

SPUNTI E RICERCHE

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Andrea Camilleri, cassatina sulla terrazza a Marinella.

(Andrea Camilleri, eating cassata on the terrace at Marinella.)

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Introduction

Andrea Camilleri, Custodian and Innovator of Italian Literature

Almost two years have passed by since Andrea Camilleri passed away. Yet, it is impossible to forget what happened on 17 July 2019, after the announcement of his death. The entire nation was in mourning: RAI 1 news, the state broadcaster, dedicated 80 per cent of its time slot to the news; writers, intellectuals and the highest representatives of the Italian state expressed their condolences. Even his archenemy, Matteo Salvini, then minister of the interior and leader of the xenophobic Northern League party—with whom Camilleri had several heated exchanges over the years—paid tribute to the popular Sicilian writer.

Andrea Camilleri is one of the most renowned Italian writers in the world and a highly influential figure in Italian society. He reached notoriety late in life. After working for the theatre and as an executive producer for RAI for many years, Camilleri turned to crime fiction when he was 69. In 1994 he published *La forma dell'acqua* (translated as *The Shape of Water* in 2002), the first novel featuring Inspector Salvo Montalbano. His second crime novel, *Il cane di terracotta* (1996), was meant to be the last featuring the Sicilian inspector. His publisher, Elvira Sellerio, convinced him to continue. When he accepted, he did not know that, with 29 Montalbano novels and six collections of short stories, he would become one of the most-loved crime fiction writers in the world. During his belated but highly successful career as a writer, Camilleri sold more than 30 million books worldwide. They were translated into 32 languages, including Catalan and Gaelic. In 2012, Camilleri's *Il campo del vasaio* was announced as the winner of the prestigious Crime Writers' Association International Dagger. A highly successful TV series, inspired by Montalbano's books, soon became an international success and was broadcast worldwide (in Australia by SBS).

The readers and audiences were captivated by its colourful protagonist and his complicated love life, picturesque locations, and the reference to Sicilian food and culture. However, considering the Montalbano series just as an escapist endeavour would be underestimating its merits. Through highly humorous language, a mix of Italian, Sicilian dialect and completely invented words that were often lost in translation, Camilleri's novels addressed very important issues. For instance, by relentlessly ridiculing the mafia, they showed the Mafiosi not as invincible figures, but stupid and violent people who could be defeated. By reflecting on what was happening in Sicily and Italy, where the war on the mafia has now claimed important victories, Camilleri overcame an enduring stereotype in literature and cinema of Sicily as an immobile society prey to violence and the code of silence. Camilleri also used humour to criticise controversial Italian prime minister Silvio

Berlusconi. He railed against political corruption under Berlusconi's rule, rampant capitalism and ecological devastation in the name of business and profit. In a period when anti-immigration rhetoric was already rampant and the Northern League shared power with Berlusconi, the Sicilian writer used his crime series to expose anti-immigration rhetoric as a political manoeuvre to divert public attention from the right-wing government's failure to fix Italy's economic issues. The battle continued till the very end, when he openly criticised the policy of "porti chiusi" initiated by Salvini in 2018.

Camilleri gained his international reputation thanks to the Inspector Montalbano series. However, the novels and stories in this series account for only about a third of Camilleri's published writings. He is also a prolific author of historical fiction. The town of Vigàta, though most often associated with the Inspector Montalbano series, appeared earlier in *Un filo di fumo* (1980), a novel set at the end of the nineteenth century. Other works by Camilleri venture back even further in Sicily's history such as *La moneta di Akragas* (2015) in which the ancient Greek city of Akragas, predecessor of Agrigento, is linked to the present by the loss of a gold coin that is recovered only after millennia have passed. However, the Risorgimento and its aftermath, and Fascism were the historic periods that intrigued him most. Among others, *La stagione della caccia* (1992) is a quirky historical murder mystery set in Vigàta in 1880; *Il birraio di Preston* (1995) relates a fictional clash between Vigàta's stubborn populace and Eugenio Bortuzzi, Prefect for the new Kingdom of Italy in 1870s; and *La presa di Macallè* (2003) deals with the political, religious, and erotic education of a young boy at the time of the second Italo-Abyssinian War (1935). Other novels, such as *Il gioco della mosca* (1995), are explicitly set in Camilleri's native Porto Empedocle and blur the line between fiction and memoir. Essays, including works of social and political commentary, round out Camilleri's popular works. He belonged to a group of politically engaged authors, such as Mankell (1948–2015), Manuel Vazquez Montalban (1939–2003) and Jean-Claude Izzo (1945–2000) who combined their work in crime fiction with an active interest in society and politics. Having experienced the rebellious and politically charged 1960s and 1970s and the subsequent return to conservative positions in the 1980s and 1990s, the old guard of European crime fiction strongly believed in the duty of the writer to act as a political watchdog. He was particularly outspoken in essays such as *Un inverno italiano* (2009) and *Di testa nostra* (2010).

While being a prolific author, Camilleri continued to work as a theatre director, accepting a position at the Teatro Regina Margherita in Caltanissetta, Sicily, in 2002. He also wrote the play *Conversazione su Tiresia* which went on stage at the Greek Theatre in Siracuse on 11 June 2018. The show, in which Camilleri played the role of Tiresias, the blind soothsayer of the Greek mythology, was broadcast on RAI 1 on 5 March 2019 and later, on 17 July 2019, the day of his death. The show intertwines Tiresias's story with the story of Camilleri who became almost blind towards the end of his life.

Camilleri received numerous awards for his writing, including honorary degrees from nine European universities. Other highlights of his long list of accolades include the Premio

Piero Chiara, a lifetime achievement award conferred in 2010, and induction into the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic in 2003.

The success of Andrea Camilleri's novels has opened a discussion on the value of the so-called genre literature in Italy, as scholars worldwide have progressively re-evaluated Camilleri's oeuvre. The first critical essays have concentrated especially on the linguistic aspects of Camilleri's work and, in particular, his original use of a mix of standard Italian, dialects and invented language for his stories. Another early trend was an investigation into the representation of regional (namely Sicilian) identity in his works. Scholarship then shifted to an analysis of political and social commentary in Camilleri's novels, highlighting his anti-Berlusconism and a pro-immigration stance. Lately the representation of food in Camilleri's fiction has been at the centre of investigation. A parallel trend relates to the issue of the translation of Camilleri's unique language into foreign languages, especially English.

The corpus on Andrea Camilleri is now very extensive. Putting together a special issue on Andrea Camilleri was therefore a hard task. This special issue hosts four articles which address less-known aspects of his oeuvre or propose new angles on his most famous work. **"Mic Drop. Addio. Montalbano (Addio, Montalbano!)"** discusses *Riccardino*, the final instalment in Andrea Camilleri's Montalbano series of detective fiction, written in 2005 but published posthumously in 2020. In this article, Elgin K. Eckert argues for the book to be placed in its correct place in the chronology of the series as the tenth novel rather than as a final work and shows that the book marks a break in the series. The article argues that the novel, which centres around the conflict between reality and fiction and between author/Author and character, subverts the conventions of the mystery genre and examines the implications this has for a rereading of the entire series. Eckert shows how in *Riccardino* Camilleri pushes the boundary of metafiction past its breaking point by writing a book that is no longer a mystery novel but falls clearly into the category of narcissistic metafiction. The implication is that the Montalbano series does not conclude with the destruction of a narrative illusion, but that Camilleri continues the illusion for 18 more novels. This means, Eckert argues, that those books need to be reread and re-analysed in a completely different light, reflecting on all the layers of fiction of the Montalbano series. In the last analysis, the revelations in *Riccardino* make it difficult to consider the books in the Montalbano series merely commercial operations of genre fiction and obligate scholars to re-examine 29 full length novels and hundreds of short stories considering complex literary-theoretical issues.

In **"Pseudo-orality and the skaz Narrative Technique in Andrea Camilleri's Inspector Montalbano Series"** Emilio Lomonaco argues that the broad appeal of Camilleri's narrative style arises to a large extent from the degree to which it resembles the Russian pseudo-oral type of narrative called *skaz*, which is a "verbal mask" whose fundamental characteristic is the deviation from the literary norm, and the adoption of the "language of the people". Lomonaco shows that one of Camilleri's specific trademarks is the lively third-person narration, typified by a clever fusion of Sicilian dialect and standard Italian into a humorous, ironic, hybrid language, which gives the narrator's voice a vibrant and appealing tone. By

concentrating on the openings of the novels where this narrative voice is dominant, Lomonaco contends that the voice of the narrator fluctuates between a humorous or ironic and a more serious tone, as if the voice of the author were taking over the voice of the narrator, and this is consistent with the *skaz* type of narration.

Nicoletta Peluffo's "**La scomparsa di Patò: una sperimentazione tra intertestualità e farsa**" analyses the historical novel *La scomparsa di Patò* in the light of its intertextual references and farcical and theatrical elements. Peluffo contends that this novel is composed of different texts that the author puts together as if the novel was a dossier where each text has a specific function in the diegetic reconstruction of the events that lead to the disappearance of the protagonist of the novel. Peluffo argues that *La scomparsa di Patò* marks the beginning of Camilleri's experimentation with theatrical forms within his novels. It is an experiment in which Camilleri complicates the narration by making use of textual and intertextual clues, farcical devices, and a multiplication of points of view kept together by the reassuring function of the *tragediatore*.

Starting with an apparently accidental connection—Camilleri's preface for Collodi's crime novel *I misteri di Firenze* in the first volume of the Edizione Nazionale of Carlo Collodi,—"**Dialects and National Identity in Camilleri's *Il birraio di Preston* and Collodi's *Il viaggio per l'Italia di Giannettino***", analyses how Collodi and Camilleri, although one and a half centuries apart, both reflected on the relationship between the Italian national language and the local dialects in a discourse of national identity. In this article, Andrea Pagani focuses on Camilleri's historical crime novel *Il birraio di Preston* and Collodi's *Il viaggio per l'Italia di Giannettino*, and examines how the two texts, although set in the similar historical context of the post-unified Italy, relate to dialects. It shows that while in Camilleri's novel the Florentine dialect epitomises the problematic presence of the central Italian State, Collodi uses the dialects in his book for children to emphasise the social and cultural importance of local communities. Camilleri's and Collodi's portrayals of the *Questione della lingua*, Pagani concludes, are two sides of the same coin; their contributions in *Il birraio di Preston* and *Il viaggio per l'Italia di Giannettino* emphasise the extent to which a weak linguistic homogenisation project failed against a vibrant and deep-rooted multiculturalism.

These articles show once more the importance of Camilleri in Italian literature. By inserting theatre into crime fiction, he expanded on the legacy of two of his illustrious Sicilian predecessors: Luigi Pirandello and Leonardo Sciascia. By experimenting with languages and registers and the very structure of crime fiction, he built on the work of crime fiction masters such as Carlo Emilio Gadda and Umberto Eco. He was both a custodian of Italian culture and an innovator. He was a lucid commentator of Italian politics and society. He died at 94, but one cannot refrain from wondering what more he might have done if he had lived just a little longer.

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Andrea Camilleri

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