

## “Speaking to every heart”: Immigration and Empathy in Contemporary Italian Children’s Literature

This paper analyzes approximately six Italian books for children published in the past fifteen years, each of which confronts the questions surrounding immigration across the Mediterranean into Italy from Africa. I assess how each text (including works by Maria Attanasio, Paolo Di Stefano, Francesco D’Adamo, Erminia Dell’Oro, and Paola Zannoner) either to elicits or impedes the empathy of its readers for its protagonists. I consider these books in the light of Italy’s colonial past in Eritrea, Somalia, Libya and Ethiopia, and in the context of contemporary Italian politics, including the elections of March 2018 that saw the right-wing anti-immigrant “Lega” party gain power, and Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini’s “Security Decree.” Some strategies deployed by these texts which forge (or inhibit) affective bonds of readers for characters include: the use of first-person narration by protagonists that are often about the same age as the target readers and who at times use direct address to the reader (as does Sekù, the teenage protagonist from Mali in Di Stefano’s novel); intertextual references to works with which readers are already likely to be familiar (such as D’Adamo’s evocations of *Moby Dick* or Attanasio’s recalling of Edmondo De Amicis’s *Heart*); employment of the conventions of familiar genres such as fairy tales (as in the various donor-figures Sekù encounters on his trek through Algeria, Libya, and Italy); and paratextual material (such as Dell’Oro’s autobiographical Preface that summarizes her links to Eritrea and the glossary she includes of non-Italian terms).