

BOOK REVIEW

Giovani e abuso sessuale nella letteratura italiana (1902–2018)

**by Luciano Parisi, Alessandria, Edizioni dell’Orso, 2021, viii + 360
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In this monographic study, by means of a meticulous comparison between literature and other disciplines, in particular psychology, law and social sciences, the author Luciano Parisi addresses in depth a difficult and indisputably very specific topic: child sexual abuse.

The book is divided into a preface, 15 chapters and an index of names. The preface explains what literature and literary criticism bring to persistent questions that arise when minors are sexually abused. Afterwards, specifically in the first chapter, Parisi identifies four main periods in the development of this thematic thread in Italian literature over the last 120 years, examining a vast range of Italian novels from the late modern era through to 2018.

The novels of Grazia Deledda, Paola Drigo, Luigi Pirandello and Mario Mariani belong to the first period (chapters 2–5), which covers the first decades of the twentieth century. Conforming to a more widespread *topos* in early twentieth-century Italian literature, these novels place at their centre the figure of a poor, lonely, uncultured, inexperienced girl, ready to become attached to an apparently courteous adult, or forced to have sexual relations with an aggressive man and then left to her fate. In this part, the author examines four novels. In *Cenere* – set in a generally fatalistic atmosphere – Deledda describes poor and isolated young women, victims of sexual abuse by men belonging to the upper classes; while in *Maria Zef*, Drigo discusses the incestuous sexual abuse suffered by a miserable girl in a context of extreme poverty, against which the protagonist ultimately rebels by murdering her rapist. In *Alla zeppa*, Pirandello narrates the allegations of paedophilia against a young priest accused of having abused the young charges of an orphanage; whereas Mariani, in his short story collection *Le adolescenti*, presents, in a spirit of solidarity, the stories of minors deceived, raped, or forced into prostitution; the victims, gradually, lose trust in others, isolate themselves and definitively renounce their commitments and ideals.

In the sixth and seventh chapters, the author focuses on the themed-twentieth century, characterised by a new literary trend that has Alberto Moravia as the main author of reference. Here, Parisi examines the relational mechanisms predisposing children to

sexual abuse, but also the intrapsychic and post-traumatic effects of abuse on victims' mental health. *Graziella* by Ercole Patti also belongs to this second period, recounting, in the wake of Nabokov's *Lolita*, the forbidden love of a 40-year-old man for two mischievous young girls, Graziella and Rosina, which ends with an unexpected tragic epilogue.

The third period defined by the author examines the 1980s and 1990s and is distinguished by the prevalence of feminist authors. Parisi chooses novels written by women: *Trilogia* by Giacoma Limentani, *Voci* by Dacia Maraini, *L'amore molesto* by Elena Ferrante, and *La bestia nel cuore* by Cristina Comencini. The central themes of these novels revolve around child sexual abuse (harassment, paedophilia, incest and domestic violence) seen as a manifestation of political violence and patriarchal society; hence the authors' intention is to support the need to talk about these themes clearly and openly, in order to raise the public's awareness of the subject. What these various novels have in common is the description of the long and painful journey undertaken by female protagonists to overcome complex trauma.

Finally, Parisi focuses on the literary production of the last 20 years, in which child sexual abuse is a widely investigated and narrated topic, and many narrative models coexist. According to Parisi, unlike in previous novels, abused children and their families belong to all social classes, abusers have very different characteristics, and communities can show hostility but also solidarity towards victims. For instance, as explained by the author, Maria Stella Conte in *Terza persona singolare* describes the protagonist's emotional neglect and loneliness, which forces her to see her salvation in an adult *carabiniere* who is sexually attracted to her. In *La moglie nella cornice* by Maria Venturi, on the other hand, the protagonist carries within her the signs of a severe trauma – the rape by a stranger when she was just a nine-year-old girl, which makes her life as an adult very hard even after becoming a very successful model.

The author concludes his book with the analysis of two novels in which sexual abuse of children is only an unsubstantiated allegation: in *Pulce non c'è*, Gaia Rayneri tells the story of a family struggling with an unfounded accusation of child sexual abuse against the protagonist's father, whilst Antonio Scurati in *Il bambino che sognava la fine del mondo* deals with false allegations of sexual violence against children and the role of the 'public realm' in contemporary Italian society. Moreover, the novel crystallises how the germ of suspicion can creep into a false story of paedophilia that ends up being a collective *folie à deux*.

In conclusion, we can safely state that Luciano Parisi's book helps to raise the readers' awareness of child sexual abuse. The author's style is clear and concise, and his analytical approach is judicious. Moreover, his examination of this hard and emotionally engaging topic makes use of in-depth documentation at different levels – legal, historical, social, psychological and psychoanalytic – which supports his analysis of such a complex subject. From a literary perspective, the book presents a major addition to the existing literary studies of the subject, with its comprehensive and extensive coverage of the theme of child sexual abuse in modern and contemporary Italian literature.