

Carlo Lucarelli, the Italian "troublemaker"

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During the event "Libri Come," organized at the the Italian Cultural Institute in New York, we sat down with the popular giallo writer and television host to talk about Italy's politics, television, past and present history

There is a dark side of Italian history that not even Italians know too well, but luckily there is a man -Carlo Lucarelli- a noir writer, a journalist and a popular TV host who tries to rescue it from oblivion. "We call the ugly things of our past mysteries, but mysteries are things you cant know, the right word would be secrets," he said during the literary event "Libri Come" at the [Italian Cultural Institute](#) [2] in New York; "what happened in the past is known, its in the draws and in the minds of someone; its written in pages of documents and history books never read by anyone." Like [Pier Paolo Pasolini](#) [3] said in his [famous and visionary 1974 Corriere della Sera article](#) [4], Lucarelli tries to "coordinate facts even far from each other (...), he puts together the disorganized and fragmentary pieces of an entire consistent political scene, re-establishes the logic where arbitrariness, lunacy and mystery seem to rule." Lucarelli puts the facts in order without never forgetting the power of emotions. He is

a storyteller who starts every book, every episode of his TV show, with the phrase a child could say coming back from school "you could never imagine what the teacher did today." A simple yet profoundly evocative formula. We sat down with him at the Italian Cultural Institute...

Can you introduce yourself to the American public?

I am an Italian writer who tries to make sense of the contradictions of Italy, today's and yesterday's. I attempt to do this through my novels, on TV, and with movies.

But you have done even more ...

When you write you become a magnet for interesting situations, challenges, and stimulating stuff; I happened to write comic book story-lines and to become a character in a comic book, I lent my facial traits to the protagonist of a cartoon called [Cornelio](#) [5]. I have also worked in radio, where I recombined stories of music and crime.

At the event "Libri Come" you defined yourself as a "troublemaker writer." How difficult it is to be one in a country like Italy?

In Italy many writers act as "troublemakers," it's rare to find somebody who writes to confirm something that already exists, they are all against something. Hence it's difficult up to a certain point. It becomes harder, yet more effective, when you start discovering new things, which in Italy is quite difficult. In our country, we virtually know everything: investigation, judiciary, police, historians, journalists have discovered and chronicled many things. It is a common place to say we don't know anything, but we know a lot! But if you discover something new, well, that is dangerous. Furthermore, it is easy to make a list of facts, it is much harder to do it while galvanizing emotions. You become a "troublemaker" when you recollect things but you do it in a way that people will never forget them.

There is also another way to become a rompiscatole, when you have such an attachment to your subject, to your territory, that you turn into the symbol of your "troublemaking." [Roberto Saviano](#) [6] is a good example. He is a writer from the south, a Neapolitan who in Casal di Principe, among the camorristi, has written a paramount book, which has sparked an incredible buzz. He was able to become one of those writers that people listen to.

I hope I am a storyteller able to move people and engrave things into them so that they never forget them.

Are there ways to delegitimize the work of people like you?

Obviously. The first delegitimization is the political one. Every time I talk about Italian history, or the mafia, for example, which is part of our history, I have to premise that I am not talking about politics. I shouldn't have to, if I refer to Garibaldi I am not being political, I am just recollecting historical facts. For example, I should be able to say "[Andreotti](#) [7] was indicted and tried" without fearing that I will be labeled as a communist. The same happens if you talk about Berlusconi, and not because I attack him but because objectively he was involved in some episode with historical value. I always have to try to avoid any element which can be connected to an area of the political spectrum. It is hard when you deal with historical narratives which are political, after all, but don't scare people off.

Then your work can be invalidated on economical bases. No matter what you write, if you are published by Mondadori or Einaudi, which are connected to Berlusconi's media empire, then you are a sell-out. And finally, there are the more pernicious delegitimizations, the dossiers, for example, papers containing private information on a person which could be used for blackmail. It doesn't really matter if the exposed facts are real or not, one newspaper headline is enough to tarnish one's reputation.

Yesterday at the Italian Cultural Institute you said that to recuperate the luminous side, a country



has to know its past. Is this possible in a country like ours?

It is possible up to a certain point. When you write about the dark side of our history, people question if you are doing good or bad to the country. My last novel is set in Eritrea during colonial times, and obviously that is a venture with positive and negative elements, but immediately the question is, is he talking good or bad? I am just talking. My idea is that dealing with the past is curative either way. It allows one to eliminate a weight and concentrate on the good stuff. One of the more frequent accusations is that we talk about mafia. Is it good or bad? I know that everywhere I travel, especially in the US, people ask me about it. There will always be an interested audience. Mafia exists, and an enthusiasm about it exists too. This allows me, however, to talk about [Falcone](#) [8], [Borsellino](#) [9], and Saviano. Who would talk about them otherwise? Today I went to Little Italy and I sat down in a bar with some people. We spoke about mafia and they even gave me a book about it. It is an integral part of our culture, and you can't erase it, hence let's use it. As many storyteller do, if you exploit the interest for a subject, a person, or an issue, you can go anywhere with it. This means cleaning the dark side to arrive to the bright one.

On a TV like the Italian one, which sanctifies everything, how is this cleansing operation possible?

TV should have the courage to do it but it is more compelled to cut and curb controversies. Moreover, television is not the best medium to convey contradictions, cinema can do that more successfully.

Let's keep talking about TV. Without using the word censorship we can safely say that this is a tough period for the Italian state TV. Lately Rai has enforced a very strict code of regulations in order to curb voices of dissent to the government, so strict that many current affair and political talk shows have almost been suspended or cancelled. A popular Italian newspaper [[Il fatto Quotidiano](#) [10]] wrote that an episode of your [Blu Notte-Misteri Italiani](#) [11] about the Italian State-Mafia negotiation, which allegedly took place back in 1992/93, will not be broadcasted. Is this really happening?

We should be on the air. What happens on Italian TV is that cyclically somebody decides to interfere with some programs, but those programs are never us. There are people on RAI that do great investigative journalism, they discover new things and they scream them out loud on the air, becoming undeniably "troublemakers." We, however, don't scream. We are not better or worse, we just have a different style. But our soft tones allow us to say things without scaring people off. For example we wanted to talk about the bloody events of the [2001 G8 in Genoa](#) [12], but our target audience weren't the protesters, nor the police. We wanted to talk to the mothers of those who were there.

Our tones were understated but once people see the blood they get it. So the blows against other programs are real, but they aren't specifically against us, however they are so blind that you risk to get caught in them. In reference with the latest RAI regulations, we were asked the synopsis of this episode, we provided it and we are good to go. We will be on the air in December. We will talk about mafia, politics and secret services.

Over the last ten years, you have recollected the stories which deeply impacted Italy's history; first the crime stories, from the [Montesi murder](#) [13] to the [Monster of Florence](#) [14]; then you focused on the more complex narratives: the [P2](#) [15], the [Red Brigades](#) [16], the Massacres of [Bologna](#) [17] and [Ustica](#) [18]... In a country like our own, afflicted by a terrible historical amnesia, do you feel like the last bastion of our shared memory?

Not the last bastion, but certainly someone who tries to do these things, and well. We started with private crimes and we were able to stop right before it became a popular topic in Italy. Then we decided to dig up the more complex stories. We felt it was our civic duty, after focusing on all those murders in the first year of our TV show. We had to talk about the [Piazza Fontana Massacre](#) [19], for example - it is a murder, after all. However, we thought that nobody would really care, that they would probably suspend the show. Well, people liked it. We started getting E-mails from viewers who told us how they would watch an episode and feel compelled to read more, learn more. So maybe we are not the last bastion of Italy's shared memory but certainly we are constructors of memory.



How much did TV influence your writing? If it did at all ...

On TV I work exactly like I do while writing a book, I write my text and learn it by heart. I don't really know another style. Maybe TV forced me taught me to be frugal, I don't use long rhetorical forms, for example, and I avoid certain words. My books, conversely, aren't really influenced by TV.

You write about crime, what is your relationship to real characters of crime stories? For example, now in Italy there is the horrifying case of Sarah Scazzi (a morbid story of murder, pedophilia, and necrophilia from Apulia) which has turned into a disturbing communication spectacle...

Over the last 15 years, we have witnessed a disturbing involution in the way crime is reported. Often when there is a murder, crime writers like me are bombarded by silly questions like "who did it?" But that is not a question that can be asked to a fiction writer. Journalists engage in abominable behaviors. Everything is sensationalized and turned into a spectacle. But over the last 20 years there has also been an involution of consumers of crime news. We used to have vampire journalists exploiting people, now there are unprecedented media savvy and nonchalant viewers.

Who is responsible?

First of all, journalists are responsible. These monsters do not exist in nature if you do not create them. When you host a show about a girl who has been murdered, the questions dealt with should be DNA, dynamics, hours of decomposition, finger prints, and not mundane fights between guests. The most responsible position for a journalist is to never take part in this type of show.

Let's talk about writing, what is the situation in Italy in regards to noir and crime novels?

Giallo novels are becoming very popular in Italy, however popularity attracts to the genre a lot of writers who wouldn't necessarily write crime stories; they do it because crime sells. Hence there is a lot of stuff out there, some is good, but a lot of it is just ballast. Furthermore, there are many young writers who are setting their crime novels against the backdrop of the 1970s and '80s. They are 25- or 30-year-olds, hence they can write free of any emotional attachment about terrorism, the so called [Years of Lead](#) [20], about Piazza Fontana or the Bologna Massacre. Also there is a new southern School of crime novel, while before you had some Neapolitan giallisti, and very few Sicilians. Today, a large number of young writers are emerging from the south of Italy. There is a constant cross-over of genres, sometimes these writers aren't giallo writers per se, but they talk about dark side in those specific places.

What impact did Saviano have on young writers? Are there others like him?

He has had a really positive impact. There are people who scream "he is a hero," some others are bothered by this but I think it is non-sense. We are at war, and war needs heroes. He is the hero. There are other young and courageous writers who are not under the same type of threat because they do not have the same presence. and also because some people must have realized that it is better not to create another Saviano. That said, there is plenty of young writers, young reporters, young troublemakers. They only lack visibility because they aren't published.

Il Fatto Quotidiano has published a list of 12 journalists ...

That's another aspect that is too often forgotten, the journalists who are under threat.

Saviano is under escort, how are the others doing?

I know some of them. They have been threatened with dead cats, bullets, burned cars, they have been assaulted; they are practically at the stage before disappearance. We are talking about stuff that if it happened to me I would immediately be assigned an escort. What is mind boggling is that very likely they haven't denounced [the Casalesi](#) [21], like Saviano, but probably wrote about a member of the local government who did something shady, because in Italy you are more likely to be in danger if you discover something small rather than something big.

Michele Santoro, journalist and host of the political talk show [Annozero](#) [22], showed some Calabrian journalists who are menaced by the local mafia, ['ndrangheta](#) [23]. Il Fatto Quotidiano has written



about them. However, these are things that we should be writing about every day, they are absurd!

Can you leave us with an optimistic note?

First off, the day a journalist says that nobody threatens him is the day we have to start being frightened. It will mean that nobody is writing or discovering anything new. The one against organized crime is a battle, and until we have soldiers fighting for it, and they fight well, we can still win it.

Also I think we have the right to be optimistic because if you aren't it means you are dead, that there are no alternatives. In Italy we have the mafia, it is undeniable, but we are not the only country affected by organized crime; and if the others survive, so can we. I confess that because Italy is Italy, I am optimistic. Our country is entrapped in an elastic situation, in which things are the same yet they change, cyclically. When these holes open up, if we are ready we can penetrate them and prevent, for a while, certain systems to resurge.

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