

Maria Truglio

I am very grateful for the generous funding from the Children's Literature Association, which enabled me to embed a week-long trip to Sicily during my fall 2018 sabbatical stay in central Italy. I am studying how books written for children and young adults in Italy during the past twenty years have portrayed immigration, especially in light of how this topic is being addressed in politics and in the media, and in the historical context of how Africa and Africans were portrayed to children in Italy's post-unification period and subsequent fascist years. Sicily, given its geographic setting, is a kind of "ground zero" for the arrival of many immigrants from Northern Africa. During my time there, my project benefitted in three ways. First, I spent about two hours with the author Maria Attanasio at her home in Caltagirone. There I interviewed her about her illustrated children's book *From the Atlas Mountains to the Apennines* [*Dall'Atlante agli Appennini*. Illus. F. Chiacchio. Rome: Orecchio Acerbo, 2008], a remarkable text that draws on a 19th-century classic children's book (*Heart* by Edmondo De Amicis) to portray the experiences of today's immigrant children in Italy. Attanasio is a well-known and prize-winning author of poetry and historical novels for adults, but she was moved a few years ago to write this children's book after speaking with immigrant children in her region. Second, I was able to give a talk on my previous book, *Italian Children's Literature and National Identity* at the University of Catania, which was attended by about 75 students and faculty. While the talk itself focused on my previous project, the visit gave me the chance to speak at length with my host Professor Letterio Todaro, who has provided me with a wealth and primary and secondary material relevant to my current topic. In fact, over the course of my sabbatical, my corpus of primary texts has grown from about six to over 40 books. Finally, being in Sicily gave me a more first-hand sense of the current political and cultural climate concerning this issue. I was able to visit book stores to see what kinds of texts are being sold in the children's sections, interact with immigrants themselves (informally), drive past an isolated and highly guarded residential holding facility for immigrants on the road between Catania and Caltagirone, and see the anti- and pro- immigrant graffiti near the port of Catania.

Using the primary and secondary material I gathered, I presented two conference papers: "Speaking to Every Heart: Immigration and Empathy in Contemporary Italian Children's Literature" at the annual Children's Literature Association conference in Indianapolis on June

13, 2019; and “Cultivating a Canon of Italian Children’s Literature and Immigration” at the “Beyond the Canon (of Children’s Literature): The 14th Child and the Book Conference” held at the University of Zadar, Croatia on May 10, 2019. In addition to these conferences, after my return from Italy in January via “zoom” I presented my current research to a reading group of about 15 graduate students and scholars at Newcastle University (England) who have been studying refugees in children’s literature. I am currently finalizing an article on intertextuality in children’s books on immigration that features Attanasio’s book and my interview with her. Ultimately my aim is to produce a monograph on this topic.