

Gian Carlo Ferretti - Giulia Iannuzzi

Storie di uomini e libri

Roma, Minimum Fax, 2014, 318 pp.

Anyone who is familiar with the history of Italian publishing will have come across the name of Gian Carlo Ferretti. He is one of the leading critics and scholars in the field and has engaged in extensive research since the sixties, writing an impressive number of volumes and contributions – among them, the seminal text *Storia dell'editoria letteraria in Italia, 1945-2003*, published by Einaudi in 2004. *Storie di uomini e libri*, co-authored with Giulia Iannuzzi, relates to the line of research opened and developed by Ferretti throughout his life on the relation between literature, market, and cultural production. The premise of this volume, and of Ferretti's entire work, is that literature, culture, and publishing industry are inextricably linked: just as there is no publishing industry without literature, there is no literature without publishing. Publishers are those who enable literature to exist and circulate, and their double role of businessmen and agents of cultural production generates all the contradictions that are constitutive of the book market, and that also affect literary production. This premise might seem obvious to many – especially to those that are familiar with the work of Bourdieu and other sociologists of literature, but is still looked askance at by the defenders of 'pure' literature, who cling to the idea of literature as an untainted form of art not compromised by commercial concerns and issues related to the market. A fortiori, research works on the material conditions of literary and cultural production are nowadays much needed.

As aptly pointed out by Iannuzzi in an interview to the Italian radio programme *Fahrenheit*¹, the main contention of *Storie di uomini e libri* had already been brought forward by Ferretti in his *Storia dell'editoria letteraria*: in Italy book series went from embodying «politiche, pratiche, orientamenti delle rispettive case editrici» (p. 5) to being «contenitori» (p. 6) lacking a proper identity and consistency in the inclusion of works. The concept of 'identità editoriale-letteraria', so relevant to the history of publishing, is central to the volume, its concerns, and methodology. The deterioration of the function of book series mirrors broader transformations the publishing industry underwent in the 1970s and 1980s, notably a shift from a publishing approach focused on *authors* and the creation of a distinctive catalogue, which favoured the long-lasting affiliation of an author with a publisher, to a strategy focused on *titles* leading to a tendency to chase works that might be successful, without a real concern for the consistency of the catalogue:

[...] il passaggio [...] da una *politica d'autore formativa* nella prospettiva del catalogo e della durata, e della (reciproca) fedeltà e appartenenza autore-editore, alla ricerca estemporanea di questo o quell'autore, con una diffusa tendenza al nomadismo, e una *politica di titolo* nella prospettiva della stagione e del mercato (p. 6).

The concept of book series is thus closely related to that of literary-publishing identity, and the weakening of the function of series goes hand in hand with the fading of distinct identities in the book market in the period examined, as a general trend which is not without exceptions.

But the originality of this volume lies in its structure and in its claim that «le collane possono *fare storia da sole*» (p. 5): it is possible to trace a publishing, literary, and cultural history of Italy in the period in question – 20th century – through the study of its most significant book

¹ Rai radio 3, 29th July 2014.

series – the authors have chosen forty-five². As they mention in the introductory note, every chapter covers a series, giving the volume the form of a mini (and by no means inclusive)-encyclopaedia of book series in chronological order. This is indeed one of the readings of the volume that Ferretti had envisaged: «un manuale di consultazione: schede, carte di identità», as he explained in the interview to Fahrenheit. ‘Carte d’identità’ seems to be the right expression to describe the profiles at the end of each chapter, that really look like identity records containing details of each series (name, publisher, period of issuing), followed by a very useful bibliography of resources on the subject including primary sources such as archives. *Storie di uomini e libri* can thus also be used as a reference work on book series, and has the merit of collecting and sorting information that were previously scattered across several sources, in a volume that makes them easy to access.

This is not to say that all the authors did was gathering information from other sources – if many of the series included in the volume are well-known and have been widely studied, others are relatively minor and/or quite recent and one has the feeling that were it not for a volume like this, they would hardly be given any attention or visibility, despite being significant from a cultural and literary point of view (e.g. ‘Collana Praghese’ by e/o, ‘Lèkythos’ by Crocetti, ‘Letterature’ by Theoria, and ‘Transeuropa’ by Il lavoro editoriale, that later assumed the name of Transeuropa itself). The authors took as their object of study literary and cultural production at large: book series considered in the volume are those that for different reasons are deemed relevant to the Italian cultural scene, and include such diverse publishing projects as ‘Mondo Piccolo’ – de facto book series composed of the extremely popular works by Guareschi on the adventures of Don Camillo and Peppone – alongside the series of the elitist publisher Vanni Scheiwiller, who went so far in his aristocratic attitude as to print a

² A less ambitious antecedent is the volume *Una collana tira l'altra* (2009), written by the students of the Master in Professioni e Prodotti dell'Editoria held by Collegio Universitario Santa Caterina da Siena.

volume in eight copies. It is thus an inclusive study that offers a truthful picture of the complex and multifaceted world of publishing and a valuable methodological contribution to the history of publishing, a field that has to find ways to account for the most disparate and even contradictory facts and data.

In writing a publishing and cultural history through book series, Ferretti and Iannuzzi also wrote a history of the book series in Italy, tracing its rising and then falling trajectory in Italian publishing. That is why although dealing with the 20th century, the volume goes back to Treves' collection 'Biblioteca Amena', emblematic of a period in which book series did not have such strong identities – all of Treves' literary series were very similar; the same author, and even the same book, could be included and reprinted in different series. In the aforementioned interview, Ferretti pointed out the pioneering role played by Treves: «noi abbiamo scelto un arco storico, il Novecento, e c'è Treves all'origine di tutto questo». A glance at 'Biblioteca Amena' and Treves, who built its fortune on this and others collections of popular literature, allows readers to appreciate the rise and the evolution of the book series from an indefinite and weak publishing category – a sort of box in which one could put more or less anything – to «strutture, pilastri su cui si fonda l'editoria»: the veritable pillars of publishing.

The following chapters draw this rising trajectory, taking us on a journey through book series, some of which have really made the history of Italian publishing: 'I libri gialli', 'Medusa', 'I coralli', 'BUR', 'I gettoni', 'I Narratori di Feltrinelli', 'Biblioteca Adelphi', 'Oscar Mondadori', but also less popular but culturally significant series like 'Edizioni di Solaria', the numerous collections by Vanni Scheiwiller, who proudly claimed he would have «più collane che libri» (p. 139), 'Biblioteca delle Silerchie', and so on. These belong to the golden age of book series, a time when books and authors could be turned down if there was no appropriate series to contain them. This is the reason why readers and editors, like Vittorini, could work for different publishers at the same time, without being subject to a conflict of interest: in the age of 'editori protagonisti', publishing houses had well-defined literary-publishing identities that distinguished one from another and

meant that, broadly speaking, a book that was suitable for Mondadori was not suitable for Einaudi and vice versa. These identities were expressed chiefly through book series. The well-known expression 'editori protagonisti', coined by Valentino Bompiani and adopted by Ferretti to describe this publishing era, can be related to the title of the book, *Storie di uomini e libri*, that emphasizes the centrality of agents in publishing work and in the volume. The book does not fail to convey the central role played by a few key figures particularly in the post-war period and until the 1970s – not only publishers but also editors were protagonists – and the fact that some book series were direct expression of the cultural work and the literary leanings of their editors (even though these were always necessarily mediated by the publisher's general strategy and demands). Such series are referred to as «collane d'autore»: among the most notable there are 'Centopagine', directed by Italo Calvino, 'I gettoni', directed by Elio Vittorini, and 'Biblioteca delle Silerchie', directed by Giacomo Debenedetti.

Nonetheless, it would be misleading to assume that any fact or event in publishing is the result of a rationale that can be (easily) discerned and uncovered, even in a period in which publishers' catalogues were the expression of their identity much more than it is today. Anyone who has embarked on the study of publishing matters knows that when dealing with this subject it is necessary to always allow for the presence of a 'random' element: factors that influence publishers' activity and editorial decisions are so many and disparate that it is often arduous to reconstruct the reasoning and agency behind them, and the events surrounding the publication and dissemination of works. Archives are certainly the most useful source of information to try and disentangle the numerous conundrums that the researcher of publishing history has to face. As previously mentioned, Iannuzzi and Ferretti often include archives among their sources, especially Archivio Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori and APICE (Archivi della parola, dell'immagine e della comunicazione editoriale), the archive centre of the University of Milan.

The turning point in the history of book series, according to Ferretti, is when Mondadori made a clean sweep of all its series of fiction and nonfiction to start a new, indefinite series called 'Scrittori italiani e stranieri', between 1967 and 1971. Those years were a period of structural changes in the publishing industry, as previously stated. The series that better exemplifies the new phase of the history of book series and of Italian publishing is 'Stile libero', and it is no coincidence that the authors chose to conclude the volume with it. 'Stile libero' was started in 1996 by Einaudi following a period of crisis that was as much a financial as an identity crisis, ended in 1994 with its takeover by Mondadori. It is a heterogeneous and 'centrifugal' series which is able to contain the most diverse works, genres, and styles – «letteratura e spettacolo, fumetti e video, manuali e sottogeneri narrativi, giallo e *noir*, comico e fantascienza, memorie e altro ancora» (p. 294) – looking like the opposite of the concept of book series that has been delineated throughout the book, especially coming from a publisher like Einaudi. Despite being in fact somehow representative of Einaudi's new, more market-oriented identity («una sorta di rivisitazione dello sperimentalismo einaudiano in una chiave nuova e moderna e con molto interesse per il mercato», in Ferretti's words), its total lack of distinguishing features epitomises the weakening of the concept of book series and the end of their role of «pillars» and «structures» of Italian publishing. Although it is still possible to find series with a well-defined identity (a well-known example is 'Memoria' by Sellerio), 'series-containers' undoubtedly represent the most common trend of today's publishing scene, particularly as far as large publishers are concerned. Book series included in the last part of the volume belong mostly to small publishers (Sellerio, Crocetti, e/o, Theoria, Transeuropa). It is no surprise that well-characterised book series today are to be found chiefly in the catalogues of small independent publishers, since newcomers can only rely on the creation of a unique and convincing identity to emerge in the publishing field, as posited by Bourdieu's field theory.

In conclusion, *Storie di uomini e libri* is a book that can be profitably read both by experts of the field, for whom it could be particularly useful as a reference work, and by the general public, that would be

introduced to the world of publishing in an enjoyable but not superficial way. Keeping with the topic, *Storie di uomini e libri* is representative of the book series in which it is included – ‘Filigrana’ by Minimum Fax is a non-fiction series dedicated to literature and writing in its broadest sense, featuring valuable and engaging volumes that can appeal to inquiring and cultivated, but not necessarily specialist, readers.

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