

<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com>

g/s/i is an annual peer-reviewed journal which publishes research on gendered identities and the ways they intersect with and produce Italian politics, culture, and society by way of a variety of cultural productions, discourses, and practices spanning historical, social, and geopolitical boundaries.

Title: Forging the New Man: World War I Narratives for Children

Journal Issue: [gender/sexuality/italy, 1 \(2014\)](#)

Author: Marisa Giorgi

Publication date: 2014

Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy

Permalink: <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/forging-the-new-man/>

Author Bio:

Marisa Giorgi is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Italian at The Ohio State University. Her primary research interests are 20th and 21st century Italian literature, culture, and film, Italian Fascism, Italian colonialism and post-colonialism, Gender Studies, and Cultural Studies.

Abstract:

“Forging the New Man: World War I Narratives for Children” examines the role of children’s literature as a tool in Mussolini’s anthropological revolution. A discussion of the regime’s goals to fascistize children’s leisure-time literature and the conciliation between the state and the Catholic Church provides context for an analysis of the conversion scenes from Eros Belloni’s *Guerra! Romanzo fascista per i giovani* (1933) and Antonio Beltramelli’s *La grande diana* (1934). The novels chronicle the participation of young boys whose participation in World War I transforms them into “new men.” This essay aims to illuminate the centrality of children’s literature to the regime’s agenda of forming the “new Italian.”

Copyright information

g/s/i is published online and is an open-access journal. All content, including multimedia files, is freely available without charge to the user or his/her institution and is published according to the Creative Commons License, which does not allow commercial use of published work or its manipulation in derivative forms. Content can be downloaded and cited as specified by the author/s. **However, the Editorial Board recommends providing the link to the article (not sharing the PDF) so that the author/s can receive credit for each access to his/her work, which is only published online.**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#)

Forging the New Man: World War I Narratives for Children

MARISA GIORGI

One of the more unique aspects of Italian Fascism is that Mussolini attempted to re-make Italian men in his own image and likeness, promoting the image of the strong, virile, active, and bellicose Italian through the bombardment of propaganda images of the “new Italian” that he embodied. This phenomenon of re-making Italians is what Emilio Gentile has coined Mussolini’s anthropological revolution.¹ The regime attempted to implement this revolution through youth and after-work organizations, literature, newsreels, and feature films, attempting to change the appearance and character of Italians.²

This essay will address the formation of the “new Italian man” brought about by the advent of World War I and the rise of Fascism, and how this phenomenon was communicated to children to a didactic end in literature. The inculcation of Italian youth into a military culture, premised on the innate virility of Italians, was of utmost importance to the regime and is reflected in novels like Eros Belloni’s *Guerra!* (1933) and Antonio Beltramelli’s *La grande diana* (1934).³ The generation for whom these novels were written was raised entirely and exclusively under a regime that celebrated war and privileged conquest.⁴ Significantly, the “new men” from this very generation, too young to have participated in World War I, saw their first combat experiences during the Ethiopian War (1935) or World War II (1940). Thus, novels like *Guerra!* and *La grande diana* were meant to inspire this interwar generation to one day participate in combat, and perhaps contributed to what George Mosse describes as fascist Italy’s “state of permanent war” in which the “new man” lived.⁵ These narratives of World War I, written for young boys, present positive models of virile masculine behavior for the young reader to imitate and, thus, functioned as tools for the regime’s goal of forming the “new Italian man.”

Setting novels for young boys during World War I would appear to be an obvious choice as it has been established as a crucial point for the formation of the “new fascist man.”⁶ Moreover, the primary function of literature for children from this period was to indoctrinate Italy’s youth in fascist

¹ Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione* (Rome: Laterza, 2002), 235.

² The youth organizations founded under the Fascist National Party played a crucial role in forming this generation of “new Italians.” The first and most important was established in 1926: the *Opera Nazionale Balilla*. This organization and its sub-divisions for boys and girls of various ages were well-established institutions during the 1930s and are widely understood as one of the most successful programs that the regime implemented. Their success highlights the regime’s ever-increasing attempts to control every aspect of Italians’ lives, blurring the line between private and public, and build consensus.

³ The edition of Beltramelli’s novel from 1934 cited in this essay is from the Mondadori series “Il romanzo dei ragazzi.” The original novel was published in 1930 by the publishing house Littorio di Roma. Beltramelli is likely better known as the author for one of the first biographies of Mussolini, *L’uomo nuovo* (1923). Eros Belloni was also closely associated with the regime. He wrote *Il libro per la seconda classe dei centri rurali* in 1941.

⁴ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, “Unmaking the fascist man: masculinity, film and the transition to dictatorship,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 10, no. 3 (2005): 342.

⁵ George Mosse, *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 160. Mosse cites the “constant wearing of uniforms, the marches, the emphasis on physical exercise, on virility, were part of the battle against the enemy” and contributed to the “state of permanent war.”

⁶ Ibid., 158. See also Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio: la sacralizzazione della politica nell’Italia fascista* (Rome: Laterza, 1993), 30.

ideology. As one might expect, the protagonists of these novels learn how to be “men” through a “pedagogy of virility.”⁷

Guerra! and *La grande diana* demonstrate the importance of the Great War to Italy, the rise of Fascism, and the formation of the “new Italian man.” Each novel follows the personal history of a young male protagonist, inserts him into history and follows the life-changing experiences brought about by World War I. For these reasons, I consider both novels to be hybrid historical-formation novels. Each novel recounts the formation of a fictional character rooted in the historical past, who is transformed by the War experience from a boy to the “new man.” These novels, written at the height of the regime’s influence and power, present World War I as a thoroughly positive event and completely essential to Italy’s salvation, that is, Fascism.

The protagonists, Cibanti of *Guerra!* and Martino of *La grande diana*, each approximately ten years old, embark on journeys that ultimately reunite them with their fathers, who are fulfilling their patriotic duty and male destiny by fighting in the War. These journeys also afford Cibanti and Martino the war experience necessary to become “new men.” For fascists, participating in war is the ultimate display of virile masculinity and is understood as a fulfillment of masculine destiny in both novels, recalling Mussolini’s famous quote: “War is to men as motherhood is to women.” In each novel, it is the virile bond between father and son that drives the narrative of the story. The protagonists’ desire to be re-united with their fathers, at all costs—even when that means joining them on the battle lines—is what moves the plot along and develops the characters. The father-son relationship is an important one to fascist ideology on both a familial level as well as a national level. It is naturally through this relationship that a “pedagogy of virility” is transmitted.⁸ Of course, the ultimate father figure of Italians is Mussolini, the progenitor of the Italian race. Therefore, the emphasis on the bond between father and son, exploited in these novels, can be extrapolated as a means to serve a greater end; that is, it is a metaphor for the bond between Mussolini and Fascism and by extension, Italy. Significantly, the fathers of both protagonists are seriously wounded in the war, reminding the reader that those soldiers whose lives were spared in combat received another kind of honor. Alongside Mussolini, they were charged with renewing the country.⁹ It was the war experience, however, that cultivated them into men of steel and produced the prototype of the “new man.”

Since both narratives are concerned with forging the “new man” and focus on the father-son relationship, there is no space for the maternal presence. In both cases, the mothers are effectively absent: we learn that Cibanti’s mother has died before the narrative begins, and Martino’s mother is a marginalized character in the novel, whose function is clearly that of the *angelo del focolare*. Indeed, she presumably remains at home with her other children for the majority of the narrative. Even before Martino embarks on his journey, we see him interacting with his godfather, Fra’ Tamburo, far more than his mother, emphasizing the importance of the virile male bond, even in the absence of the father.

Guerra! and *La grande diana* certainly reflect fascist culture and seem to contribute to the regime’s attempts to realize the anthropological revolution. As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, literature was one of the many tools the regime used to accomplish its objectives. In 1938, a

⁷ Sandro Bellassai, “The masculine mystique: antimodernism and virility in Fascist Italy,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 10, no. 3 (2005): 320. Bellassai uses this term to describe the fascist regime’s agenda of “proposing the ideal masculine model of the combatant devoted to action.”

⁸ Interestingly, in children’s literature from the fascist period, when a father does not represent the virile masculine ideal, or is otherwise absent, the young male protagonist is encouraged to seek out a masculine role model representative of the “new man.”

⁹ Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 160.

national conference on children's literature "encouraged" by the P.N.F and the Ministeri dell'Educazione Nazionale e della Cultura Popolare, and organized by l'Ente nazionale per le biblioteche popolari e scolastiche and il Sindaco nazionale fascista autori e scrittori was held in Bologna to discuss the state of children's literature in fascist Italy and address its purpose as well as ways to make it more effective with regard to the regime's goal of forming the "new Italian." This conference and its proceedings support the idea that children's leisure-time literature was used as a means of inculcating fascist values in Italy's youth and that it simultaneously contributed to the creation of fascist culture during the most crucial years of the regime's consensus building, the 1930s. Moreover, several of the essays argue for the importance of leisure-time literature as supplemental to the propaganda that children were exposed to in the schools.¹⁰ Through adventure stories, historical fiction, and formation tales, these novels provide clear role models and important lessons of comportment without being pedantic.

The preface to the published proceedings of the 1938 children's literature convention consists of a "Manifesto della letteratura giovanile," by F.T. Marinetti. As a prominent intellectual, it is significant that Marinetti was concerned with children's literature. It makes sense that Marinetti, the father of Futurism, would have an interest in the formation of Italy's youth. Marinetti, like many other fascist intellectuals, recognized that the future of Fascism relied upon the regime's successful indoctrination of Italy's youth. Thus, Marinetti's manifesto details the themes and qualities that literature for children should reinforce. Interestingly, his very first declaration in the manifesto is "La Fede in Dio e nel divino che nutrono d'ideale e di bellezza la terra il mare il cielo la bandiera della patria le guancie della madre della sposa dei figli."¹¹ While this first point marks a stark contrast with the language of the author's futurist writings, it is meant to reinforce the relationship between Fascism and the Catholic Church, which I will discuss in greater detail shortly. Among the more interesting and relevant points of this manifesto, regarding the present study is Marinetti's insistence on "la verità storica," however, only when the "historical truth" portrays Italians in a positive manner. Marinetti, continues: "rispettata ma sottomessa all'orgoglio italiano per modo che in tutte le narrazioni i nostri infortuni siano trattati con laconismo e le nostre numerose vittorie con lirismo."¹² What Marinetti is championing here is a "historical truth" that is convenient for Fascism, and thus, supports the fascist myth that World War I was an Italian military success. As might be expected, both *Guerra!* and *La grande diana* speak only of the bravery and courage of the soldiers and veterans of World War I. Marinetti's manifesto dictates that children's literature should promote several qualities reminiscent of Futurism, for example: "Il coraggio fisico...", "L'amore del pericolo...", "Una adorazione del nuovo e dell'inventato..." and "L'estetica della macchina..." to name a few.¹³ I highlight these points out of a lengthy list because some (though not all) of these qualities that Marinetti deems important to include in children's literature are present in the novels, since indeed they narrate the combat experiences of young boys in World War I. Additionally, Marinetti's language emphasizes the influence of Futurism on fascist ideology.

In his presentation at the convention on children's literature, "Gusti letterari dei ragazzi," Giuseppe Giovanazzi a children's author and pedagogue of the time, speaks to the importance of the ability of young readers to identify with the protagonist. Since the protagonists of these novels function as role models, it should come as no surprise that the very ordinary nature of the

¹⁰ See Carlo M. Caretta and Renato Liguori, "Il libro di cultura fascista per i ragazzi," *Convegno Nazionale per la Letteratura Infantile e Giovanile*, edited by Giuseppe Giovanazzi, Francesco Saporì, Nazareno Padelalrio, Enrico Vallecchi, Luigi Volpicelli, 109-116 (Rome: 1939).

¹¹ F.T. Marinetti, "Manifesto della letteratura giovanile," in *Convegno Nazionale*, 7.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 8-9.

protagonists is often emphasized. In a similar vein he discusses the necessity of incorporating reality, stating: “se noi vogliamo indagare la base psicologica di questo desiderio di verità, la troviamo, io credo, proprio nel bisogno di esemplarità... Il ragazzo, il giovanetto vogliono trovare, negli eroi delle loro letture, personaggi da imitare e nei fatti letti vicende che almeno fantasticamente si possono rivivere.”¹⁴

Another issue raised at this conference was the accessibility of these novels, because they were written for children, the language is very clear and simplistic, “visiva, che non richieda troppa esperienza interiore e troppo vocabolario e che sia facilmente trasportabile nel consueto linguaggio delle conversazioni.”¹⁵ Literature for children is generally written in such accessible language, because in addition to concerns of comprehension, it aims to educate and develop language skills. An ancillary effect of this accessibility is that parents who only had an elementary school education would be able to read and enjoy books ostensibly for their children. Indeed, Giovanazzi, in his remarks states that he frequently saw: “con quanto interesse certi padri leggevano i giornalini comperati per i loro figli.”¹⁶ Furthermore, these leisure-time novels represent penetration of fascist ideology into the home. It is probable that children of apolitical or even anti-fascist families were introduced to these books through the Balilla organization, or at a number of different locations. With rather innocuous titles, such as *Guerra!* and *La grande diana*, it is not evident, especially to someone with little to no education, that the aim of these novels is to transmit fascist ideology and forge the “new Italian.”

Regarding accessibility, another issue discussed was the affordability of children's novels. Enrico Vallecchi, son of the founder of Vallecchi publishing, spoke specifically about the necessity of keeping the publishing costs of children's books low without sacrificing too much in terms of the quality of the physical aspects of the books. Although not mentioned specifically by Vallecchi, Mondadori's “Romanzo dei ragazzi” series (1933-35), to which *La grande diana* belongs, is an excellent example of affordable children's literature with contributions by such well-known authors as Beltramelli, Olga Visentini, and Annie Vivanti, to name a few. Each issue cost only 3 Lire, with a yearly subscription rate of 30 Lire.¹⁷ While each book in the series contains approximately 15 illustrations, almost exclusively by Bruno Angoletta, each page is divided into two columns, evidently a cost-cutting measure of the sort Vallecchi advocates. In his remarks Vallecchi also discusses at length wider distribution methods, specifically to areas outside the major urban centers, indicating a desire to reach as many households as possible: “bisognerà assicurare loro [ai libri] un sicuro cammino, una via che li porti al popolo.”¹⁸ Among his suggestions for expanding the distribution of children's books in general, he lists including a book in every stocking for the Befana Fascista, as well as distributing pamphlets to peasant children “affinché le loro cognizioni, attraverso la lettura di questi libri facili, possano gradatamente aumentare.”¹⁹ Vallecchi is quick to clarify, however, that these distribution efforts only include “opere ritenute *degne* di tale particolare menzione.”²⁰ Underscoring not only the quality of the books, but most certainly the content; that is, books that support the exigencies of the regime.

¹⁴ Giuseppe Giovanazzi, “Gusti letterari dei ragazzi,” in *Convegno Nazionale*, 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷ The series contained 24 books published between 1933 and 1935.

¹⁸ Enrico Vallecchi, “Aspetti commerciali del libro da ragazzi (Aspetto economico e diffusione),” in *Convegno Nazionale*, 48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

Evinced in the proceedings to the conference discussed above, children's leisure-time novels from this period were written and created with the express purpose of forming "new Italians" for Mussolini's "new Italy." Indeed, the 1938 convention on children's literature represents the culmination of the regime's efforts for a new kind of literature that reflected the social mores and culture of Fascist Italy. Furthermore, Luisa Passerini affirms that even children's literature that was not part of the state controlled curriculum was influenced by the regime.²¹ Fascist intellectuals lamented the ubiquity and popularity in 1930s Italy of children's literature from the 19th century. They claimed, specifically, that Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* and Edmondo De Amicis' *Cuore* were not the books they wanted to see in the hands of young Italians because they did not represent the values pertinent to forming the "new Italian." These two classics were singled out by the regime, in part because they were still the best-selling children's novels in 1930s Italy.²² In this respect, Adolfo Scotto Di Luzio has observed that fascist pedagogues accused these novels of sentimentalism, rendering them, according to fascist officials, "insufficiente rispetto alle esigenze educative dell'italiano nuovo."²³ Since these novels did not promote the ideas conducive to forming the "new Italian man," as envisioned by Mussolini, they were of little use to the regime and its goals for forming the male youth. With regard to the regime's accusations of sentimentalism and Liberal Italy, Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, in her study on the making of Italians between Unification and Fascism, argues that the language of sentimentality popular at the end of the 19th century grew out of "the crisis of liberalism, the crisis of religious conscience, and the crisis of paternal, masculine performativity [and] coalesced in an anxiety about the possible lack of interiority that seemingly described the modern Italy."²⁴ A similar image of the Liberal era Italian that Mussolini and the fascists were reacting against was described by Mino Maccari in the first issue (1924) of *Il Selvaggio*: "It is a question...of giving back to all classes of Italian society a sense of force, virility and willfulness [...] of defending the warrior tradition of our race: to make Italian males, considered by foreigners as pasta eaters, mandolin players, etc. into men."²⁵

Belloni's preface to *Guerra!*, which is addressed directly to the young reader, clearly states how his novel breaks with traditional popular children's stories and specifically *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. It is also an invective against fairy tales, fantastic themes, and unrealistic heroics. It most explicitly tackles the unreal aspects of the beloved children's novel, as the narrator claims that his hero does not have a long nose or a wooden head, but "Era proprio figliuolo vero come voi che leggete questa storia."²⁶ He continues, stating that our hero, Cibanti, does not have a fairy who helps him, rather, in difficult moments, it is God who guides him; "Se la cavò sempre come ve la sareste cavata voi se vi foste trovati nei suoi panni."²⁷ In the brief preface to the novel, the author emphasizes the verisimilitude of his novel, the similarity between the protagonist and the reader, as well as the importance of God. The perceived inadequacies of novels like *The Adventures of Pinocchio* with regard to forming the "new Italian" are highlighted here by Belloni and support the argument

²¹ Luisa Passerini, *Mussolini Immaginario. Storia di una biografia, 1915-1939* (Rome: Editori Laterza, 1991), 184. "La produzione libraria per i giovani era largamente governata dal regime...anche la letteratura per l'infanzia e l'adolescenza fu condizionata direttamente o indirettamente dal sistema, con la collaborazione più o meno spontanea di autori ed editori."

²² Adolfo Scotto Di Luzio, *L'Appropriazione imperfetta: Editori, biblioteche e libri per ragazzi durante il Fascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), 146.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, *The Pinocchio Effect: On making Italians (1860-1920)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 4.

²⁵ Mino Maccari, "Squadrismo", *Il Selvaggio* 1, July 13, 1924, 1. Quoted in Bellassai, 2005, 317.

²⁶ Eros Belloni, *Guerra! Romanzo fascista per i giovani* (Lanciano: Giuseppe Carabba Editore, 1933), 1.

²⁷ Ibid., 2.

for the importance of revamping children's leisure-time literature during Fascism. Indeed, the abundance of children's literature created in 1930s Fascist Italy is a result of the regime's demand for children's books that reflected the values and modes of behavior of fascist culture.²⁸

The elements of Collodi's novel that the author objects to are what Scotto Di Luzio's study reveals as contrary to the "pedagogy of virility." *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, a product of Liberal Italy, was thus, associated by fascist pedagogues with all the "errors" of the Liberal government. The "new fascist man" was, of course, constructed in direct opposition to the weak Liberal era Italian.²⁹ Scotto Di Luzio cites Olindo Giacobbe's 1934 *Letteratura infantile*, where the children's author claims that *The Adventures of Pinocchio* was not the ideal book for young boys to be reading, in part because he claims it was written "quando il pregiudizio liberale cercava di allontanare l'anima dell'infanzia dalla religione cattolica, facendo, per un mal compreso sentimento di patriottismo, un'unica questione del potere temporale e della grandezza spirituale della chiesa."³⁰ Therefore, the choice to introduce *Guerra!* with such a scathing rebuke of specific elements of *The Adventures of Pinocchio* is relevant to the interpretation of this novel as an example of literature for the "new Italian" and to the overall relevance of contemporary children's literature to the formation of the "new man." The appearance of numerous children's series from the major publishing houses in 1930s Italy (Mondadori and Bemporad, among them) at the same time important members of the regime bemoaned the state of children's literature cannot simply be coincidental. The regime desired a new children's literature tradition that would help forge a sense of strength, virility, and love for the Patria in its young male readers, while also encouraging a Catholic identity. I argue that the leisure-time novels published during the 1930s, and *Guerra!* and *La grande diana*, in particular, are representative of the regime's quest for literature that reflected fascist culture and the regime's desire to forge the "new Italian."

Giacobbe's comments regarding *The Adventures of Pinocchio* are particularly relevant to Belloni's preface to *Guerra!*, specifically the accusation that Liberal Italy's prejudices attempted to keep children away from Catholic teachings. In the preface, the narrator explicitly claims that Cibanti owes any good fortune that he may encounter in his adventures to God alone, thus, effectively supplanting the fantasy of children's literature with religion.³¹ Furthermore, the narrator's statements criticize the laic tradition of Liberal Italy and simultaneously praise Fascist Italy's relationship with the Catholic Church. Stewart-Steinberg observes that in the years after Unification, the emphasis on being Italian (and making Italians) and on nation building was so emphasized that it "potentially signified the exclusion of a Catholic identity."³² Therefore, the author's emphasis on religion and negation of fantasy has a multifaceted role: it stresses the importance of God and faith, effectively promoting the teachings of the Catholic Church, the regime's strongest ally, and at the same time it rebukes the culture and policies of Liberal Italy.

Significantly, *Guerra!* was published in 1933, four years after the signing of the Lateran Accords in 1929, which formalized the alliance between the Church and the fascist state. According to Tracy Koon, after the tense years of negotiations of the 1920s leading up to the conciliation between the Church and Mussolini, the 1930s represented a period of relative cordiality. The conciliation between the Church and state is often characterized as a mutually beneficial relationship.

²⁸ Mondadori and Bemporad were among the many publishing houses that produced series of books for children. Mondadori published "Il romanzo dei ragazzi," while Bemporad published "I libri dell'Ardimento."

²⁹ For a discussion on creating an identity based on its opposite see Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 6.

³⁰ Giacobbe Olindo, *Letteratura infantile* (Torino: G. B. Paravia, 1923), 137. Quoted in Scotto Di Luzio, 1996, 147.

³¹ "Lasciamo le Fate dormire il loro sonno interminabile nel buio delle foreste favolose. [...] se [...] Cibanti riceve, in momenti difficili, aiuti miracolosi, vi assicuro che non furono certo le Fate a portarglieli, ma fu il buon Dio, sempre misericordioso verso i bimbi buoni e coraggiosi." Belloni, *Guerra!*, 2.

³² Stewart-Steinberg, *The Pinocchio Effect*, 4.

Mussolini recognized that conciliation with the Church was his best bet for producing consensus for Fascism, while the Church saw the reinstatement of Catholic teachings in the classrooms and its designation as the official religion of the state, or what Church leaders referred to at the time as the “‘Christianization’ of Italy.”³³ A main point of contention between the two entities, even after 1929, surrounded the right to educate and mold the minds and bodies of the future of Italy. The public squabbling concerned Catholic Action and the ONB, and whether the organizations, both interested in educating and forming Italy’s youth, could co-exist. A few parameters were laid out for the Catholic Action groups which were acceptable to the Vatican: Catholic Action groups could not be political, nor could they be in anyway related to military preparedness, which led to the demise of the Catholic Scouts, a concession Pope Pius XI was willing to make to save his “pet organization, Catholic Action.”³⁴ In fact, Mussolini coined this impasse the “scoutist parenthesis” since it stalled the conciliation between the regime and the Church for a year.³⁵ While Mussolini had tried to eliminate all youth groups that he saw as a threat to the ONB, ultimately he understood conciliation with the Church as too important for the success of Fascism, so he settled for the “dissolution of the Catholic Scouts but tacit recognition of other Catholic Action associations for the young.”³⁶ Despite the rifts during the 1920s between the Church and the regime regarding the education of Italy’s youth, the two institutions found common ground on more than a few issues, including: conservative and traditional values regarding the family unit, women’s role in society, a common enemy in Communism, the necessity and importance of hierarchy, discipline, and a strong will, values that both Catholics and fascists believed were integral to an individual’s formation.³⁷

Another function of the narrator’s tirade against fantasy is that it simultaneously argues for the validity and verisimilitude of his own tale. That is, the less fantastical the story is, the more real it becomes. In fact, the reader is meant to believe that the people and events of the story are real, since the narrator states that he personally knew Cibanti, whose real name is Paolo Sacchi, though he admits he never knew why our hero was always called Cibanti.³⁸ The verisimilitude of the story lends veracity to the accounts related throughout the narrative. The narrator’s direct address coupled with the protagonist’s authentic (real) child qualities make him a more readily available model for boys to emulate. One example of the narrator’s attempt to ensure that the reader identifies with the protagonist is when he confides to the reader that Cibanti does not enjoy school and is not a good student. Thus, the more of himself the reader can recognize in the protagonist, the more likely it is he will imitate the positive (fascist) behavior displayed in the story.

While *Guerra!* and *La grande diana* share many qualities and address many of the same themes, they differ in two main areas. The first is in the narrative voice. *Guerra!* takes on more of an instructional tone, at several times addressing the reader directly and drawing comparisons between the protagonist and the reader. At other times, speeches and instructions are given to the protagonist, but are clearly meant for the reader, as well. For example, the scene in which Cibanti’s teacher explains to the class what the Patria is. The definition is meant to inform the fictional class, as much as the young reader. Instead, in *La grande diana* the facts and events of the story are

³³ Tracy Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 119.

³⁴ Ibid., 127.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ In both *Guerra!* and *La grande diana*, there is clear anti-Communist rhetoric, and in both cases Mussolini is credited with saving the nation from such an unthinkable fate. This anti-Communist rhetoric has a two-fold purpose, promoting the fascist state, as well as emphasizing the Catholicism of the “new Italy.”

³⁸ Belloni, *Guerra!*, 2.

recounted in a linear narrative, which never breaks to address the audience directly. The difference in narrative style of the novels is also reflected in the actions of the protagonists. Cibanti's actions, for example, are completely imitable by the young reader. Martino, instead, serves as a different kind of role model, an aspirational one. His actions are meant to inspire the reader to be as brave and selfless as our young protagonist, as well as to understand the importance of being a "man" in Fascist society. The other major difference is the timeline covered in the two novels. *Guerra!* recounts the events of the War and the post-war period, including squadrist activity and concludes with the March on Rome, thus reminding the reader of the events directly responsible for bringing about Fascist rule. *La grande diana* covers exclusively the timeline of World War I and concludes with Martino's return to his family after his participation in the war. The timeline of the latter novel, therefore, emphasizes the singular importance of the First World War and its man-making effects.

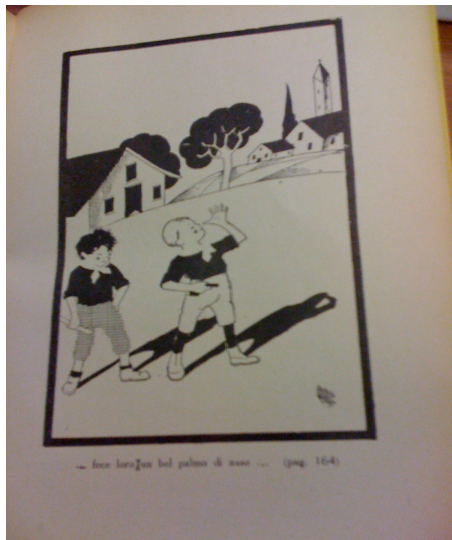


Figure 1: Cibanti dressed as a Black Shirt (*Guerra!*, 164).³⁹



Figure 2: Martino dressed as a soldier (*La grande diana*, 75).

One similar scene in both novels and of crucial importance to these formation tales is the conversion scene. In *Guerra!*, Cibanti's conversion is only completed years after the end of the war when he proves himself worthy to wear the Black Shirt and subsequently participate in the March on Rome (Figure 1). Although the experience of World War I opens his eyes to the meaning of sacrifice and love for the Patria, his true moment of conversion occurs in the post-war period, demonstrating his physical and mental toughness, cultivated by his war experience. When he, his father, and fellow customers are attacked by a Russian vagrant, known for distributing Communist propaganda in the area, it is Cibanti who wrestles him to the ground, binds him, and awaits the arrival of the Black Shirts. They subsequently thank Cibanti and congratulate him on his heroic actions. Soon after this episode, Cibanti decides to join the Black Shirts, whose members were, arguably, the "prototype of the 'new' man."⁴⁰ Significantly, it is Cibanti's own war experience that entitles him to don the Black Shirt and become a "new man." In this way, Cibanti serves as a model for the young readers of the story. Thus, this scene serves not only to demonstrate how Cibanti has grown out of his war experience, but also to remind the reader of the important role so many World War I veterans

³⁹ By courtesy of Carabba Editore.

⁴⁰ Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 160.

played in helping Mussolini ascend to power and bring about Fascist rule. To ensure that this is not lost on the reader, the novel ends with the March on Rome and a description of Cibanti, along with his war hero father donning their black shirts and marching toward Rome. The narrative is effective in promoting the positive effects of war and militarism and as something to be desired, therefore, encouraging the military culture that by 1934 the Fascists had effectively established in Italy. Instead, in *La grande diana*, Martino's moment of conversion is presented as a re-birth while he is on the battlefield. Furthermore, his guardian, Fra' Tamburo, a sixty-year-old man and close friend of Martino's father, who is also at the front, experiences a similar conversion, which I will also briefly discuss.

During his first experience on the battlefield Martino sees and hears grenades detonating around him, when a fellow soldier tells him that he has been baptized and that he is now a soldier of Italy. This baptism is the experience of war itself, and it suggests the completion of Martino's re-birth, from civilian to soldier and from boyhood to manhood. It also solidifies his camaraderie with his fellow soldiers. Indeed, as a result of his virile performance, Martino earns the right to join the ranks of the infantrymen. His fellow soldiers dress him as one of them, outfitting him with an old uniform, a helmet, and a musket (Figure 2). Because Martino has proved that he has what it takes on the inside—the character—to be a soldier, he appears outwardly as one. As a result of his war experiences, Martino has matured into a true man. Martino's audacious behavior is meant to inspire the young readers of the novel.

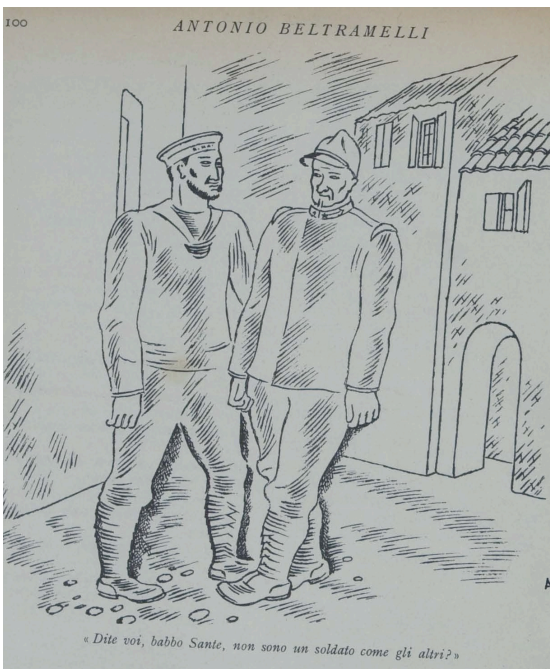


Figure 3: Fra' Tamburo pre-combat
(*La grande diana*, 100).



Figure 4: Fra' Tamburo carrying wounded, fellow Romagnolo off the battlefield. He appears years younger than in previous illustrations
(*La grande diana*, 121).

It also simultaneously inspires Fra' Tamburo who upon hearing of Martino's bravery decides that he, too, should be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for Italy. While the combat experience

infinitely matures Martino, it physically and spiritually rejuvenates Tamburo.⁴¹ This is demonstrated by his valor in carrying a wounded fellow Romagnolo man from the battlefield. The rejuvenation of Fra' Tamburo is significant because of Fascism's cult of youth. The illustration of his bravery depicts him as a man whose actions and appearance belie his sixty years. When compared to those earlier in the novel, this illustration clearly reinforces the propaganda of the positive effects war has on men (Figures 3 and 4). Martino and Fra' Tamburo have been made soldiers and have become new men, both with respect to their former selves, as well as the ideal "new man." The novel's overall significance to Fascism and worth as a children's book can be interpreted, not only as testament to the formation of the "new man," but also in its representation of a historical event—World War I—and how nobly the humble people of Romagna acted under the difficult circumstances of war.

In many ways, *Guerra!* and *La grande diana* are exemplary novels with regard to the regime's goals of forging the "new man" and how fascist pedagogues envisioned the new children's novel for the "new Italian." Indeed, these novels appear to respond to the regime's desire for more virile popular literature for children. The relevance of the retelling of World War I that both *Guerra!* and *La grande diana* engage in is the importance of the war experience, for the individual as well as the Patria. Indeed, neither title leaves much to the imagination about its subject matter, and in both cases, the maturity of the protagonist occurs through his direct involvement in the fictional events of World War I represented in the novel. The Fascists believed that they were the "true inheritors" of the war experience and, thus, that Fascism was a product of that war.⁴² These characters, too, are products of the war—the war experience dramatically alters the paths of their lives. Like the rhetoric surrounding this war, these two novels propagandize and mythologize Italy's participation and performance in World War I, framing it as the defining man-making experience, while focusing on the personal histories of everyday, humble people. By focusing the narratives on the heroic actions of two average young boys, the authors, Belloni and Beltramelli, highlight the centrality of the formation of the "new man" to Fascism, and of encouraging average Italian boys to emulate virile and heroic comportment, characteristic of the "new man."

Works Cited

- Bellassai, Sandro. "The masculine mystique: antimodernism and virility in fascist Italy." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 10, no. 3 (2005): 314-335.
- Belloni, Eros. *Guerra! Romanzo fascista per i giovani*. Lanciano: Giuseppe Carabba Editore, 1933.
- Beltramelli, Antonio. *La grande diana*. Milan: Mondadori, 1934.
- Ben-Ghiat, Ruth. "Unmaking the fascist man: masculinity, film and the transition from Dictatorship." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 10, no. 3 (2005): 336-65.
- Caretta, Carlo and Liguori, Renato. "Il libro di cultura fascista per i ragazzi." *Convegno Nazionale per la Letteratura Infantile e Giovanile*, edited by Giuseppe Giovanazzi, Francesco Saporì, Nazareno Padelalrio, Enrico Vallecchi, Luigi Volpicelli, 109-116. Rome, 1939.
- Gentile, Emilio. *Il culto del littorio: la sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista*. Rome: Laterza, 1993.
- . *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione*. Rome: Laterza, 2002.
- Giacobbe, Olindo. *Letteratura infantile*. Torino: G.B. Paravia, 1923.
- Giovanazzi, Giuseppe. "Gusti letterari dei ragazzi." *Convegno Nazionale per la Letteratura Infantile e Giovanile*, edited by Giuseppe Giovanazzi, Francesco Saporì, Nazareno Padelalrio, Enrico Vallecchi, Luigi Volpicelli, 13-29. Rome, 1939.

⁴¹ Youth is, of course, another defining aspect of Fascism.

⁴² Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 155.

- Koon, Tracy. *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1943*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.
- Maccari, Mino. "Squadrismo." *Il Selvaggio*, July 13, 1924: 1.
- Marinetti, F.T. "Manifesto della letteratura giovanile." *Convegno Nazionale per la Letteratura Infantile e Giovanile*, edited by Giuseppe Giovanazzi, Francesco Saporì, Nazareno Padelalrio, Enrico Vallecchi, Luigi Volpicelli, 7-10. Rome, 1939.
- Mosse, George. *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Passerini, Luisa. *Mussolini Immaginario. Storia di una biografia, 1915-1939*. Rome: Editori Laterza, 1996.
- Scotto, Adolfo di Luzio. *L'appropriazione imperfetta. Editori, biblioteche e libri per ragazzi durante il Fascismo*. Bologna: il Mulino, 1996.
- Stewart-Steinberg, Suzanne. *The Pinocchio Effect. On Making Italians, 1860-1920*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Vallecchi, Enrico. "Aspetti commerciali del libro da ragazzi (Aspetto economico e diffusione)." *Convegno Nazionale per la Letteratura Infantile e Giovanile*, edited by Giuseppe Giovanazzi, Francesco Saporì, Nazareno Padelalrio, Enrico Vallecchi, Luigi Volpicelli, 43-51. Rome, 1939.