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**Crovi, Luca. *Tutti i colori del giallo. Il giallo italiano da De Marchi a Scerbanenco a Camilleri*. Marsilio. Venezia, 2002. 364 p. (All the shades of yellow. The Italian detective novel from De Marchi to Scerbanenco to Camilleri.)**

In Italy, detective stories are known as « *yellow novels* », from the name of a famous collection launched by Mondadori editions in 1929. These books are noticeable for a bright yellow cover with a blood-red rimmed circle framing an appropriately garish illustration. The term has been generally adopted and now encompasses basically all genres related to the detective story, including thrillers, suspense novels, mysteries, noir novels and in part horror novels as well.

The author of this study knows the field from the inside, as he works as Editor with Sergio Bonelli Editions, the producers of some of the country's best known and most loved comic books. His familiarity with the subject is readily apparent, and his book's title is entirely appropriate. Hard to imagine, indeed, that the slightest shade of "yellow" may have escaped his attention in the three hundred and sixty pages and more he employs to describe the genre in the most minute detail.

Crovi's approach is partly chronological, partly generic. He starts his story from well before the beginning, taking the reader for a long historical stroll through the generic no man's land that marks the end of the nineteenth century, when the distinctive traits of the detective novel start to become visible in the magma of the *feuilleton*. The end of the path is in contemporary Sicily, where Camilleri, the creator of inspector Montalbano, started his conquest of Europe's book market. In between, we learn countless things about detective stories on TV, in the movies and in comic books. We find out about the illustrators of some of the most popular collections (including the great Giove Toppi and Walter Molino, among others). We explore the ranks of the women writers who have recently invaded this traditionally male-dominated field, and we are taken on an entertaining trip amongst the imitators, the plagiarists and the admirers of Sherlock Holmes in Italy. Furthermore, let's not forget a chapter on the connections between the detective novel and the historical novel. Umberto Eco, the lone writer in this field who is known outside of the country's borders, is clearly not the only one worth knowing. Finally, Crovi provides a more in-depth presentation and analysis of the works of two of the authors who have most significantly influenced both the reception and the evolution of the genre: Camilleri and Giorgio Scerbanenco.

The adventure starts towards the end of the 1880s, with the publication of *Il cappello del prete* (*The Priest's Hat*) of De Marchi. A remarkably Italian-sounding title for a novel that is still in several ways influenced by the French *feuilletons* of Sue, Dumas, Ponson or Gaboriau. As Crovi points out, however, the importance of this novel resides in the fact that it is not simply an attempt at imitation, but truly a

reaction: a way of showing that Italian authors could write as well and as abundantly as the French masters whose works had dominated the publishing market until that point in time. Then comes the time of the translations and adaptations of the mostly American dime novels that left such a deep impression on the readers of the early twentieth century: Nick Carter, Nat Pinkerton, and also Joe Petrosino. The latter detective's purely fictional adventures, Crovi tells us, having been presented to the public as his "memoirs" barely two weeks after his violent death! From 1929 on starts the saga of Mondadori's "Libri gialli", or "yellow novels". The story of this particular collection offers a vivid insight into the situation of the press under the fascist regime. The dictatorship hardly appreciates the predominance of English and American authors in the field. As a consequence, starting in 1931, a law will impose a minimum of 15% of Italian writers' creations per year. This big chance for local talent, however, only lasts until 1941. The Ministry for Popular Culture does not really like popular culture. The collection is forced to stop publication. Detective novels, as everyone knows, are eminently dangerous for public morals and social order. Revenge will come in 1947, and the post-war period will bring many new authors and a renewed interest for a genre that has become a permanent fixture of the literary landscape. In this context, Crovi mentions the works of Soldati, an important and multi-faceted author whose works, unfortunately in part already forgotten, definitely deserve attention. To Soldati, he opposes quite rightly the incredibly versatile Giorgio Scerbanenco, the astoundingly prolific author who managed almost single-handedly to carry Italian detective stories from the era of the "marshal of the 'carabinieri' who drinks wine and plays cards" (an allusion to Soldati's characters) to the representation of a considerably more complex and problematic reality: the dark side of the economic miracle that followed the devastations of the war.

Crovi also touches upon the difficult question of the contemporary critical reception of the detective novel. He mentions quite rightly that many very well-known "literary" authors, such as Pirandello, Sciascia and Gadda, were extremely close to the aesthetics of the detective story in their narratives. It is also true that the distinction between "high brow" literature and popular literature is becoming increasingly blurry within the Italian publishing market. Even such traditionally "high brow" publishers such as the Milanese Adelphi include titles by Georges Simenon in their catalogue, and open their doors to young and talented writers like Giuseppe Ferrandino, whose novels are basically mysteries.

Crovi's work, chock-full as it is of names, dates, quotations, reminders, pithy and accurate judgments, is much more than a simple invitation to the (re)discovery of a valid slice of Italian literary creation. It is an indispensable anthology for all those who want to know what role detective novels have played, and still play, in Italian culture. Well written, with gusto and in a direct, no-nonsense style, this book is a useful reference tool that presents itself as a highly readable yarn.