Read On, Keep Talking: The Mystery Genre in Integrated Language Curricula

Mystery novels consistently outsell all other literary genres. Accounting for 60-80% of all bestsellers in the West (Perissinotto 5), their critical recognition has been inversely proportional to their popularity.[1] The dizzying number of mystery readers, though welcomed by publishers, was initially rejected as a dishonor by literary scholars who inherited contempt for wide readership from premodern times. The genre was degraded to the status of non-literature, its readers considered escapists, intellectually lazy and unresponsive to literary value. Renzo Cremante and Loris Rambelli frame the early mystery stories as subject to both a literary and moral condemnation. Extruded like a disease from the body of literature and rebranded as *paraletteratura*, *Trivialliteratur* or, at best, "mainstream literature," mysteries and their readers were held to be a suitable domain for sociologists, semioticians or cultural historians (but not literary critics) (5).

The attention of internationally renowned scholars like Umberto Eco and Carlo Ginzburg, who researched the complex two-way relationship between popular and élite culture both past and present, in part rescued mystery-readers from the one-dimensional understanding imposed on them by belletristic critics. As early as 1964, Eco effected a true paradigm shift with his argument that "tra il consumatore di poesia di Pound e il consumatore di un romanzo giallo in linea di diritto non esiste nessuna differenza di classe sociale o di livello intellettuale" (*Apocalittici* 55). A proud consumer and scholar of popular culture, Eco decisively contributed to the reconciliation of popular and high culture by lending his scholarly authority to the genre with his internationally best-selling mystery *Il nome della rosa* (1980). Just as crucial to the scholarly reevaluation of mysteries was cultural historian Carlo Ginzburg's work on the interdependence between high and low culture in the past. After publishing *Il formaggio e i vermi* (1976) (a scholarly bestseller that, like the *Nome della rosa*, also reads like a "giallo romanzesco") (Costigliola n.p.), Ginzburg would give historical depth to the "paradigma indiziario" linking nineteenth-century medicine to artistic connoisseurship and literary detection in the fundamental essay from 1986 entitled "Spie. Radici di un paradigma indiziario."

Not until the 1980s would another generation of literary critics seriously consider the mystery genre worthy of scholarly investigation and intellectual engagement. Loris Rambelli's *Storia del "giallo" italiano* (1979) and Stefano Tani's *The Doomed Detective* (1984) were the first of many sustained studies that contributed to the reevaluation of the genre and to date these remain the most useful introductions. In Rambelli and Tani's wake, crime fiction was no longer tainted by its bestselling status as just the domain of sociologists, and began to be studied in the contexts of social, economic, political and intellectual history such that it is now fully appreciated as "autentica letteratura" (Camilleri, qtd. in Sangiorgi and Telò 20), included in collected works, cared for by élite publishing houses and anointed by the highest literary prizes.

Through this complete reversal, readers formerly believed naïve and "in flight from thought" (Sciascia, qtd. in Farrell 48) are now recipients of "the most metaphysical and philosophical genre" (Eco, *Il nome* 603), one that is "protean in appearance as well as visibly sophisticated and innovative in styles and themes" (Cicioni and Di Ciolla 3). Some now argue that it is time "not only to question the standard patrician judgment that separates literature from genre fiction but also to overturn the canons, and judge what is by common consent literature by the standard of the detective story" (Farrell 51). Escapist no more, the *giallo* is likewise heralded as "the new social novel" (Milanesi 20), participating in "the ethical turn in literary studies" (Cannon 15) and praised as a "powerful instrument of social analysis and cultural criticism" (Somigli 69) that provides a "paradigma interpretativo della realtà" (Perissinotto 6). Solidly ensconced in the disciplinary arena of *impegno*, the mystery novel is now the yardstick according to which the sterile élitism of the avant-garde is measured as retrograde and politically suspect.[2]

The literary, intellectual, political and moral rehabilitation of the genre has yielded a steady stream of publications that give teachers of literature both the resources and confidence to teach Italian through mystery novels. Indeed, the critical acceptance of the intellectual, literary and political value of the mystery genre is making it possible to focus on its "*leggibilità* vendibile" (Spinazzola, "Letteratura moderna" 128, emphasis mine), to use Vittorio Spinazzola's phrase, as an asset also in the pedagogy of foreign languages.

While the literary or moral value of the bestselling genre had been questioned for decades, its power to seduce unlikely

markets into reading has been acknowledged in the most hyperbolic language since the beginning. Highly consumable by design, it can be argued that the mystery genre consistently not only out*sells* but out*reads* other literary genres because, as Spinazzola has noted, it deploys "strategie seduttive . . . per galvanizzare l'interesse del lettore invece di trattarlo come un volgo profano da odiare e tener discosto" (135). Mysteries are "perfect reading machines" (Narcejac, qtd. in Sangiorgi and Telò 31) because writers of mysteries do indeed obey the "imperativo della leggibilità e della conquista del lettore" (Amici 134), and proudly admit that they write "pensando a un lettore" (Eco, *Il nome* 600).

Since mystery narratives are designed to be irresistible, they can at a minimum be counted on to motivate students to read on. Seemingly passive, reading is crucial to develop the scaffolding required for all learning. As James Lang writes, reading extends both lateral and progressive benefits to student learning:

> One of our first and most important tasks as teachers is to help students develop a rich body of knowledge in our content areas—without doing so, we handicap considerably their ability to engage in cognitive activities like thinking and evaluating and creating. . . . When we learn new facts, we are building up mental structures that enable us to process and organize the next set of new facts more effectively. (15)

It is no surprise, then, that mysteries have become a valuable teaching tool in remedial classes for native speakers in Italy. For the teachers and scholars of crime fiction who contributed to the volume *Il giallo italiano come nuovo romanzo sociale,* mystery novels were an obvious curricular choice when the goal was building "la rimotivazione, il coinvolgimento e l'interesse" (Sangiorgi and Telò 7) of the students. First taught in an experimental afternoon class in a technical high school in Ravenna, Italy, and then introduced in several programs in schools at all levels, mysteries proved an excellent reading and writing machine. Loris Rambelli's showcase of creative writing assignments "**G** come 'giallo' **G** come 'gioco': Laboratori di scrittura nella scuola media" (167-208), beyond inspirational, is also a useful resource for activities and strategies for foreign language teaching.

Calibrated to maximize the reader's desire to read onward in order to gain prized information, mysteries are a uniquely valuable instrument in foreign language pedagogy in the first instance because they offer a learning dynamic that closely resembles the "information gap activities" recommended by communicative language teaching methods. Assignments where learners are missing the information they need to complete a task and need to talk to each other to find it remain the gold standard of effective language teaching as they diverge from the artificial exercises of a contrived language learning setting and root conversation in the genuine and urgent desire to learn that inspires actual lived conversation. Applicable to silent reading as well as to conversation, a broadly defined information gap drives the consumption of mystery stories that, as Alessandro Perissinotto has argued, can be classified as "'narrativa di indagine,' cioè narrazioni concepite come cammino verso l'accertamento di una verità inizialmente negata" (7). Across all its subgenres (noir, thrillers, the judicial novel) mysteries provide narratives of investigation, the consumption of which is propelled by the desire to find the missing information: the mandatory "who did it."

Plot-driven, suspenseful and gripping, mysteries are increasingly recognized as catalysts for reading in large part because of their vivid rendering of place and unique engagement with the present. As Corrado Augias writes, "in primo piano c'è il delitto, ma lo sfondo è altrettanto importante" (qtd. in Sangiorgi and Telò 21). It is widely acknowledged that the synesthetic bravura with which Italian mystery-writers have rendered "l'humus, l'aria e i sapori della nostra terra, dando vita a personaggi plausibili che assomigliano a quelli che ci capita di incontrare nella vita di tutti i giorni" (Crovi 14) is as essential to the readability of the story as the desire to find out "whodunit." Realistic rendering of place "enables the novels to capture the very different regional specificities of the criminal activities narrated . . . and to enhance the readers' engagement with the stories" (Di Ciolla 8). Following Giorgio Scerbanenco, recognized as the founding father of the modern Italian *giallo* for setting crime fictions in recognizable Italian environments, the background has steadily moved to the fore. Far from accessory, the setting is increasingly dignified by lengthy, informative standalone digressions that are both essential to the story and supremely readable, as in the case of Christian Frascella's

many descriptions of the Turinese neighborhood of Barriera in *Fa troppo freddo per morire*:

> Barriera era un quartiere operaio di immigrati dal Sud. Lavoravano all'Iveco, alla Pirelli, alla Michelin, alla Magneti Marelli. Poi quella generazione è quasi sparita, sono scappati altrove o sono morti. Quelli che sono rimasti, per scelte sbagliate o per scalogna, hanno messo al mondo questi figli del buio. Senza lavoro, senza laurea, senza altro destino che girovagare a muso duro da una via all'altra, da un locale all'altro.
> L'invasione degli extracomunitari ha spezzato il tenue equilibrio su cui si reggeva il quartiere. La malavita locale si è scontrata con quella albanese, rumena, magrebina, asiatica, è stato versato del sangue. Sono arrivate le armi. Barriera è diventato un centro di smercio, parte da qui l'eroina che istupidisce mezza città. (36)

As well as contributing to re-defining the mystery genre as realistic fiction, descriptions such as this one provide an opportunity for in-class student presentations on the history of Italian cities and the concept of *periferia*.

Praised by G. K. Chesterton as early as 1901 as "[t]he earliest and only form of popular literature in which is expressed some sense of the poetry of modern life," the mystery genre thrives "on the perceived need among readers for a literary production that represents reality in all its contradictions" (n.p.). Both scholars and practitioners of the genre increasingly agree it is the crime, not the setting, that is fungible in a mystery. As mystery-writer Massimo Carlotto phrased it, "[l]'unico elemento che i miei romanzi noir e gli hard boiled hanno in comune è la formula narrativa: il racconto di una storia criminale in un luogo e in uno spazio precisi come pretesto per raccontare la realtà sociale, politica, economica e storica che circonda gli avvenimenti narrati" (qtd. in Carlotto and Amici 26). Crime stories are an excuse to speak about our own present even when, as Marco Amici has noted, they purport to describe the "passato e futuro remoto o di mondi fantastici" (132-33).

Whether or not realism of time and place is evidence of the sociopolitical agenda characteristic of the *impegno* tradition, the mystery genre's "deep roots into reality" (Sangiorgi and Telò 21)

are a most valuable asset in the classroom. For Marco Sangiorgi and Luca Telò it is primarily because the *giallo* has grown to be the "romanzo sociale per eccellenza" (21) that it has proven an effective catalyst for reading. What makes for a desirable read for native learners also makes for an ideal teaching tool in the foreign language and literature classroom because, as pedagogists insist, "features of language can only make their way into the learner's mental representation of the language system if they have been linked into some kind of real world meaning" (Lee and VanPatten, qtd. in Brandl 16). Even more importantly, as well as motivating students to read on, real-world mystery stories that are often couched in simple language and reproduce conversational speech, replete with redundancy and contextual information, are uniquely suited to improve learners' language proficiency because they offer linguistic input that is both authentic and comprehensible. Eileen W. Glisan and Richard Donato have stressed that "effective language instruction must provide significant amounts of comprehensible, meaningful and interesting talk and text in the target language for learners to develop language and cultural proficiency" (19). Students who read Giorgio Scerbanenco's *Venere privata* (1966) for an advanced language class I recently taught acknowledged that they enjoyed reading the book especially because they were able to understand it.[3] The prologue in which two journalists interview an eyewitness about his discovery of a corpse, exemplifies a mystery text that is both accessible to beginner-level language learners and saturated with learning opportunities:

> "Come si chiama lei?"
> "Marangoni Antonio, io sto lì, alla Cascina Luasca, sono più di cinquant'anni che tutte le mattine vado a Rogoredo in bicicletta."
> "Non stare a perdere tempo con questi vecchi, torniamo al giornale."
> "È lui che ha scoperto la ragazza, ce la può descrivere, se no dobbiamo passare all'obitorio e siamo in ritardo."
> "Io l'ho vista quando è arrivata l'ambulanza, era vestita di celeste."
> "Vestita di celeste. Capelli?"
> "Scuri ma non neri."
> "Scuri ma non neri."
> "Aveva dei grandi occhiali da sole, rotondi."

"Occhiali da sole, rotondi."
"Non si vedeva quasi niente del viso, era coperto dai capelli."
"Andate via. Non c'è niente da vedere."
"Non c'è niente da vedere, l'agente ha ragione, torniamo al giornale."
"Andate via, andate via. Non dovete andare a scuola?"
"Già, qui è pieno di ragazzini."
"Quando sono arrivato io si sentiva odore di sangue."
"Dica, dica signor Marangoni."
"Si sentiva odore di sangue."
"Naturale, era dissanguata."
"Non si sentiva nessun odore, era passato troppo tempo, siamo arrivati qui con la camionetta."
"Dica, dica agente."
"In questura vi dicono tutto, io sono qui per tenere lontano questa marmaglia, non parlo coi giornalisti. Ma non c'era odore di sangue, non ci può essere."
"L'ho sentito io, e ho il naso buono. Sono sceso di bicicletta perché dovevo spandere acqua, ho appoggiato la bicicletta in terra."
"Dica dica Signor Marangoni."
"Mi sono avvicinato a quei cespugli, ecco, proprio quelli, e così ho visto la scarpa, il piede, insomma."
"Andate via, circolate, non c'è niente da vedere, tutta questa gente per vedere un pezzo di prato vuoto."
"Io al principio ho visto solo la scarpa, il piede dentro non lo vedevo, ho allungato la mano."
Alberta Radelli, ventitré anni, commessa, trovata a Metanopoli, località Cascina Luasca, il cadavere è stato scoperto alle cinque e mezzo del mattino, dal signor Marangoni Antonio, abito celeste, capelli scuri ma non neri, occhiali rotondi, io comincio a telefonare questo, poi torno a riprenderti. (7-8)

Notice here that the same information is repeated twice and then combined in a final clarifying sentence to allow learners to both struggle with the linguistic clues and then absorb information from them. Learners who have mastered typical introductory-level vocabulary (body parts, colors, numbers, ages, names) can tackle this text. Since the excerpt is challenging despite its lexical

accessibility, it is ideal for a task-based group activity such as producing, acting out (improvising rather than memorizing the lines) and perhaps filming the scene. Working with peers, students will need to read closely and share information and opinions in order to understand what is going on in the scene, determine the number of actors and then select them for the performance.

Although fragmentary and rudimentary in its syntax and vocabulary (and sometimes ungrammatical) real-life communicative exchanges like this one are highly effective. In activities that encourage communicative efficiency in foreign-language learners the benefits of modeling everyday language use outweigh the risks.

Beyond their construction, mysteries are boundless repositories of interesting, meaningful and therefore memorable expressions from authentic everyday conversation. For a recent class, I catalogued some of the most useful idiomatic expressions in *Fa troppo freddo per morire*:

> Tracagnotto (9);
> Tutto sommato (12);
> Io non lo reggo (17);
> Vita morte e miracoli (22);
> Non riescono quasi a parlare per quanto sono fatti (25);
> L'aveva messo nei casini (37);
> Parlare a quattrocchi (37);
> Tu sei fuori, contrera (43);
> Essere di manica larga (51);
> Io sono del Toro ma per me fa uno strappo (62);
> Prendersi la briga (68);
> Fa schioccare la lingua (76);
> Non vogliamo che si alzi un polverone (77);
> Lo becco sempre qui (79);
> Sento mia sorella che ciabatta (80);
> Qui non è aria (90);
> Abbordare (99);
> Mi scolo (99);
> Una piega inaspettata (137);
> Mi sfugge di mano (137);
> Mi giro di scatto (138);
> Non ne caverai un ragno da un buco (159);
> E chi più ne ha più ne metta (174-175);
> La stronchi (178);

Non c'ero portato (181);
Meglio togliersi il dente subito (182);
Adulta e vaccinata (185);
Quando mi pare e piace (187);
Ho quarant'anni suonati (194);
Parlotta (212);
Gambizzare (246);
La tratta come una pezza da piedi (247);
A momenti ci restava secco (251).

These expressions can be used in multiple-choice activities or in exercises where students generate new sentences, which they can then combine in skits that incorporate as many of them as possible.

It goes without saying that mysteries also deploy very sophisticated language suitable for more advanced learners. Artful, genuine and unpredictable, the prose of Elisabetta Bucciarelli's ecothrillers, for instance, is the very opposite of pulp and offers foreign language learners the opportunities to teach close reading through the authentic cultural product of mysteries. The beginning of her *Dritto al cuore* invites productive close reading and stylistic analysis:

La Casa era in alto. Per arrivarci si doveva risalire tutta la valle, affrontare trentasette tornanti, prendere una funivia. E ancora non bastava. D'estate c'era da camminare una buona mezz'ora a piedi, fino a quota duemila. D'inverno servivano gli sci, oppure le ciaspole agganciate agli scarponi, al limite il gatto delle nevi.

Era costruita di legno e pietra. Legno di larice ormai quasi del tutto annerito. E pietra grigia, ancora perfetta in ogni sfumatura di colore, colonizzata dal muschio verde argenteo a nord e da qualche pianta a piccolo fiori gialli incuneata tra le beole del tetto a sud.

Vecchia la Casa, ma non ancora antica. Portava i simboli Walser, insieme a quelli di altre popolazioni meticce. Cuori magri con la punta in basso che svirgolava a sinistra. Piccole fessure a tilde, che riprendevano le orme degli animali, croci e cerchi.

Le finestre tagliate come occhi lasciavano entrare solo lame di luce, frange di tende corte come mutande

decoravano i bordi superiori, aumentando il buio. La porta di legno era composta da poche assi decise, larghe e robuste, inchiodate a vista. […] sulla destra dell'ingresso zampillava una fontana che rovesciava in moto perpetuo l'acqua gelida del ghiacciaio in una larga vasca di pietra monolitica, il cui bordo era abbastanza spesso da ospitare un pezzo di sapone da bucato e una spazzola con fitti denti di ferro. (9-10)

Careful examination reveals the idiosyncrasies of this description of a mountain hut. Inaccessible and animated by the energy generated by the journey to reach it, a house of wood and stone is evoked as a living being through metaphors that bind the mineral to the human realm: the windows are cut "like eyes"; the fringes of the curtains are as short as "underwear"; the planks that make up the door are "decisive"; the water fountain large enough to "host" a piece of soap. Students can be asked to identify the verbs, adjectives, and similes that evoke the hut as a living being and then practice writing about an object as if it were a human being.

Beyond motivating learners to read further, the detailed evocation of the here and now in the mystery story offers a privileged window onto Italian history and culture. For Claudio Milanesi, the realism of detective fiction fulfills the purpose of reflecting "la realtà storica e sociale del passato recente (e più raramente remoto) per rivelare e/o salvaguardare la memoria di eventi e fenomeni dimenticati o rimossi" (20). Similarly, Barbara Pezzotti has convincingly shown the need for a historical survey of the *giallo* to be used as a companion to the study of Italian political and social history because of its power "to reflect social transformations and dysfunctions of contemporary Italy" such as "a merciless industrialization of the country; loss of traditional values, consumerism and loneliness in the urban environment; criminal organizations; the North and the South divide and a problematic national identity; political instability and unresolved questions of democracy, freedom and illegality" (2).

Given the breadth of social issues reliably treated by the genre, issues that often have transnational resonance, one unintended educational advantage of mystery-writers' keen engagement with the present moment is that it makes it possible for foreigners to learn about how people are living in other countries today. Mystery writer Patrick Raynal argues that "per capire che

cosa succede nei vari paesi europei bisogna pescare nel giallo, l'unica narrativa adatta a registrare le turbolenze e i mutamenti della realtà" (qtd. in Sangiorgi and Telò 20). More importantly, mysteries allow for an understanding of culture that is dynamic and feels surprisingly close. Fulfilling Glisan's and Donato's recommendation that "all language instruction . . . be embedded in cultural contexts" (118), mystery stories enable culture instruction to transcend the mere display of "cultural products (e.g., foods, monuments, currency, texts) or providing information about cultural practices (e.g., greeting protocols, holiday celebrations, sporting events)" (115). They allow teachers of language to move away from a "view of culture as tourism or as behaviors that are strange, incomprehensible, or weird" (115). Mysteries that capture the tense multiculturalism of today's Italy or encourage climate activism help students un-see the old view of culture as a "fixed and stable body of knowledge shared by all members of a group living within the same geographical boundaries" (116) and instead comprehend it as a "dynamic system of beliefs, values and worldviews that emerge in and are shaped by the shared social practices and products of a group or groups of individuals" (116).

As it is second nature to think of Italy as the land of the picturesque, frozen in time and untouched by modernity, it is thus essential to teach the richness of the messier Italian present. Learners of Italian who encounter Italy in novels by Gianrico Carofiglio or Wu Ming or Loriano Macchiavelli are pleasantly surprised by the absence of rolling hills and family recipes and welcome the chance to read about loud traffic and environmental degradation, ecumenical music and lean cuisine; women wearing combat boots and being stalked, children being abused and immigrants being both defended and discriminated against in the courts of law and also running the local bars and launderettes.

Useful for teaching language at all levels, mystery novels allow for language instruction to be rooted in authentic texts, which Glisan and Donato define as texts that are "created for various social and cultural purposes *by* and *for* monolingual, bilingual or multilingual users" with a "socio-cultural purpose (e.g., to inform, entertain, argue, teach a life lesson) that goes beyond simply providing contrived, artificial and unmotivated examples of the target language to learners" (65). Complex sources that encourage reading, invite close analysis and stimulate conversation on current topics and controversial issues (from euthanasia to stalking to

immigration and climate change) mysteries are particularly suited to discussion-based classes.[4]

For students who might be put off by an outdated notion of literature as laborious, irrelevant or "boring", mysteries that are easily relatable and ennobled, not tainted, by their proximity to massively popular taste, provide a non-intimidating entry to the field of literary studies. But the mystery story is more than a literary genre: it is also style of writing and a mode of inquiry and Italian *gialli* can fit right at home in curricula that integrate the study of literature with the visual arts, film and intellectual history. Best-selling mysteries are an effective gateway to the paintings of Giorgio De Chirico, which seek to capture the uncanny metaphysical dimension of our lives, and to Michelangelo Antonioni's cinematic meditations on the mystery narrative, such as the 1960 "giallo alla rovescia" *L'avventura* or the 1966 thriller *Blowup*. Elena Past's *Methods of Murder* (2012) offers a useful template for teachers of mystery novels to discuss changing notions of crime and criminal justice, violence and the philosophy of law, while Ginzburg's fundamental 1986 essay "Spie. Radici di un paradigma indiziario" provides historical insights into the epistemology of detection. Instructors can also focus on inquest as a narrative strategy, allowing for a discussion of the new journalism of Roberto Saviano's documentary novel *Gomorra* (2006) and the theater activism of Marco Paolini's *Racconto del Vajont* (1997).

Keeping in mind the importance of "*editing the task, not the text*" (Glisan and Donato 66, emphasis in original), assignments based on mystery stories can be calibrated to the linguistic capabilities of any body of learners. Short stories, individual chapters, single paragraphs or individual scenes or paintings can provide a basis for a fulfilling class discussion. Mystery stories achieve high utility in instruction at all levels without sacrificing the precious import of authentic texts. Students can be exposed to complex ideas and practice academic language by listening to mini-lectures and taking notes as well as presenting articles or parts of articles.

While the humanities today suffer a deepening crisis of relevance, it is all the more urgent that both language and literature instruction foster an approach to learning that is enjoyable, enriching and relevant. Suitable for integrated curricula in which "language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole" (MLA 3), the mystery allows for more effective language teaching

and could lead students to pursue the study of interdisciplinary literary studies.

Maria Grazia Lolla　　　　　INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

ENDNOTES

[1] I wish to thank Elvira Di Fabio for providing useful references on the current debate about literature and language pedagogy, and Troy Tower for the valuable suggestions that helped shape this article.

[2] As Beniamino Placido puts it, "se una volta pensavamo che la letteratura di massa ci consolasse anche troppo facilmente, mentre la cultura d'elite avanguardistica e spregiudicata ci dicesse verità sgradevoli adesso comincio a sospettare il contrario; che sia la cosiddetta letteratura d'elite a dirci poco o niente mentre le verità profonde e sgradevoli è proprio la cultura di massa a sussurrarcele" (qtd. in Sangiorgi and Telò 9).

[3] On Scerbanenco's Language see Canova and Salibra.

[4] For strategies to lead effective group discussions see Brookfield and Preskill.

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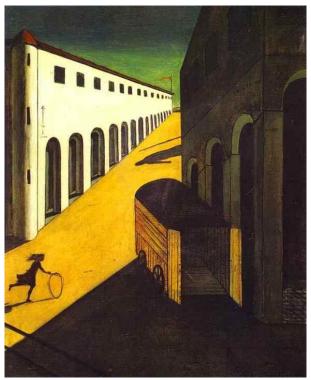
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Italian Mysteries
Template Syllabus for an Interdisciplinary Course

> The answer is the question's misfortune.
> Maurice Blanchot

De Chirico, Giorgio. *Mistero e malinconia di una strada*. 1914, Private collection.

Course information

Recommended for students who have achieved a high-intermediate level comprehension of Italian. The course is taught in Italian and participation is in Italian although some of the reading is in English. Classes meet twice a week for 90 minutes.

Course description

Some ten years after the international success of Eugene Sue's *Mysteries of Paris* (1842), Carlo Lorenzini—better known as Carlo Collodi, the author of *Pinocchio*—attempted to write up his own *Mysteries of Florence*. But halfway through, he gave up in despair:

how could Florentine readers believe that such extraordinary events took place in their city without their knowledge? How could a writer mention a street address without having "one hundred, three hundred or a thousand readers tell you exactly who lives there" and provide the "name, surname, profession and moral standing of all the people who had resided at that location in the past forty years?" Writers and readers of Italian mysteries of the past hundred and fifty years have shown Lorenzini's objections to be ungrounded. Interrupted by the Fascist regime, which asserted that its rule ensured "there was no crime" and, therefore, rendered the genre implausible, Italian novelists, artists, filmmakers, playwrights, and academics have favored the mystery as a literary genre, as a style of writing and as a mode of enquiry. Whether the goal was to find out the motive or the culprit of a crime, to redress a past or present injustice or to question the limits of our investigations of the past, the mystery has attracted the attention of internationally acclaimed figures such as Umberto Eco, Leonardo Sciascia, Carlo Ginzburg, and Michelangelo Antonioni. The course will cover a variety of forms—novels, short stories, films, dramatic monologues, histories, journalism – from the nineteenth century to the present. Topics of discussion will include:

- Mysteries: Literature, History, Philosophy
- The Mysterious Case of Crime Fiction in Italy: From Escapism to Engagement
- When the Judge Is the Hero: Gianrico Carofiglio, *Ad occhi chius*i (2003)
- *L'Italia del malessere*: Giorgio Scerbanenco, *Venere privata* (1966)
- The Crime is Solved but Justice Is Not Served: Leonardo Sciascia, *Il giorno della civetta* (1961)
- On Not Solving a Mystery: Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (1957)
- *Un giallo alla rovescia*: Michelangelo Antonioni, *L'avventura* (1960)
- *Mistero e malinconia di una strada*: The Metaphysical Painting of Giorgio De Chirico
- Prosecuting the Past: Marco Paolini, *Il racconto del Vajont* (1993)

- True Crime: Roberto Saviano, *Gomorra* (2006)
- Crimes of the Earth: Elisabetta Bucciarelli, *Dritto al cuore* (2013)
- The Poetry of Modern Life: Christian Frascella, *Fa troppo freddo per morire* (2018)

Week One: Introductions; outline of the course; requirements and expectations; open discussion on the mystery genre (students' prior experiences, recent and from childhood; assumptions; likes and dislikes); dictionary and Wikipedia searches of "mystery"; the lexicon of crime and crime fiction.
Reading: Marco Amici, "Regole del poliziesco e non-regole del noir", 140-45. Students will be assigned sections from this reading and asked to turn the information found into questions, after which they will then take turns asking questions and providing answers.

Week Two: Ways to "think" about mystery.
Readings: Stefano Tani, "The Development of the Detective Novel and the Rise of the Anti-Detective Novel," 1-34; Elena Past, "Epistemologies of Crime," 7-9; Past, "Enlightened Investigations: Voltaire and Beccaria," 9-12; Past, "Introspections vs Lombrosian Vivisection," 12-16. Students will be assigned keywords (Poe; positivismo; ragione e irrazionalismo; detective versus hardboiled) that they will present to the class in Italian, after which they will discuss and rate the usefulness of the concepts.

Week Three: The Italian mystery tradition; teacher's presentation on Umberto Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati*; discussion on highbrow and lowbrow; discussion on literature to learn from and reading as a pastime.
Readings: Carlo Collodi, *Misteri di Firenze*, 102-105; Luca Crovi, "Nascono i libri gialli," 43-44; Crovi, "La censura

fascista," 52-53; Crovi, "La chiusura dei Gialli Mondadori," 59-60; Crovi, "Il poliziesco come poesia della vita moderna," 67-68; Luca Somigli, "Form and ideology in Italian detective fiction," 67-69.

Week Four: White collar crime; senseless crime; two short stories.
Readings: Antonio Manzini, "Le ferie d'agosto" (2013); from *Gioventù cannibale* (1996): "Le favole cambiano," v-x, and "Seratina," 5-44.

MIDTERM CONVERSATION: Pre-circulate a list of keywords of concepts covered in the first 4 weeks that students will need to review, then make a deck of cards out of the keywords or relevant passages and ask students to pick any three to present.

Depending on the linguistic abilities of the class the following four weeks could be a combination of one full novel and selections from the others.

> **Week Five**: When the Judge Is the Hero.
> Reading: Gianrico Carofiglio, *Ad occhi chiusi* (2003).
>
> **Week Six**: *L'Italia del malessere*.
> Reading: Giorgio Scerbanenco, *Venere privata* (1966).
>
> **Week Seven**: The Crime Is Solved but Justice Is Not Served.
> Reading: Leonardo Sciascia, *Il giorno della civetta* (1961).
>
> **Week Eight**: On Not Solving a Mystery.
> Reading: Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (1957).

Week Nine: Visual arts; *Mistero e malinconia di una strada*; the metaphysical painting of Giorgio De Chirico.
<u>Reading</u>: Italo Calvino, "Accanto a una mostra," 44-52.
<u>Presentations</u>: Emily Braun, *De Chirico the Songs of Love*; Victoria Noel-Johnson, *Giorgio De Chirico e l'oggetto misterioso*; Noel-Johnson, "Vivere nel mondo come in un immenso museo di stranezze," 9-29; Keala Jewell, *The Art of Enigma: The De Chirico Brothers and the Politics of Modernism*, 1-33.

Week Ten: Film; *un giallo alla rovescia*.
<u>Materials</u>: Michelangelo Antonioni, *L'avventura* (1960).

Week Eleven: Performing Arts; prosecuting the Past.
<u>Materials</u>: Marco Paolini, *Racconto del Vajont* (1997).

Week Twelve: Investigative journalism; true crime.
<u>Reading</u>: Roberto Saviano, *Gomorra* (2006).

Week Thirteen: Environmental activism; crimes of the Earth.
<u>Reading</u>: Elisabetta Bucciarelli, *Dritto al cuore* (2013).

Week Fourteen: The poetry of modern life.
<u>Reading</u>: Christian Frascella, *Fa troppo freddo per morire* (2018).

Week Fifteen: Final discussion on why we read mysteries; is the answer the question's misfortune?

POSSIBLE FINAL ASSIGMENTS:
- Oral Presentation: "Assolutamente, dovete andare a vedere/leggere": a 3-minute pitch to the class about their favorite assignment.

- Oral presentation: a 3-minute presentation of an imaginary mystery artifact.
- Creative writing assignment modelled on Calvino's "Accanto a una mostra." Choose a painting or a film-scene and imagine entering the space. Look around, talk to the passers-by, listen in as they talk to each other, make conjectures, draw out the mystery of your being there and the meaning of your surroundings.