

Niccolò Ammaniti (2001). *Io non ho paura*. Torino: Einaudi. 219 pages

ISBN 88-06-14210-0

English translation:

Niccolò Ammaniti (2003). *I'm Not Scared*. Translation by Jonathan Hunt. Melbourne: Text Publishing. 215 pages

ISBN 1 877008 46 X

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“The Bogeyman at Your Table”: Niccolò Ammaniti’s *Io non ho paura*.

From the outset, Niccolò Ammaniti’s career as a writer of fiction has offered tantalising story-telling across a diversity of styles from horror to noir to comic-grotesque vignettes about daily life in squalid, provincial towns. Although a masterly craftsman of prose and dialogue, the indelible sensory impression transmitted by Ammaniti’s work is often a visual one. Whether it be tales of gruesome gang-rape murders, the decomposing zombie remains of Andrea Milozzi, former biology student who carves out a brilliant academic career in spite of his malodorous presence, or the betrayal of the vain hit-man Albertino against ruthless drug-lord, il Giaguaro (all episodes drawn from the short-story collection *Fango*, Mondadori, 1996), Ammaniti’s fictional narratives are imbued with a strongly cinematographic quality. Moreover, he has a special talent for capturing adolescent patois as evidenced in the novel *Ti prendo e ti porto via* (Mondadori, 1999), which features as its protagonist the bullied and troubled twelve-year-old, Pietro Moroni. Not surprisingly, Ammaniti has been involved in a number of film-based ventures, notably cinema versions of his first novel, *Branchie* (Ediesse, 1994), and the *novella* “L’ultimo capodanno dell’umanità” (in *Fango*). Most recently, his fourth and most successful publication, the best-selling novel, *Io non ho paura*, winner of the 2001 Viareggio-Repaci Prize, and now translated into English with the title, *I’m Not Scared*, has been made into a film. Ammaniti collaborated with screen-writer Francesca Marciano to create a prize-winning script and the film version, *Io non ho paura*, directed by Gabriele Salvatores, premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2003.

Ammaniti’s early attempts at fictional writing came about, not as a conscious decision, but as the result of his fear of confessing to his high-achieving child-psychiatrist father that he was having difficulty completing his university thesis in biology at *La Sapienza* University in Rome. At that stage, Ammaniti was busily curating aquariums and breeding fish in his room; a somewhat terrifying prospect from a structural engineering

point of view, since it involved no less than twelve full-sized aquariums holding approximately two-thousand litres of water. His father's concession of his private study in order for the young Niccolò to write up his thesis without interruption led, instead, to the creation of a story entitled *Branchie* ("Gills"), about an aquarist who has only three months to live. Ammaniti says that he transposed his fear of revealing the truth about his dodgy thesis to his father onto the terminally-ill protagonist. Although he never completed his university degree, Ammaniti, encouraged by his mother, became a voracious reader of fiction, where previously he had rejected the set-book lists of Italian literature recommended by his teachers. He avidly devoured the translated works of Jack London and Joseph Conrad, numerous French and Russian writers, and Stephen King who was the catalyst for his delving into contemporary fiction. Prior to writing *Io non ho paura*, which is now studied at the *scuola media* level in Italian schools, Ammaniti read Calvino's anthology of Italian fairy-tales, *Fiabe italiane*.

During an interview with this reviewer conducted in Adelaide on 27 May 2003, the novelist, who hails from Rome, articulated his frustrated longing to be a film director when he mentioned that the "small" novel, *Io non ho paura*, "il piccoletto", as he referred to it, was originally conceived as a film treatment and was composed while he was in the process of trying to bring to completion a much longer volume, "il grossone". Eventually, with publication deadlines looming for the longer work, he gave his energies to "il piccoletto". "It was my attempt at a Baricco-length novel", he says tongue-in-cheek. *Io non ho paura* is set in an unidentified region in southern Italy, in a tiny hamlet, Acqua Traverse, composed of a clutch of houses encircled by vast expanses of wheat-fields. In reality, the author is drawing inspiration from the area in north-west Puglia known as Le Murge, where the confines of Puglia, Campania and Basilicata meet. Acqua Traverse is an evocation of the tiny village of Candela. In Ammaniti's fictional rendering, the landscape of this inland setting is harsh and isolated, the water-supply scarce and the possibilities for economic development a distant and forlorn hope. As events unfold, the narrator's mother makes a plea to her young son for him to grow up and one day leave Acqua Traverse forever: "you must go away from here and never come back" (154). In writing this tale, Ammaniti has deliberately chosen to avoid both a comic style and the use of the traditional narrative tense, the Past Historic, in Italian. Instead, he employs the Present Perfect Tense as the main verb form since it the tense most suited to conveying immediacy and the sense of an on-going link with the present. The author maintains that he wanted to achieve an intensely personal experiential narrative akin to a trance-like state; an hypnotic effect, bereft of retrospective moral reflections or adult judgements. The English translation by Jonathan Hunt captures the direct and moving facets of Michele's rite of passage and his descent into the darkness.

In the torrid summer of 1978, while the grown-ups take refuge indoors behind drawn blinds, the first-person narrator, nine-year-old Michele Amitrano, is trudging about through the drought-stricken wheatfields in the stifling heat, keeping an eye on his five-year-old sister, Maria, while simultaneously fending off the bullish threats of gang-leader, il Teschio ("Skull"). In spite of its name, there is no source of fresh water in Acqua Traverse, and water is delivered by a tanker every fortnight. At night the immense combine harvesting machines move like giant insects across the scorched earth. Michele, now adult, recalls a harrowing episode from a childhood summer twenty-two years earlier. The boy Michele inhabits the child's atemporal world of endless play and

imaginative impulses, where witches, ogres, corpse-eaters and werewolves come out after dark. His mind is full of childhood fantasies; he is still an innocent lad who looks up to his father, until the moment of rude awakening when Michele's world is torn apart by his discoveries.

As the result of a forfeit, Michele finds himself in an abandoned farmhouse and accidentally stumbles across a dark secret. He finds a kidnap victim, a boy his own age named Filippo Carducci, who is confused, naked and frightened, chained by his foot, his humanity violated. Filippo cannot understand what has happened to him and so, in order to explain the disappearance of his world and his entrapment in a dark hole in the ground, he imagines that he is dead. His child's consciousness conjures a Dantesque-like vision (one is reminded of the Heretics in their burning tombs in *Inferno* X or the Simoniacs in their holes in the rock in *Inferno* XIX), whereupon he imagines himself dead, with all his loved ones now corpses buried in open holes in the ground: "And papa's dead. And grandmother Arianna's dead. And my brother's dead. They're all dead. They're all dead and they live in holes like this one. And I'm in one too. Everybody. The world's a place full of holes with dead people in them" (109-110). At the same time, Michele's untrammelled existence is about to be shattered and his faith tested; the discovery of an item from his mother's kitchen leads him to the realisation of the truth and his family's complicity in the crime.

Throughout the story, Michele desperately searches for answers to help him unravel the mystery behind Filippo's imprisonment. At first he fantasizes that the child in the hole is a demented twin sibling who was hidden by his unhappy parents so as not to frighten everyone. He imagines the scene of violence, the baby hidden in a sack and then disposed of by his father in the dark hole. His attempts to make sense of an incomprehensible mystery have the effect of laying bare Michele's private thoughts and, in these monologues of a boy confronting his innermost fears, the author provides a rare authenticity of voice. After the first discovery of the body in the hole, Michele suffers a nightmare. However, he is determined to examine the alleged corpse and steels himself to carry out his mission by imagining he is Tiger Jack: "Tiger Jack. Now there was a serious person. Tiger Jack, Tex Willer's Indian buddy. And Tiger Jack would go up that hill even if an international conference of all the witches, bandits and ogres on the planet was taking place there, because he was a Navajo Indian, and he was fearless and invisible and silent as a puma and could climb and knew how to lie in wait for his enemies and then stab them with his knife" (44). The weight of Michele's determination is carried by the repeated use of conjunctions. He discovers that Filippo is indeed alive and a bond gradually develops between the two boys. With great compassion, Michele tries to ease the burden of Filippo's inhumane and monstrous treatment. During one encounter, he tenderly wipes the scabs from his eyes to allow him to see again and even takes him out of his prison so that he can breathe a little fresh air. At a moment of heightened tension, Michele remembers his father's words: "Monsters don't exist. It's men you should be afraid of, not monsters" (184). The chief bully in Acqua Traverse, a twenty-year-old who goes by the incongruous name of Merry Christmas (Felice Natale), provides heightened moments of terror for the protagonist. Although pre-adolescent and still fearful of imaginary monsters, Michele ultimately faces his fears and, when the moment comes to follow a course of perilous action in order to help the defenceless victim, Michele detaches himself from his family and peers and acts alone. In spite of all the dangers and

prohibitions, he remains true to the boy trapped in the hole.

The straightened economic circumstances of Michele's family are realistically portrayed. Michele's father is a small, wiry truck-driver who desires a better life for his family. Teresa, the wife, is trapped by the isolation and strictures of a traditional rural community: "Mama never sat at table with us. She served us standing up. With her plate resting on the fridge. She spoke little and stayed on her feet. She was always on her feet. Cooking. Washing. Ironing. If she wasn't on her feet, she was asleep" (54). The raw feral quality of Teresa and her fierce love for her children is memorably conveyed. These are parents who want to do the best they can but have chosen a morally aberrant means of doing so, with the collusion of the whole community. Michele, too, becomes momentarily caught up in the deception and greed. As the growing storm gathers, Michele betrays Filippo's whereabouts for the sake of a desired toy and is in turn betrayed by his best friend, who trades his secret for a reckless driving lesson with Felice. The suspense of the denouement is beautifully sustained. As a wheeling, distressed owl searches desperately for its disturbed nest and missing young, the *carabinieri*, in their swooping menacing helicopters, are on the trail of the defenceless, kidnapped child, whose sorrowful vision offers a sobering indictment of the iniquities perpetrated on the innocent.