

## Suddenly, the Room Went *Noir*

*In the framework of the PEN World Voices, the Italian Cultural Institute has organized two events dedicated to crime fiction, one on Monday, April 24 featuring Gianrico Carofiglio, and the second on Wednesday, April 26 with thrill masters Boris Akunin from Russia and Henning Mankell of Sweden. Standing in for Massimo Carlotto is translator Lawrence Venuti. Here Edmondo Lupieri offers a short introduction to "Mediterranean noir," which Maria Campbell indicates in her interview with US Italia Weekly (on page 4) is one of the hottest properties in Italian publishing.*



by Edmondo Lupieri

The writing of home-grown crime fiction is a relatively recent phenomenon in Italy. Not that *gialli*, as they are popularly known, were not well-loved. When Mondadori launched a series of detective stories in 1929, they were an instant hit that became known by the color of their paperback covers, yellow, leading to the uniquely Italian moniker of *giallo* for the genre. Despite their success, for decades they consisted mainly of translations and imitations for popular consumption, rather than the bookstore public. As late as the post-War period, the only places that sold them were newsstands, on the same rack as the newspapers and comic books.

With the arrival of the 1960s, the situation started to change. After the erudite and bitter *divertissements* of Carlo Emilio Gadda ("That Awful Mess on Via Merulana," 1957), 1961 was the year of Leonardo Sciascia's "The Day of the Owl," a giallo with a social message. The book was a denunciation of the Mafia and of Italian corruption, which ultimately undo the hard work of a dedicated carabinieri officer who tries to bring justice to Sicily. And fails. Rather than provide the traditional assurance that good would triumph over evil, it was a story ripped from the headlines. So was born Italian *noir*, a genre that reflects, from a bitter and at times cynical perspective, our social, political, economic and legal reality, told with the despair typical of the films that go by the same name.

Duca Lamberti was the first hard-boiled Italian detective. A doctor expelled from the profession for practicing euthanasia, after his release from prison he gets by through back alley abortions and operations to reconstruct the virginity of girls with a questionable past. He smokes, drinks and has sex when he feels like it. But he also helps the police, following his personal sense of morality rather than the official rules. The setting is the new Italian society of 1960s Milan, Italy's industrial capital, where people have learned how to bend or just plain ignore the law. These were the years of the economic boom and Giorgio Scerbanenco, the inventor of Duca Lamberti, created a portrait of Italian crime

better than any investigative report (who could forget the cultural clash experienced by the American girl who came to Italy to avenge her father in the 1966 thriller, "Traditori di tutti").

True masters of the genre, however, were few and far between. In the 1970s, Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini co-wrote "La donna della domenica," the first in a series of novels that explored the dark side of bourgeois life in Turin in the shadows of Fiat. In Bologna in 1974, Lorian Macchiavelli told the stories of the all-too-human Antonio Sarti, police sergeant (a ranking that does not exist in Italy). Sergeant Sarti suffers from indigestion, has a prostitute as a friend and an ex-1968-protester as his assistant. The true protagonist of the series, however, is a dark and mysterious Bologna.

The inimitable meteor of Umberto Eco created the isolated phenomenon of the historical-theological detective novel in his 1980 international best seller, "The Name of the Rose." So it was not till the 1990s, with the surprise success of the no longer young Andrea Camilleri (born in 1925), that the Italian noir took off. From the back of his desk drawer, Camilleri pulled out the first of the Inspector Montalbano mysteries, set in the impenetrable depths of the Sicilian provinces. The main feature of his work and indeed that of all the other major *noir* writers in Italy today—and the secret of its success—is that it digs into the dirt, the problems and the

shortcomings of our world, often providing an imaginative reconstruction of situations that represent the worst aspects of Italian reality.

Gianrico Carofiglio, for example, takes the reader on a realistic tour of the Italian justice system, through the eyes of a lawyer from Bari, Guido Guerriere, a reformed cynic who has decided to fight for the truth ("Involuntary Witness," "A Walk in the Dark"). In his professional life Carofiglio is a judge who knows the Italian justice system inside out, as does Massimo Carlotto, from the other side of the bench, as an ex-con who was acquitted and convicted repeatedly for the same crime (double jeopardy is on the books in Italy). He was finally released from prison by a pardon from the president of the Republic. Today he is a hugely popular author deeply committed to social causes, such as the fight against asbestos, and is perhaps the most talented exponent of serious "Mediterranean" noir. In his ruthless stories, the bad guy not only "gets away with it" (as in real life), but also gets the better of the good guy. The acts he relates are based on true crimes, for which he has read the autopsies, reconstructed the techniques and often interviewed the perpetrators. As he himself says, what better way to record what is happening in Italy today. Read "The Goodbye Kiss" and you'll understand why.

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