized history?: Lia Levi's Cecilia va alla guerra and the legacy of the First World War in contemporary Italian children's literature
Author(s)	Myers, Lindsay
Publication Date	2017-04
Publication Information	Myers, L. "Historicized Fiction or Fictionalized History?: Lia Levi's Cecilia va alla guerra and the Legacy of the First World War in Contemporary Italian Children's Literature." <i>The Lion and the Unicorn</i> , vol. 41 no. 2, 2017, pp. 167-185. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/uni.2017.0016
Publisher	Johns Hopkins University Press
Link to publisher's version	<a href="https://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/lion-and-unicorn">https://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/lion-and-unicorn</a>
Item record	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/7198">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/7198</a>
DOI	<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/uni.2017.0016">http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/uni.2017.0016</a>

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**“Historicized Fiction or Fictionalized History? Lia Levi’s *Cecilia va alla guerra* and the Legacy of the First World War in Contemporary Italian Children’s Literature”**

**Lindsay Myers**

Historical fiction has always been a popular genre in international children’s literature, and recent decades have seen a notable increase in the number of novels for children set during the First World War. Providing authentic experiences of past events while simultaneously respecting the attitudes and norms of today’s readers can, however, constitute a significant ideological and philosophical conundrum. As Catherine Butler and Hallie O’Donovan have observed, “in a world riven by the effect of cultural mistrust and incomprehension: writers seem to face a difficult choice: that of presenting a sanitized past with at least the sympathetic characters displaying an ahistorically liberal sensibility; or appearing to normalise and perpetuate those attitudes through fiction”<sup>1</sup>.

Innovative narrative techniques and point-of-view shifts can be effective tools for engaging contemporary readers with the past, and narratives with first-person perspectives and multiple focalization have become extremely popular in contemporary First World War fiction for children.<sup>2</sup> The employment of unconventional narrative perspectives is not, however, in and of itself, inherently progressive; the ideological message of any text being as bound up with the plot, the language, the structural patterns

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and the characterization as well as with the accompanying paratextual materials. National biases can also often exert a powerful influence on the content and style of children’s historical fiction, particularly when the work is set during a *founding moment* in that nation’s history.

Italy's experience of the First World War was markedly different from that of other participating nations. Unlike Great Britain, France, Russia, and Germany who entered the conflict in 1914 as a result of the invasion of Serbia, Italy did not enter the war until May 1915, and when she did join her reasons for doing so were primarily territorial. The Italian government was hopeful that an Allied victory would result in the acquisition of Trieste, Gorizia and Trentino, lands on the Austro-Italian border which many believed to be the rightful possession of the newly united nation. The battles for which the Italian soldiers were recruited were all against the nation's archenemies the Austrians—even if many of the latter ones witnessed the demise of as many German as Austrian soldiers. The wartime propaganda continually cast the conflict as an extension of the Italian Unification, a process that had begun in the early eighteen hundreds and had given rise in 1861 to the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy. Nineteenth-century Italian children's literature was rife with irredentism, and the idea that the First World War was the final stage in the nation's struggle for independence permeated almost all of the reading material directed at children during the conflict.<sup>3</sup>

The interwar years were not marked in Italy, as they were in the rest of Europe, by a period of disillusionment but rather witnessed the rise of Italian Fascism. The wartime concept of the First World War as a war of Italian independence was skillfully appropriated by the fascist government for the purposes of political propaganda. The First World War remained a key theme in postwar Italian children's fiction and many authors consciously perpetuated and extended the Italian narratives written for children during

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the First World War in order to draw a direct line between the heroes of this conflict and their fascist successors.<sup>4</sup>

Once the Second World War ended attempts to reconcile Italy's 'insular' perspective of the First World War with the climate of international solidarity became increasingly difficult. Postwar Italian children's authors simply could not continue to portray the First World War in the manner in which it had been portrayed up to that point. They did not, however, revisit the period, as did their international counterparts, but rather concentrated instead on the Second World War—a conflict that was far more conducive to the expression of pacifist and humanitarian messages than was the First World War. Almost all of the wartime and immediate postwar Italian children's books on the First World War went out of print and by the 1950s the conflict had all but disappeared in Italian historical novels for the young.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Cecilia va alla guerra: A Watershed Text with a Conservative Message***

At the dawn of the twenty-first century the First World War returned as a setting in Italian children's fiction. The Italian publishing giant, Mondadori, commissioned the Italian children's author, Lia Levi, to write a book on the war as part of their *Storie d'Italia* series, and the novel that appeared in 2000 soon became one of the most successful in the collection.<sup>6</sup> It was followed in 2007 by a novel by Marco Tomatis,<sup>7</sup> as well several translations of Anglophone First World War novels,<sup>8</sup> and in 2014 a further

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eight Italian, war-novels appeared,<sup>9</sup> four of which were commissioned as part of a centenary series entitled “La Grande Guerra 1914–1918.”<sup>10</sup> In 2015 a further First World War novel was added to the collection,<sup>11</sup> and the last two years have seen the publication of several new scholarly studies on the relationship between the war and Italian children’s culture.<sup>12</sup>

Of all the Italian children’s novels that have been written on the conflict since the year 2000 it is *Cecilia va alla guerra* that has had the most significant impact. The novel, which recounts the events that took place in Italy between 1914 and 1917 through the eyes of a young, Italian girl, has been very popular with Italian school teachers and librarians.<sup>13</sup> What, however, is the ultimate message of this work? How does it differ from its predecessors, and to what extent can it be separated from the broader, social, and political context in which it is situated?

First-person narrations are often employed in children’s literature to subvert the totalizing nature of hegemonic, grand narratives,<sup>14</sup> and the diary entries in *Cecilia va alla guerra* in which the young girl records her daily life between May 2, 1915 and December 3, 1916, more or less contemporaneously, reveal a Cecilia who is critical of contemporary propaganda. Unlike the majority of her classmates who passively absorb the propaganda of the time Levi’s ten-year old protagonist is highly sceptical of her schoolteacher’s invocations to precocious heroism. She does not see why she and others like her should be expected to sacrifice their young lives for their nation and she is anxious about the

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impact that intervention will have on her family and the people that she loves.

The propagandist rhetoric to which she is being subjected at school is heavily skewed by contemporary, bellicose discourse, and the notion that “in order to become a hero you need a war, because otherwise there is no way for a hero to show his worth,”<sup>15</sup> is something for which she has little time, not least because the civilian act of heroism that she witnessed when a local boy risked his life to rescue another boy from a river is entirely on par, in her eyes, with any act of bravery on the field of battle.

Cecilia’s teacher regularly makes her students read entire pages of the children’s magazine, *La Rivista dei Ragazzi*, a work that is riven with irredentist fervour. Cecilia, however, is not entirely convinced by the magazine’s claims that “it is up to us, children, to ask our big brothers to free the children in Trieste, all of whom are our little friends.”<sup>16</sup> She tells the reader: “quite who these children of Trieste are I don’t know, and I have no idea how they can be my friends.”<sup>17</sup> The exams that the children are set while in school are permeated with patriotic rhetoric, and it is highly significant that when Cecilia is asked by one of the professors to write a letter to the soldiers on the front “showing an understanding of the value of this war as an extension of the *Risorgimento* battles,”<sup>18</sup> she refuses to comply, begging the soldier to stay alive and reminding him of the pain that his mother, his fiancé and all those who love him would feel were he to die prematurely.

Critical appraisal of *Cecilia va alla guerra* has, to date, has been resoundingly positive. Lia Levi is a prize-winning author who has earned a national reputation for her

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children's fiction,<sup>19</sup> and the novel has been highly praised in Italy for its personalized, epistolary narrative,<sup>20</sup> its fresh and youthful protagonists,<sup>21</sup> and its pleasant and engaging style.<sup>22</sup> Close analysis of the structure of the novel, the characterization, and the language that is employed in *Cecilia va alla guerra* reveals, however, that the novel does not really present a well-balanced reconstruction of the conflict but rather is perplexingly split into two radically different sections, each of which has its own mutually contradictory outlook.

Part one is a chronological narration told more or less contemporaneously by Cecilia. A young girl from an affluent, northern Italian family, Cecilia lives with her parents, her younger sister, Emanuela, and the family's housekeepers. Her older brother, Giancarlo, is enrolled in a school in Udine and lives there with his aunts. Cecilia attends the local school and she and her friend Marco (the son of the family gardener) are preparing to sit their school exams in order to progress on to high school. In the beginning their lives are not directly effected by the war. Before long, however, the impact of the conflict begins to take its toll. Cecilia's father takes up a position in the barracks in Udine, Cecilia's brother is suspended from school for campaigning for intervention, and Cecilia's mother befriends a new neighbor, a frivolous and self-centered woman who claims to be of Russian descent. Cecilia and Marco become convinced that this Olga Orlova, is an Austrian spy, and the latter part of the section is centered around their efforts to monitor her behavior and to prevent her from accessing the war journal that their father keeps in a drawer in his study.

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Part two is a retrospective journal, which relays the events between 1917 and 1918 from the perspective of November 1918. It is structured around the heroic journey that Cecilia and Marco undergo to pursue Olga, apprehend her and reclaim their father's stolen journal, and it reads much more like a conventional "adventure" story than it does a reflective diary. It is not set in Cecilia's house but in the area near the Tagliamento River, a region in northeastern Italy, which became pivotal in the Italian campaign after the Battle of Caporetto, and it documents in a highly detailed manner the chaos of the final months in this border territory. At the end of the novel the two children recover the stolen notebook and make their way back home, with the help of Cecilia's brother (a character who has since become a spy for the Italian army) and the story ends with the triumphant celebration of their "heroic" good deed.

Structured around the journey that Cecilia and Marco undergo to pursue and apprehend the Austrian spy, the second section of the novel concerns itself primarily with Cecilia's actions. It is written in a matter of fact, authoritative manner, and its narrator is a flat, two-dimensional character, a figure who bears more resemblance to a boy in girl's clothing than she does to a middle-class, girl on the cusp of puberty. The children's journey to retrieve their father's rightful possessions from an Austrian thief is viewed from one perspective only, and the children's triumphant recovery of the journal, far from problematizing contemporary irrendentist discourse, as did Cecilia's musings in the earlier section, ironically serves to reinforce this rhetoric, operating as it does as a powerful metonym for the nation's later reclamation of Trieste and Trento. The concluding scene in which the young girl is presented with a medal for her bravery is highly reminiscent of the scenes in nineteenth-century Italian war novels for children in

which young heroes were decorated for their patriotic acts, and the narrator's later description of her role in the war as an *avventura* (adventure) reveals little (if any) trace of the pacifist sentiments of her younger counterpart.

The narrative shift that takes place in the novel between the first series of diary entries and the second section recounting "my 1917," is pivotal, not just because it radically undermines the perspective of the younger Cecilia but because the second section is, itself, sandwiched between two 1918 entries (one written on November 4 and one written on a later date in the same month) both of which call into question the younger Cecilia's doubts and musings and effectively encourage the reader to view the second section as a more reliable narrative. Both of these 1918 entries, the first of which is a single-page entry and the last of which spans six pages, are fervently nationalistic in tone

The First World War is commemorated in Italy not on November 11 (the date that the armistice was signed) but on November 4 (the date the Italian victory was declared), and it is highly significant that the diary entry describing the raising of the Italian flag over Trento and Trieste was written on this date and that it makes no mention of the other nations involved in the conflict but rather casts the entire First World War as a battle between the Italians and the Austrians (referring to the enemy as "our" enemies):

Yesterday, after the huge victory at Vittorio Veneto last October the Italian troops raised the Italian flag over Trento and Trieste. Yes Trento and Trieste have been liberated, just like those who started the war always wanted. And today the armistice has been signed. Our enemies have been defeated forever. In short it's

all over.<sup>23</sup>

Rather than problematize irredentist rhetoric this patriotic entry reinforces the notion that the First World War was primarily a war of Italian liberation. It also subtly compares the joy that the Italian people are said to have felt at having won back Trieste and Trento with the delight that the narrator experienced when she was able to *riconquistare* (“reclaim”) her bedroom at the end of the war:

But why did I write nothing in 1917?

Quite simply because I, also, was at war. I, too, twelve-year-old Cecilia Ferrari was caught up in the war. And when one is at war one is very busy, and is so taken up with looking out for one’s own life that one hasn’t time to stop, take up a pen and write things down in a diary. But I haven’t forgotten anything about the end of 1917. I will tell it all now, as I sit here in my room, in this space which has also finally been reclaimed.<sup>24</sup>

The final entry of the novel, a six-page section that was written on an unspecified date in November 1918, is similarly unequivocal in its celebration of Italian victory. The narrator tells us:

I take up my diary again here to relay “how it all ended.” That everything ended well will have been apparent from my earlier comments. Italy won the war, Trento and Trieste became Italian cities and we all went back home.

My brother was right. Italy did not retreat further than the Piave. That summer the Austrians tried again to advance. They wanted to carry out a surprise attack on our soldiers, right there on the Piave, but the Italian army, thanks to spies like my

brother, Giancarlo, was prepared for them and they did not succeed. Quite the contrary, in fact. . . . Italy, bit by bit, reclaimed, as I said, all of her lost cities, until she finally won the war once and for all in a great battle at Vittorio Veneto.<sup>25</sup>

So absent is the broader, international picture here that is hardly surprising that the very first question in the accompanying historical notes to the first edition was: “Why was the war that lasted between 1914 and 1918 known as a World War?”<sup>26</sup> It would, of course, be entirely possible for someone with no prior knowledge of the period to read this novel and not know the answer to this question.

Cecilia, herself, is, in many ways, more of a vehicle for the transmission of conflicting ideological perspectives than she is an accurate portrayal of a girl of the time. Unlike the traditional *bildungsroman* protagonist who gradually matures as a result of his/her social interactions, Cecilia does not develop or mature over the course of the novel. Quite the contrary, in fact, she changes suddenly (and for no apparent reason) and she exhibits radically different traits in each of the three narrations; in the first she is a reflective but anachronistically liberal child, in the second she is a fearless and idealistic girl while in the 1918 entries she is an authoritative fourteen-year-old with a voice akin to that of official historiography. All of her different “selves” have little in common with the other, and the blind patriotism that the fourteen-year-old author of the 1918 entries exhibits is the exact opposite of the ten-year-old Cecilia’s cynical and controversial perspective.

Cecilia is not the only character in the novel whose identity is defined by politics; all of the characters in the novel essentially function as mouthpieces for different political

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viewpoints. The female figures with which the young Cecilia comes into contact are either self-absorbed, pacifist matrons or sexually mature and belligerent villains and they cannot be said to afford, as do the females in so many of Levi's other novels, any genuinely authentic insights into "the lived experience of women's personal and domestic history."<sup>27</sup> Neither Olga Orlova who attempts to gain access to Cecilia's father's secret journal through the employment of cunning deception nor Cecilia's mother who objects to Italy's intervention because the "war brings confusion and chaos,"<sup>28</sup> have any real depth of character, and Cecilia's father and Cecilia's brother, Giancarlo, while they are far more attractively portrayed than are the female figures in the novel are ultimately no more well-rounded than are their female counterparts. They do not develop as a result of their experiences but operate throughout the novel as bastions of certainty and conviction in a world of traditional, patriarchal values.

Marco, the young boy with whom Cecilia shares her wartime adventures is probably the most one-dimensional of all the characters in the novel. The son of the family's gardener, he is the novel's token working-class hero, and his friendship with the book's middle-class heroine is first and foremost a symbol of the interclass collaboration that took place during the war both on and off the field of battle, and which later proved instrumental in the construction of a shared national spirit.

Just as the structure and the characterization in this work appear to have been heavily influenced by ideological factors, so too the language that Levi adopts often betrays a latent, political bias. Much of the vocabulary, while not overtly disparaging, sanctifies the Italian soldiers by prioritizing national goals. The passage, which recounts

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the execution of the Austrian-born, Italian spy, Fabio Filzi, for treason, for example, is full of praise for this *patriota italiano* (“Italian patriot”, 121), and the young narrator of the passage appears entirely oblivious of the fact that the spying of this patriotic hero was fundamentally the same as that of the novel’s Austrian villain.<sup>29</sup>

Twentieth-century Italian war novels for children frequently belittled or demonized the enemy in order to reinforce notions of Italian superiority,<sup>30</sup> and Cecilia is often either mocking or scathing in her descriptions of the enemy soldiers in the text. The German soldiers that she meets while searching for the Austrian spy have “ridiculous pointed helmets” (155), while the soldiers who throw the mustard gas against the Allied forces at Ypres are described by the narrator as being nasty and cruel,<sup>31</sup> a judgment that takes little account of the chemical warfare later employed by the Italian army in Africa.<sup>32</sup>

Italian aviation prowess, by contrast, is highly praised, and the passage in which Cecilia watches with admiration as Italy’s most famous war pilot, Francesco Baracca, zooms overhead and shoots down an enemy plane is fervently nationalistic:

That one there is Baracca! It’s Baracca! Shouted Marco pointing up at the plane that was displaying the tricolour on its wings. Baracca is our ace of aviation and a hero, an Italian pilot who single-handedly brought down tens and tens of enemy planes! And so it was this time too. There was a sudden burst of fire and the Austrian plane went up in flames “Somebody at least”, I thought, is still

defending Italy.<sup>33</sup>

Why is this novel so fundamentally schizophrenic? Why did Levi, an unaccomplished author with an established reputation for her work on the Second World War, place such an apparently “open-minded” twelve-year-old protagonist, in such a conservative and traditionally, patriotic novel?

Part of the answer to this question may lie in the author’s own family history; it should not be forgotten that Levi’s grandfather, Alberto Levi, lost his life at the Battle of Caporetto in 1917 and that the novel is dedicated to him.<sup>34</sup> The contemporary, cultural climate in which the work was published was likely, however, the most important contributing factor. The early years of the twenty-first century witnessed a significant resurgence in Italian nationalism,<sup>35</sup> a re-awakening of “the myth of the nation,” which has been attributed by the eminent Italian historian, Emilio Gentile, to a gradual shift in political perspective,<sup>36</sup> and the myth of the First World War as a war of independence, while it has been problematized in recent years by a wide range of counter narratives has never been fully dismantled in Italian popular culture. One of the primary aims of Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, the president of the Italian Republic, between 1999 and 2007 was to restore a sense of patriotism and national pride to the Italian people,<sup>37</sup> and there can be little doubt but that this myth continued to serve as an important national signifier in the rhetoric of his successor, Giorgio Napolitano.<sup>38</sup> The introduction, which the Milanese historian, Paolo Colombo, wrote for the 2014 republication of Levi’s text, actively

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encourages its readers to remember the war in a positive way, noting that it was—even in the midst of all its horrors—the time when many Italians discovered their true identity.<sup>39</sup>

Colombo's evocation of the war as a foundational event (while not entirely incorrect) totally downplays the huge material and economic losses incurred. It entirely ignores, as did Levi's novel, the international dimension to the conflict and it evokes in the reader through the use of highly charged emotive language a sense of pride in the war's final outcome—a victory that consolidated Italian nationalism. The commitment that the Italian people showed over the course of the war to ensuring that there was a constant supply of “new soldiers, ammunitions, uniforms, supplies, coal, vehicles, ever more efficient weapons” is viewed in exclusively positive terms,<sup>40</sup> and it is telling that the adjective “world” in the title of the conflict is linked by the author not to the war's international breadth but to its modern nature:

Military historians have all observed that the First World War saw the birth of an entirely new type of warfare, a “total” warfare that would find its fullest expression in the Second World War (1939–1945). This does not mean (as one might be led to think from the adjective “world”) that the whole world was involved. [Rather that] the entire societal fabric of the participant countries was involved, at every level.<sup>41</sup>

By framing the war within the context of technological and social advances Colombo effectively shifts the reader's attention away from the war's broader international import and back onto national concerns.

### **Looking Beyond: The Legacy of *Cecilia va alla guerra* in Italian Children's**

#### **Literature**

The problematic way in which Levi's *Cecilia va alla guerra* juxtaposes modern, international approaches to the conflict with conservative and traditionally nationalistic perspectives has not to date been the subject of any serious academic scholarship and the paratextual material that has been generated to accompany the text has always tended to overlook the work's inherent ambiguities. Both the 2009 and the most recent 2015 edition of the novel contain footnotes and in-text marginalia (annotations that are normally associated with scholarly texts) and both of these additions subtly reinforce rather than challenge the work's authenticity.

The six historical FOCUS sections that have been interspersed within the 2009 Mursia Scuola edition of the text are also problematic, in that while they do provide accurate facts about past and current events, they do not prompt the reader to draw connections between the First World War and the wars of today. They suggest, rather, that modern-day conflicts are so radically different from their early and mid-twentieth-century counterparts as to have become mutually incomparable.<sup>42</sup>

When they realise that the Countess Orlova has stolen the diary of Colonel Ferrari, Cecilia and Marco throw themselves into her pursuit. They take on without fear the risks of the war, crossing enemy lines and entering into Udine, a city that has been newly occupied by the Austrian troops. As adults they will likely look back on this adventure with a great deal of nostalgia, remembering above all the friendship that brought them together. The reality is however often very different from novels and much more dramatic. Today there really are child soldiers. They face death in terrible ways and are marked by it, as if by a wound that will never heal.<sup>43</sup>

While the phenomenon of child soldiers is certainly a burning humanitarian issue to suggest that the First World War was less traumatizing for the children involved than are modern conflicts is, perhaps, a step too far. Distinguishing the First World War from more modern wars is, however, a useful device for enabling the reader to view it in a more positive way, and it is surely not coincidental that the final paragraph of the last FOCUS section, entitled “The outcome of the First World War” focuses almost exclusively on the victory that the Italian army had over the Germans at Vittorio Veneto in 1918 and on the manner in which this victory concluded the process of Unification begun with the *Risorgimento*.

The didactic exercises that were added to the 2009 edition of the novel, tasks that were added to enable the novel’s young readers to “identify some of the characters’ key traits, and to understand the novel’s key turning points and narrative style” are also extremely conservative, despite their apparent modernity. The exercise that requires the students to connect the characters in the novel with the adjectives that best describe them

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(a list that includes adjectives such as “indignant,” “malicious,” “zealous,” and “excessive”) is superficial, and even the question that asks the students to consider the extent to which Olga Orlova is “a completely negative character” does not pursue this line of enquiry to its logical conclusion by asking the reader to then ask the opposite question of Cecilia’s brother (a character who is described in the subsequent exercise as a “great character” despite his having been a spy).<sup>44</sup>

The final question of the comprehension section that asks the students to decide whether the novel is a historical novel or an adventure novel is also of limited value given that the first sentence of the thematic section that follows it begins with the declaration that: “*Cecilia va alla guerra* is a historical novel.”<sup>45</sup> Despite their apparently “progressive” appearance neither the comprehension section nor the thematic exercises really explore the ongoing tensions that exist in the novel between local and global perspectives. They do not interrogate the symbolism of the conflict within the nation’s founding myth but rather subtly re-propose it, and the paratextual material that accompanies the 2014 edition actively discourages anything other than ultraconservative readings of the novel.

That Levi’s classic has generated such little critical discussion is cause for concern, not least because the text has set a precedent for subsequent Italian children’s novels about the First World War, many of which exhibit similarly nostalgic and patriotic aspects despite their ostensibly modern plots and stylistic features.

The adventures that the “miniature heroes” (197) of Ave Gagliardi’s *Amici su due fronti* undertake are, for example, every bit as romanticized as those carried out by Levi’s heroes, and Benni, the sixteen-year-old hero of Luisa Mattia’s *Hemmingway e il ragazzo*

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*che suonava la tromba*, is compared on several occasions by the author to Maciste,<sup>46</sup> the muscular hero of the highly patriotic Italian, silent films, *Cabiria* (1914), *Maciste* (1915), and *Maciste alpino* (1916), productions whose racist and nationalistic tendencies would no longer be acceptable today. Neither novel can really be said to address the problems posed by Levi's classic nor to respond in any genuine way to the broader questions that Campagnaro considers crucial in her discussion of children's literature and the First World War in her study, *La Grande Guerra raccontata ai ragazzi*.<sup>47</sup>

Even Guido Sgardoli's *Il giorno degli eroi*, a work that is infused with pacifist values, concludes with a fabricated ceasefire between the Austro-Hungarian and Italian army at the Piave in 1917, a ceasefire that despite its advocacy of international solidarity is no more authentic in its depiction of the Italian experience than was Levi's novel.<sup>48</sup>

Whether Italian society will ever fully let go of the nationalist myths associated with the First World War is impossible to say. Chiara Carminati's *Fuori fuoco*, a work that has won several awards for its portrayal of the challenges faced by two young Italian girls of Austrian descent during the conflict would suggest that things are gradually beginning to change<sup>49</sup>. The publication one year prior to this of Christian Hill's aviation novel, *Il volo dell'Asse di Picche*, a work that narrates the spine-chilling adventures of five boys who steal a fighter plane in order to bomb the enemy Austrians clearly shows, however, that there is still a strong market in Italy for children's novels that depict the war as an exciting game won by the "right" side. One thing is certain-Lia Levi's

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ideologically ambivalent classic has as much to reveal about the present climate of Italian patriotism as it does about Italy's experience of the First World War itself.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Butler and Hallie O'Donovan, *Reading History in Children's Books* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Well-known examples of First World War novels that experiment with first-person narratives and multiple focalization include Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse* (1982), Paul Dowswell's *Eleven Eleven* (2012), and Theresa Breslin's *Remembrance* (2001).

<sup>3</sup> For a broad overview of the manner in which Italian children's culture was infiltrated by propaganda during these years see Gibelli (2005). For information on the pro-war bias of the Italian children's magazines of the time see Fabiana Loparco, *I bambini e la guerra: Il Corriere dei piccoli e il il primo conflitto mondiale (1915–18)* (Florence: Nerbini, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Examples include Guido Fabiani's *La gran fiamma* (1921), Laura Orvieto's *Beppe racconta la guerra* (1925), and Salvatore Gotta's *Piccolo alpino* (1926) and *Altra guerra del piccolo alpino* (1933). For further analysis of these books and their pro-war ideologies see Sabrina Fava (2004) and Jessica D'Eath (2012) and (2014).

<sup>5</sup> One of the few Italian First World War novels that remained in print in the postwar period was Salvatore Gotta's *Piccolo alpino* (a work which was adapted for a TV series in 1986).

<sup>6</sup> The novel has been republished three times (firstly in 2007, then again in 2009 and most recently in 2014) and it has sold over 20,000 copies, a figure that is due in no small part

to the fact that the 2009 edition was marketed directly to Italian high school students and their teachers.

<sup>7</sup> Marco Tomatis, *Lorenzo e la Grande Guerra* (Rome: Fanucci, 2007). This novel was republished in 2008 and 2015 by Raffaello editore in Ancona.

<sup>8</sup> These include: Michael Morpurgo, *La guerra del soldato Pace* (Florence: Salani, 2005); Michael Morpurgo, *Warhorse* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2011); Paul Dowswell, *L'ultima alba di Guerra* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2013); James Riordan, *La notte in cui la guerra si fermò* (Milan: Mondadori, 2014); John Boyne, *Resta dove sei e poi va* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2014); and Robert Westall, *La grande avventura* (Milan: Piemme, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Chiara Carminati, *Fuori fuoco* (Milan, Bompiani, 2014); Guido Sgardoli, *Il giorno degli eroi* (Milan, Rizzoli, 2014); Annamaria Piccine, *Una rosa in trincea* (Milan: Paoline, 2014); Christian Hill, *Il volo dell'Asso di Picche* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014) Luisa Mattia, *Hemmingway e il ragazzo che suonava la tromba* (Milan: Piemme, 2014); Ave Gagliardi, *Amici su due fronti* (Milan: Piemme, 2014); Teresa Buongiorno, *Il sentiero dei ricordi* (Milan: Piemme, 2014); Paolo Colombo e Anna Simioni, *L'oro della montagna* (Milan: Piemme, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> A new edition of *Cecilia va alla guerra* was also part of this series.

<sup>11</sup> Marco Tomatis, *Il sapore dell'ultima neve* (Turin: Notes Edizioni, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> See Marnie Campagnaro, *La grande guerra raccontata ai ragazzi* (Rome: Donzelli, 2015) and Walter Fochesato, *Il gioco della guerra* (Novara: Interlinea 2015), and L. Paul, R. Johnston, and E. Short (eds.), *Children's Literature and Culture of the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2016), which contains two articles on this relationship in Italian children's literature: Francesca Orestano, "On the Italian Front: Salvator Gotta's

*Piccolo Alpino*” (48–59), and Lindsay Myers, “Flying the Flag”: Arturo Rossato’s Fantasy novel, *L’aeroplano di Girandolino*” (30–47).

<sup>13</sup> The book is often one of the novels that children are requested to read in Italian middle schools. In 2015 there were several exhibitions around the book in the children’s sections of Italian libraries, many of which included involvement by Italian children in middle schools. See, for example, <http://www.romagnagazzette.com/2015/05/22/massa-lombarda-cecilia-va-alla-guerra-inaugura-alla-biblioteca-carlo-venturini-la-mostra-fotografica-sul-tema-del-fronte-italiano-della-grande-guerra/>.

<sup>14</sup> The title of the series for which the novel was initially commissioned, implicitly suggests that history is made up not of one single “official” narrative but of a plurality of histories, and the diary format of the novel with its “private” focus subtly challenges the absolute authority of grand narratives.

<sup>15</sup> “per diventare eroi ci vuole la guerra, altrimenti un eroe non ha modo di farsi valere” (*Cecilia va alla guerra* [2007], 7). As this book has never been translated into English all translations in this article are my own.

<sup>16</sup> “noi bambini dobbiamo chiedere ai nostri fratelli maggiori di liberare i bambini di Trieste, che sono i nostri piccoli amici” (*Cecilia va alla guerra* [2007], 28).

<sup>17</sup> “io questi bambini di Trieste, in verità, non li conosco, e non so quindi come possono essere amici miei” (*Cecilia va alla guerra* [2007] 29).

<sup>18</sup> “dimostrando consapevolezza del valore di questa guerra come proseguimento ideale delle battaglie del nostro Risorgimento” (*Cecilia va alla guerra* [2007], 73).

<sup>19</sup> Lia Levi is undoubtedly one of the nation’s most prolific and well-established children’s authors. She has written over thirty-five books for children, many of which are

set during the Second World War. She earned the Elsa Morante Prize in 1994 for her adult novels, *Una bambina e basta*, the Moravia prize in 2001 for *L'albergo della magnolia*, and the Rapallo prize in 2015 for *Il braccialeto*. In addition to *Cecilia va alla guerra* she also wrote four other historical novels in the *Storie dell'Italia* series: *Maddalena resta a casa. 1938* (2000); *Il segreto della casa sul cortile. Roma 1943–1944* (2001); *La collana della Regina. Roma 1943* (2002); and *La Villa del Lago. La Repubblica di Salò 1943–1944*, (2003), all of which were subsequently republished by Piemme.

<sup>20</sup>Maurizio Onnis has praised the novel for the way that it foregrounds “‘History’ with a small ‘h’” (“la Storia con la ‘s’ maiuscola”). See Onnis’ introduction to the novel in *Cecilia va alla guerra* (2009), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Campagnaro observes that: “in Marco and Cecilia one can find the characteristic freshness and recklessness of youth” (“in Marco e Cecilia si respirano la freschezza e la tipica incoscienza dell’età della giovinezza”, 158).

<sup>22</sup> For Campagnaro the novel is “a pleasant adventure” (“una piacevole avventura”, 118), a description that echoes that of Fochesato who wrote in his entry on the novel in the appendix to *La guerra nei libri per ragazzi* that “in this balanced reconstruction, there is also space, as is typical of the works in this series, for a small adventure” (“in questa ricostruzione equilibrata c’è anche lo spazio, com’è tipico della serie, per una piccola avventura,” 203). Campagnaro believes that the events in the novel are permeated with “a subtle vein of humor that draws the reader in and plunges him/her into the conflict being narrated” (“percorsa da una sottile vena umoristica che coinvolge il lettore e lo catapulta nelle vicende belliche,” 158).

<sup>23</sup> Proprio ieri, dopo la grande vittoria dello scorso ottobre a Vittorio Veneto, le truppe italiane hanno issato la bandiera tricolore su Trento e Trieste. Sì, Trento e Trieste sono state liberate, proprio come volevano quelli che avevano deciso di fare la guerra. E oggi è stato firmato l'armistizio. I nostri nemici sono stati per sempre sconfitti. Insomma, è finita (*Cecilia va alla guerra* [2007], 133).

<sup>24</sup> “Ma perché non ho scritto niente nel 1917? Semplice, perché ho fatto la guerra. Anch'io Cecilia Ferrari di anni dodici, ho partecipato alla guerra. E quando si è in battaglia si è molto presi, a volte ci capita anche di scappare per salvarci la pelle e non ci si può certo fermare a buttare giù degli appunti con penna e quaderno. Ma non ho dimenticato niente di quel fine 1917. Lo racconto ora tutto insieme, seduta nella mia stanza, finalmente anche lei riconquistata” (*Cecilia va alla guerra* [2007], 133).

<sup>25</sup> “Riprendo il mio diario del 1918 per raccontare brevemente ‘come è finita.’ Che tutto è finito bene, l'avevo già anticipato. L'Italia ha vinto la guerra, Trento e Trieste sono ormai città italiane e noi siamo tornati a casa nostra. Aveva avuto ragione mio fratello. Dal Piave l'Italia non si era più ritirata. Questa estate gli austriaci ci avevano provato ancora. Volevano attaccare di sorpresa il nostro fronte, proprio lì sul Piave, ma l'esercito italiano, grazie anche alle spie tipo mio fratello Giancarlo, sapeva già tutto e la sorpresa nemica non era riuscita affatto. Anzi è successo il contrario. . . . L'Italia, avanzando avanzando, si è ripresa, come dicevo, le città perdute, fino a vincere in modo definitivo in una grande battaglia a Vittorio Veneto.” (*Cecilia va alla guerra* [2007], 185–86).

<sup>26</sup> “Perché la guerra durata dal 1914 al 1918 si è chiamata ‘mondiale’?” See Lia Levi, *Cecilia va alla guerra* (2007), 191.

<sup>27</sup> F. K. Clementi, “Natalia Ginzburg, Clara Sereni and Lia Levi: Jewish Italian Women Recapturing Cities, Families and National Memories” in *European Journal of Women’s Studies* vol. 21 no.2 (2014): 134–47.

<sup>28</sup> Cecilia's mother does not want the war because she believes that “la guerra porta tanto disordine” (*Cecilia va alla guerra* [2007], 9).

<sup>29</sup> On this note it is also highly ironic that just after Cecilia and Marco rescue their father’s book from Olga Orlova they come across Cecilia’s brother, Giancarlo, dressed as a vagabond, and learn that he has dressed himself in this manner in order to infiltrate the enemy and spy on them!, an occupation that Cecilia declares is “a truly great job” (“davvero un bel lavoro!,” 170).

<sup>30</sup> This approach is discussed at length by Fabiana Loparco in *I bambini e la guerra: Il Corriere dei piccoli e il primo conflitto mondiale* (1915–18).

<sup>31</sup> “the cloud was yellow because of the suffocating gasses that the Germans had nastily thrown against the soldiers that they were fighting” (“quella nuvola era gialla per via dei gas asfissianti che i tedeschi con molta cattiveria avevano buttato contro i soldati che li combattevano” (83).

<sup>32</sup> During the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–36), the Italians reportedly used tons of mustard gas against the Ethiopians, a form of warfare that caused large numbers of Ethiopian casualties from gas poisoning.

<sup>33</sup> “Quello è Baracca! È Baracca!—ha gridato Marco indicando l’aereo che esibiva sulle ali il cerchio a tre colori. Baracca è il nostro asso dell’aviazione, è un eroe, è il pilota italiano che da solo ha abbattuto decine e decine di aerei nemici!” in *Cecilia va alla guerra* (2007), 153.

E così è stato anche questa volta. Una vampa improvvisa e l'aereo austriaco precipitava in fiamme. "Qualcuno allora" ho pensato "sta ancora difendendo l'Italia" (*Cecilia va alla guerra* ([2007],153).

<sup>34</sup> As Catherine Butler observes authors who write with a degree of personal investment about the past often view history in a very different way from those who have no affective connection with the period. See her discussion of the role of memory in British children's fiction about the Second World War in chapter six of *Reading History in Children's Books*.

<sup>35</sup> See *La Grande Italia* and the new 2005 preface which notes that from 1995 on in Italy there was a reawakening of the cult of the nation: "there is a reawakening of national rhetoric in Italy today. . . . there is a reawakening of the myth of the nation in Italy today."

<sup>36</sup> The opening address by the president of the Chamber of Deputies, Gianfranco Fini, referred to the war as "an indelible experience which represents one of the greatest high-points in modern Italian history" ("un'esperienza incancellabile e rappresenta uno dei momenti più alti nella storia dell'Italia moderna.") *La Grande Guerra nella Memoria Italiana: Palazzo di Montecitorio, Sala della Lupa, 29 October, 2008*. (Rome: Camera dei Deputati, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> Close analysis of the speeches delivered by Ciampi in the Quirinale on November 4 "Giornata dell'Unità e delle Forze Armate" in the early years of the twenty-first century, reveal a consistent recourse to Risorgimento symbolism and a virtual absence of references to the episodes and import of the First World War as an international conflict. Transcripts of these speeches are available on the Quirinale website at <http://www.quirinale.it/qrnw/statico/expresidenti/Ciampi/dinamico/discorsi.asp>.

<sup>38</sup> Giorgio Napolitano. Napolitano's 1,000 word, inaugural, commemorative speech on the war delivered on November 4, 2007, did not refer to the conflict as the First World War (or indeed as the Great War) but rather constructed it as an addendum to the Nineteenth Century Risorgimento wars of liberation: "ninety years ago, in this period, Italian soldiers, stationed on the Piave, were preparing to complete the unification of Italy in that which was to be the last war of the national Risorgimento. The ideal of a united *Patria*, cultivated in the previous century by a small few enlightened Italians, was finally about to be realised" ("novant'anni orsono, in questi giorni, i soldati italiani, attestandosi sul Piave, si apprestavano a portare a compimento l'unificazione dell'Italia in quella che fu l'ultima guerra del Risorgimento nazionale. L'ideale di Patria unita, coltivato un secolo prima da pochi italiani illuminati, si stava per materializzare definitivamente.")

<sup>39</sup> "per noi italiani, secondo molto studiosi, la Prima Guerra Mondiale rappresentò—pur nel mezzo di tutti gli orrori che la contraddistinsero—un momento particolarmente importante. Fu in quell'occasione infatti che molti italiani scoprirono di esserlo, italiani" (*Cecilia va alla guerra* [2014], 6).

<sup>40</sup> "forze fresche, munizioni, divise, rifornimenti, carburante, mezzi, vettovaglie, armi sempre più efficienti ed evolute" (*Cecilia va alla guerra* [2014], 10).

<sup>41</sup> "Gli specialisti di storia militare concordano nell'affermare che allora ci si trovò di fronte a un nuovo tipo di guerra, che si sarebbe manifestato al massimo grado nella successiva Seconda Guerra Mondiale (1939–45): la guerra totale. Il che non vuol dire (come potrebbe far presupporre l'aggettivo "mondiale") che tutto il mondo fu coinvolto. La questione è un'altra, e molti dei suoi aspetti emergeranno in questo libro. . . . Le

società intere dei Paesi coinvolti furono toccate, in ogni loro parte” (*Cecilia va alla guerra* [2014], 8–9).

<sup>42</sup> They note, for example, that twentieth-century wars were fought primarily on battle fields, while modern wars make no distinctions between military and civilian territory. Modern wars also “are far more bloody than those of centuries past and have many more victims” (“sono molto più sanguinose di quelle dei secoli passati e causano un numero assai maggiore di vittime”, *Cecilia va alla guerra* [2009], 85).

<sup>43</sup> “Quando si accorgono che la contessa Orlova ha rubato il diario segreto del Colonnello Ferrari, Cecilia e Marco si gettano all’inseguimento. E sfidano senza paura i rischi della guerra, varcando la linea del fronte ed entrando in Udine, città appena occupata dalle truppe austriache. Da grandi ricorderanno probabilmente questa avventura con molta nostalgia, in nome dell’amicizia che li ha uniti. La realtà, è però spesso molto diversa dai romanzi e assai più drammatica. Nel mondo d’oggi, esistono davvero bambini e ragazzi soldato. Fanno un’esperienza di morte terribile, che li segna in profondità, come una ferita che mai più si rimargina” (*Cecilia va alla guerra* [2009], 140).

<sup>44</sup> “un personaggio completamente negativo?” (*Cecilia va alla guerra* [2009], 165).

<sup>45</sup> *Cecilia va alla guerra* è un romanzo storico” (*Cecilia va alla guerra* [2009], 168).

<sup>46</sup> “The boy lifted the wounded soldier on to his back and reckless and bold as he was he ran right into the middle of the battlefield which was still exploding around him. Big, powerful. He was like Maciste” (“Il ragazzo si caricò sulle spalle il soldato ferito e, incosciente, impavido come si sentiva, corse in mezzo alla battaglia che continuava a esplodere. Grande, possente. Sembrava Maciste”, *Hemmingway e il ragazzo che suonava la tromba*, 168).

<sup>47</sup> Marnie Campagnaro says of her scholarly study: “This is a work that in rereading a selection of children’s books on the first world war, seeks to reflect on the “whys” the “hows” the wheres” and the “whos” of the event” (“È un’opera che, nel rileggere alcune lancinanti storie per bambini e ragazzi riferite al primo conflitto mondiale, si interroga sui “perchè,” sui “come,” sui “dove” e sui “chi” di quell’evento”, *La Grande Guerra raccontata ai ragazzi*, ix).

<sup>48</sup> It is significant that this fabricated truce is actually legitimized by the reproduction in the text of a counterfeit newspaper article on the truce in the Italian newspaper, the *Corriere della Sera*, on the 29 December, 1917.

<sup>49</sup> The novel won the Orbil prize in 2015, the Andersen Prize in 2015, and the Strega Prize in 2016 for the 11–15 years category. It was also selected for inclusion in the White Ravens catalogue in 2016 by the International Youth Library.

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