

ARTICLE

Italian Nostalgia: National and Global Identities of the Italian Novel

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The production, distribution and consumption of the Italian novel in the global editorial market has accompanied the gradual creation of a national branding process that does not coincide with the literary identity Italy tends to associate with. When considering the main analysis approaches of the Italian literary canon—the top-down one of the country's yearly national bestsellers, literary prizes, suggested readings in Literature courses at University and school anthologies—and the larger-scale, bottom-up view of digital platforms like Amazon and Goodreads, Wikipedia stands in a middle, unexplored ground between the two. Through the comparative quantitative analysis of data derived from some of these sources, this article aims to gain more awareness on Italian literature from 1980 to 2021, to start addressing why national book prizes winners do not make it to the global market and if it is possible to talk about a national cultural resistance, which allowed authors like Elena Ferrante and Goliarda Sapienza to become literary sensations abroad before it happening in their own country. While some studies have already dealt with the unchanging aspect and the lack of diversity of the Italian literary canon, there has been little quantitative research on the two brands of the country, the national and the global, and on the dynamics between them. As well as proposing a methodology for the ongoing study of literary reception of Italian novels under multiple points of view, this article contributes to the discussion on the reliability of measures for studying the canon.

Introduction¹

If the canon can be defined as the result of the need for self-comprehension of a society (Curi 7–30), this is a particularly urgent research topic in the case of Italian literature, whose role, especially in relation to the contemporary period, is still the subject of many discussions.

Indeed, it is possible to claim Italian identity was a literary construction way before the institutional acknowledgment of the political unity of the country in the late 19th century, accounting for the perpetuation of cultural continuity of a nation that was not united yet. However, today it does not play such a paradigmatic role in terms of building a common language, cementing a collective identity and securing aesthetic values through narration, which is in turn expressed as a canon. Because of its gradual detachment from an increasingly more globalized and mediatized present, and because it is usually taught with an isolated perspective, without a real comparative perspective to other literatures despite its minority role, and also because it is separated from

¹ I would like to thank Prof. Giuliana Benvenuti and Prof. Alberica Bazzoni, whose advice was incredibly valuable. I also thank the reviewers who took the necessary time, effort and expertise to review the manuscript. Their thoughtful comments were extremely helpful and a great source of improvement for this article.

the other arts, the perceived importance of Italian literature throughout all stages of education has been considered controversial (Benvenuti, “L’Italia in Italia (e fuori d’Italia)” 31–42; Jossa 333–348). Hence the mild reception of the debate on the canon and on world literature with respect to other countries: while in the United States this debate has assumed since the very beginning political and ideological connotations, for Italian scholars and critics, the matter has been mainly considered for educational purposes and in opposition to cultural militancy (Giovannetti 215–29).

In fact, ever since the educational reform “*riforma Gentile*” of 1923, the canon of Italian literature in schools has been outlined very rigidly up until the beginning of the 21st century, when the situation started to become more uncertain, leading to the almost complete absence of contemporary literature today (Luperini 11). The circumstances are similar for the case of universities within the national borders, where despite the peculiar use of anthologies to periodize and define the history of literature, it is not clear which contemporary authors are considered “classics” (Benvenuti, “Who Needs ‘Italianness?’” 121–38). Such a confused literary universe has been defined for the literary production 1990–2000 as a “magma”, difficult to analyze not only because of the proximity of the period, but also for the crisis of literary criticism’s ability to sustain cultural communication within an increasingly powerful literary cultural industry (Asor Rosa 355–422).

It is perhaps for the fear of the inevitable—the slow but steady detachment between centralized cultural identity and multifaceted reality—that the Italian literary canon has often assumed coercive and restrictive connotations rather than inclusive ones. Anthony Tamburri, in his study of Italian Literature in the United States, has noted that some Italian literary critics, in order to defend a specific type of establishment, ignore the more and more prominent literary production connected to “Italianness” when it is not created by people inside the Italian national boundaries: “at this time, there is not enough attention on the literary production outside of Italy, both in Italian and English” (Tamburri 150).² But apart from people with non-Italian origins, the strong boundary between inclusion and exclusion has also been claimed to be disadvantageous to Italian authors, such as women writers and authors of what are considered minor genres.³ It is a systemic issue, as Lidia Curti worded it: “the articulation of a literary discipline is a form of violence equivalent to the formation of a nation [...] in order to define it, a geographical border is sought, a dominant culture to give name and substance to its expressions however desperate they may be” (Curti 167–68).

2 About the relationship between literature and migration, see Vera Horn: “Critics have often associated works of migrant writers to an intercultural context and to an ethnic prisma (therefore “other”), confining them into extra-literary categories, which makes opaque or even invisible the possibility of a literary evaluation of such works. It is not rare that they receive an isolated critical treatment [...]”.

3 About women writers, see, for instance, Bazzoni, *Il genere della letteratura*, and *Canone letterario e studi femministi*. About criticism towards second-rate genres like detective fiction, see for instance Jana Vizmmuller-Zocco.

Whatever the institutional resistance, literary representation in the age of online reproduction has come to have an international, globalized dimension that strongly influences its modes of diffusion within and beyond the national borders and which is worthwhile to analyze. The rise of literary blogs⁴ has been, in this sense, a response to a broader public awareness of the need of a renewed institutionalization of Italian literature, which would bring a new set of values and aesthetic judgements in order to free genres and other externally imposed boundaries from well-established models of publishing. Their engagement level, though, was soon overshadowed by the rise of online platforms for collectively buying and discussing books such as Amazon and Goodreads, which opened up new possibilities for controlling the acquisition and reception of books by readers, with the consideration that collaborative filtering “at times imitate and at times differ from the conventions of literary scholarship” (Hegel ii).

Consequently, despite this ever-changing context, correspondence between the online and offline popularity of books, at least up until the 21st century, appears to be tighter than expected, while the notion of “classic” has indeed changed when considering crowdsourced online tagging systems.⁵ It seems that the perception of what is a classic may depend upon reinforcements of works as such through schooling, their transmedial representations, or even what other users have considered as classics.⁶

An analysis of norms and modalities of representation in the globalization process has to take into consideration that the transmission of a canon now implies the concept of its translatability, that is, its adaptability to different cultural contexts: a critical step for writers to produce books that can circulate both at the national and at the international level. A significant year for the beginning of this process is 1980, when *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco and *Other Libertines* by Pier Vittorio Tondelli were published. Both works have been read as identifying a common project of reinterpretation or abandonment of the tradition which marks the entrance of postmodernism into the Italian literary scene.⁷ The former was the first Italian book to blur the boundaries between cultural work and bestseller; Tondelli allowed the world of youth to

⁴ See Spinazzola, for instance, for an overview of the phenomenon.

⁵ See Pianzola; Walsh and Antoniak.

⁶ Walsh and Antoniak 276–277: “For Goodreads and Amazon, a classic is a prominent advertising target value, a marketing tool, and a source of lucrative adaptation material. For Goodreads users, a classic is a book read in high school, a book that inspired a TV show, or a book that other Goodreads users have tagged as a classic. As we have shown, the classics industry — the collaborative forces of publishing, film, television, Amazon, and more — defines the status of popular classics to a large extent. Yet for Goodreads users, a classic is also an invitation to become amateur critics and creative writers [...]”

⁷ See Benvenuti, *Il romanzo neostorico italiano*.

break into Italian literature. It is also in this period that the global market started to dominate the decisions of publishing houses, which sparked a phenomenon of academic interest towards Italian literature abroad.⁸

Today, on the one hand, both offline and on digital social reading platforms like Goodreads, Italian literature's privileged position is related to recognizable images of the Italian identity, its "past symbolic capital" (Sapiro 320–246), and the association between the "brand Italy" and sophisticated culture.⁹ Even translations of modern classics beyond the Italian borders are still benefiting from this delayed fame, although they are also undergoing a definite downsizing in terms of status.¹⁰

On the other hand, the result of reinterpretation of the "brand Italy" in book production that is aware of the commercial addition to the Goethean definitions of world literature is not always backed up by the traditional value judgement that separates bestsellers from classics and award-winners. It is in this perspective that within these platforms, readers can develop "tactics to circumvent and reinterpret the strategies of powerful institutions, [...] including corporate control over book consumption and intrusions into people's private reading activity" (Albrechtslund).

An important factor that comes into play in this scenario is the influence of the Anglophone book/media industry, which guides and sometimes corrects the Italian market's ability to access and value cultural products by encouraging products that are connected in some way to an international context and/or convey a specific understanding of what and who is considered "Italian". More recently, this has been noted for the receptions of *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship* trilogy by Nuruddin Farah (Fotheringham 568–83), of the book *Swimming to Elba* by Silvia Avallone (Pennacchio 136–55), and the popular case of Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* saga,¹¹ and also in Goliarda Sapienza's posthumous book *The Art of Joy*.¹²

In other words, it is possible to witness the international cultural impact of several literary products thanks to the clear Italian identity they represent. At the same time, there are works that emphasize narrative aspects in a globalized way, even when stories are rooted in Italian landscapes. As with most Italian works that develop a transnational dimension, there is a balance between these

8 According to Casadei (46), Eco and Tondelli's novels are symbols of a changed relationship with humanities. Literature itself lost its central role as a reference framework for writers in the Eighties to music, cinema, visual arts.

9 See Anholt.

10 For instance in the dimension of the publishing houses in the target language, as seen for Sweden in Schwartz and Edfeldt.

11 Where it is also stated that the reception of both books and their subsequent transposition into a tv series is also to be read in a perspective of confrontation and opposition with respect to the North-American entertainment, causing a polarity of opinions among critics that either are influenced by the international success or even more bothered by it. See Schwartz (122–142).

12 See Bazzoni, Bond and Wehling-Giorgi (1): "the Einaudi edition of *L'arte della gioia* came out in 2008, following the success of these foreign translations, the sheer number of literary reviews, blogs, cultural events, readings, and talks has multiplied both in and out of Italy, and continues to grow."

two poles, although the specificity of these dynamics is based on the equilibrium between cultural distinctiveness and the ideal of a symbolic community beyond the national borders, which is different each time. The basis for the exportability of Italian literature can be precisely an “extra-literary content of Italian literature, that may be ethical-philosophical, political-ideological, or even simply ‘mythical’” (D’Intino). This is visible also in the case of the inclusion of Italian literature in university teaching abroad, where, in contrast to the Italian situation, bibliographical references in the syllabi are articulated thematically instead of chronologically (Benvenuti, “L’Italia in Italia (e fuori d’Italia)” 40).

Among the constellations of digital spaces, Wikipedia is considered to be relatively safe from the influence of commercial interests and, in this domain, even a middle ground between social platforms and physical book circulation,¹³ though authors contributing to the encyclopaedic entries share a similar agency in the creation of this literary institution.¹⁴ Starting from the assumption that “the work constitutes itself as such in its becoming social, that is to say, in the transition from being a private fact to public phenomenon” (Spinazzola 46), this project aims to focus on the part of the double nature of the canon involving the concept of an ever-changing shared value system within a community both online and offline which mirrors and defines taste and cultural need and, ultimately, the “selective memory of a population” towards specific books and authors (Luperini 19).

Taking into account different sources to compare them with Wikipedia’s information on Italian contemporary literature, the premise is that the canon “is not one-size-fits-all”,¹⁵ but rather that its different online manifestations give us a clear glimpse of the new dynamics that have been forming in the publishing industry. This study therefore has the objective of starting a discussion on novels and the Italian contemporary literary canon as connected to both the synchronic self-representation and the foreign interpretation of the Italian identity which results in the “two brands” of Italy, concerning its resistance to alterity and concerning the ways it is possible to include the digital dimension in the traditional, critical one. If Wikipedia is a middle ground between social platforms and physical book circulation, can it be considered in this context as an intermediary between institution-oriented views of Italian contemporary literature and readers’ perspectives, also understood as users?

13 See Schwartz. At the same time, it is important to stress that Wikipedia is not safe from bias: see, for instance, Hube (717–721), and Reagle and Rhue (1138–1158).

14 See Pianzola.

15 Jacob Blakesley, “World Literature According to Wikipedia Popularity and Book Translations: The Case of Modern Italian Poets”. *Comparative Critical Studies*, 17: 3 (2018): 433–458.

Related work

Research on Wikipedia has existed since its inception, but only recently have literary studies turned to the online encyclopedia to better understand the dynamics of popularity and knowledge sharing within the digital realm. Italian Wikipedia was included in the comparative analysis of Hube et al. as one of the biggest Wikipedia language versions, while Jacob Blakesley carried out a research of the canon for Italian poetry based on the concrete sources of Wikipedia and publication data on book translations. It seems no study has been carried out specifically on Italian prose, which could be due, in part, to the general lack of acknowledgement that the study of online platforms can help us understand creative and cultural production. Research has focused on digital social reading platforms as the main online resources for literary studies¹⁶ or, before Amazon and Goodreads became so widespread, literature blogs.¹⁷ Literary consumption via analysis of readership data on Goodreads is indeed relevant to literary criticism today, as online book discussion can be itself considered a form of assessment that makes different underlying literary and ethical values emerge.

In this context, recent critical studies like the ones by Roberto Dainotto and Giuliana Benvenuti¹⁸ about the transmedial representation of Italian literature, its relationship with world literature, its reception and its success in the age of Amazon, have set some critical guidelines to study this topic through different concepts of literary canonicity. While this research will focus on the general representation of works and authors in the selected data sources, a separate discussion would be required for the empirical study of the inclusion of Italian women writers both online and in the academic system.¹⁹

Data sources

The sample of works analyzed in this study derives from a query on Wikidata of Italian books between 1980 and 2021 sorted by the number of versions of articles in other languages on Wikipedia. All datasets and code are published on Github.²⁰

The choice of carrying out the analysis for the works and not for the authors was done from the perspective of comparing editions of the works and literary award-winners. While data in web platforms may be easier to analyze in an automatic or semi-automatic way, even when considering information's partiality, the case of online portals of institutions (universities, libraries)

¹⁶ See Pianzola et al., *Wattpad as a resource for literary studies* and *Digital Social Reading*; Walsh and Antoniak.

¹⁷ See Spinazzola (eds), *Tirature '11*.

¹⁸ See for instance Giuliana Benvenuti et al. (1–6).

¹⁹ See Bazzoni, *Canone letterario e studi femministi*; De Rogatis.

²⁰ [Github repository for the code of Cultural Analytics: an analysis of the Italian contemporary canon](#), April 2022.

remains unexplored. Initiatives like *OpenSyllabus*²¹ have just started to involve Italian universities, and bibliographic records of University databases of Italian peer-reviewed monographs and articles cannot be downloaded or have limited access. Research on literature teaching in Italy exists, but on specific topics and with no public data in open format to draw from. As academic data is a fundamental frame of reference to understand the reception of books, its exclusion from this study comes with the premise the data sources presented here do not aim to be exhaustive, but that it is better to start describing and interpreting the available references with the hope of collectively discussing and analyzing in different ways the Italian contemporary literary canon.

The data sources used for this study are:

1. Data on global Wikipedia about Italian narrative 1980–2021;
2. Readership data on Goodreads on selected works 1980–2021;
3. Publication data of book editions listed on Goodreads on selected works 1980–2021;
4. Data on selected Italian literary prizes awarded for narrative, 1980–2021.

Wikipedia

Wikidata is a collaboratively edited knowledge base launched in 2012, working as a “data repository” with facts from all Wikimedia Foundation projects, including Wikipedia.²² Its query service represents the perfect starting point to extract books of Italian contemporary writers available on the platform in the selected time range.²³ A first distinction has to be made, since in Wikidata, literary works can be referred to as “book” (9 results), “literary work” (199 results) and “written work” (176 results). This last category, although wide, added novels that were not included in the other two categories. As in this research individual books belonging to a series appear, “series of novels” has not been taken into consideration as a label although it is still relevant popularity-wise (three series in particular: *Ulysses Moore* by Pierdomenico Baccalario, *My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante, Licia Troisi’s *Chroniques, Wars and Legends of the Emerged World*). Furthermore, selecting the book label in Italian has produced almost twice as many results as in English.

²¹ [The Open Syllabus Project](#), accessed March 31, 2022.

²² See Vrandečić and Krötzsch.

²³ It is worth to note that there is a Wikisource page about the canon of the works of Italian literature (Wikisource, [Canone delle opere della letteratura italiana](#), accessed March 31, 2022): there are only 13 works published between 1900 and 2000; novels published from 2000 onwards are not included at all, as the page seems to be based on literary anthologies published in the 20th century.

Table 1. The first twenty Italian contemporary novels sorted by number of language versions on Wikipedia.

Work ^a	Author	Number of Wikipedia Language Versions
The Name of The Rose	Umberto Eco	53
Foucault's Pendulum	Umberto Eco	30
Baudolino	Umberto Eco	26
The Island of the Day Before	Umberto Eco	22
The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana	Umberto Eco	21
Praga's Cemetery	Umberto Eco	21
Numero Zero	Umberto Eco	15
Gomorra	Roberto Saviano	14
Silk	Alessandro Baricco	12
Q	Luther Blissett	12
The Solitude of Prime Numbers	Paolo Giordano	11
The Shape of Water	Andrea Camilleri	9
Assandira	Giulio Angioni	9
If not Now, When?	Primo Levi	8
Pereira Maintains	Antonio Tabucchi	8
The Twelve Abbots of Challant	Laura Mancinelli	8
Indian Nocturne	Antonio Tabucchi	7
Insciallah	Oriana Fallaci	6
The Terracotta Dog	Andrea Camilleri	6

^a When works have not been translated into English, the Italian title has been maintained.

Table 2. The eleven most common language versions on Wikipedia about contemporary literary works.

Language	Works on Wikipedia having a page in that language
Italian	195
English	101
French	66
Spanish	39
German	30
Polish	19
Portuguese	17
Gaelic	15
Catalan	15
Dutch	13
Swedish	12

After filtering the 378 results based on the exclusion of works that are not novels and/or works that have just one Wikipedia page in one language, 207 works emerged ([Table 1](#) shows the first twenty, sorted by number of Wikipedia language editions). The most common languages these Wikipedia pages are available in, apart from Italian, were English, French, Spanish, German, Polish, Portuguese, Galician, Catalan, Dutch and Swedish ([Table 2](#)).

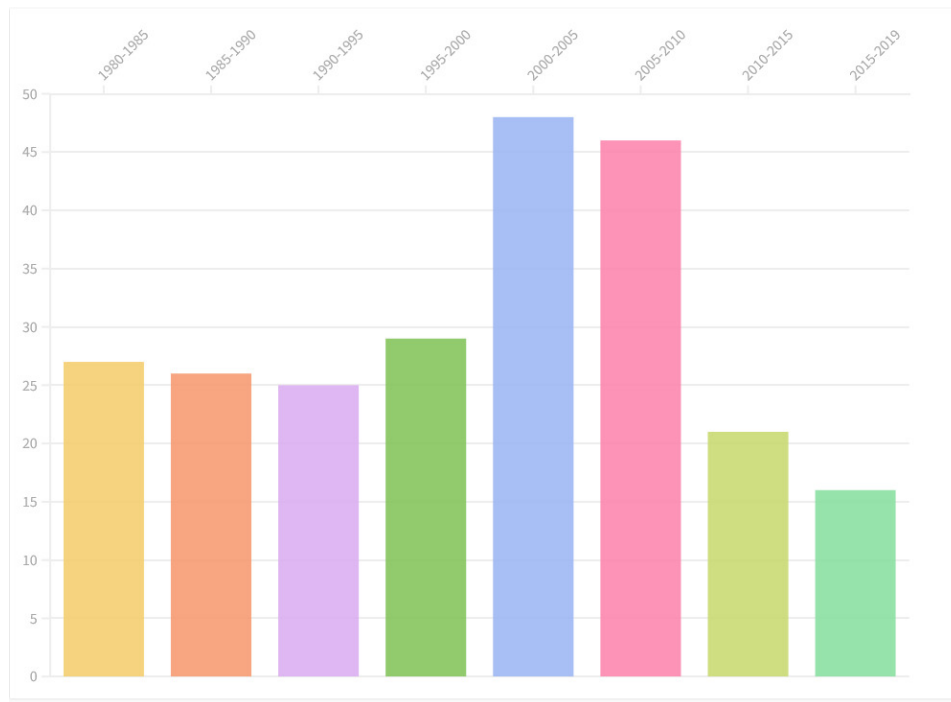


Figure 1. Distribution of number of books with more than one language version on Wikipedia for first year of publication, grouped into five-year periods.

As [Fig. 1](#) shows, the distribution of the books' first publication year grouped into five-year spans is uneven and prevailing in the period between 1990 and 2010. The most recently published works, especially from 2010–2019, even if published during a time of high online presence, are not included or do not have a language version other than Italian on Wikipedia.

Among the resulting works, out of the 103 authors, some occur more than once, especially when they have written books in series. For instance, there are 20 works by Andrea Camilleri, 10 by Valerio Massimo Manfredi, 7 by Umberto Eco and 6 by Elena Ferrante, Aldo Busi, Alessandro Baricco, Laura Mancinelli and Licia Troisi. There is quite a disproportion between a total of 26 female authors and their male colleagues. This gap goes hand in hand with the marginalization and exclusion of women writers within Italian institutions (as represented and taught in schools and universities): despite their strong presence in the Italian literary landscape ever since the second half of the 20th century, they still have to endure a structural scholarly reluctance to face the unconscious values and the partiality of the national tradition they inherited.

At first glance, the ranking doesn't show surprising results—many books are all-time Italian bestsellers—nevertheless, it starts to exhibit the different natures of Italian contemporary literature. Umberto Eco's novels are at the top of the chart, along with classics like Primo Levi's *If Not Now, When?*, and Antonio Tabucchi's *Pereira Maintains* and *Indian Nocturne*. There are bestsellers like *Gomorrhah*, *The Solitude of Prime Numbers*, *Silk* (not by chance, as both Dainotto and Di Nicola note, the authors Roberto Saviano, Paolo Giordano and Alessandro Baricco are represented by Wylie Agency, a literary agency

with an important role in the export of works abroad); there is also *Q* by the collective pseudonymous Luther Blissett, an original historical novel distributed through copyleft. While Elena Ferrante appears in this ranking for the first time in the 29th position, it is worth mentioning the Wikipedia page for her book series Neapolitan Novels has nine language versions, and, were it included, it would appear high up in this ranking—this says a lot about the foreign consideration of the author’s work as a single unit divided into equally meaningful parts, just like the corresponding TV series, rather than standalone novels. This is also the case with the book series *Ulysses Moore* by Pierdomenico Baccalario.

Significant is also the presence in the first twenty positions of two novels by Andrea Camilleri, part of the famous series of detective stories of Inspector Montalbano, set in an imaginary but realistic Sicilian province and unique for the use of an artificial dialect that works as a filler and mixes Italian, Sicilian and invented words. The local dimension within a noir genre is shared by Giulio Angioni’s *Assandira* as well, representative of the so-called Sardinian Literary Spring.²⁴ Both authors’ successes reflect the relevance of “tourism literature”, especially in neighboring countries like Germany,²⁵ and the self-exoticizing tendency of writers as a mediating factor between local identity and drive of popularity beyond regional borders. The fame of these writers, particularly for noirs, is thus also tied to the details of a different culture that are being discovered by a wider audience, a different image of Italy than the stereotypical one, that of an “utterly unrecognizable place”, without “Renaissance art, [...] leisurely lunches or bustling piazzas [...]” (“Underworld”) as has been said about *Gomorra*, but rather of a country where astonishing and intricate crimes “appear perfectly probable” as described in Camilleri’s detective stories.²⁶

Apart from *Assandira*, which also became a movie, and Camilleri’s novels, which correspond to a TV series, many of the works in the top ranked places have undergone transpositions and adaptations. Others may be recognized under the label of “New Italian Epic”, that is, a series of works “simultaneously complex and popular”, with “basic elements and an allegorical nature in common”, characterized by a strong critical outlook on reality and a nature irreducible to consolidated narrative categories (for example *Q*, *Gomorra*, or Camilleri’s novels).²⁷

Apart from novels mixing history and invention following the *success* of *The Name of the Rose*, (for instance, Mancinelli’s, Maraini’s *The Silent Duchess*, Vassalli’s) among the results, it is also possible to see less prestigious genres in

²⁴ On the phenomenon, see Broccia.

²⁵ See Kleinert.

²⁶ See Jones.

²⁷ See Wu Ming.

Italy, such as sci-fi, fantasy and children's books. Books intended for a young audience form a particularly marginal genre in the Italian literary system, despite many having reached international fame thanks to their deliberate international setting. It may not be surprising that in the context of Wikipedia, unlike traditional literary anthologies, Italian children's writers are side-by-side with writers of other genres: they actually belong to a new generation of Italian authors unconcerned with moral or pedagogical goals.²⁸

Finally, if we look at these first twenty positions according to the category of generation of writers, we find that, with the exception of Primo Levi, they all range from the generation of the thirties to the generation of the eighties. The “explorers of magma”, leaders of the heterogeneous literary production 1990–2000, on the other hand, are missing.²⁹

While this rank is already representative of the canon of Italian literature 1980–2021 on Wikipedia, results have also been compared with the average number of in-links ([Table 3](#)), a significant measure strongly correlated to the Page Rank.³⁰ As the page length of each Wikipedia article can depend on individual editors, it has not been taken into consideration as a relevant indicator. Page views were also not considered in this analysis.

The number of versions of articles in other languages corresponds to the crossing of national boundaries, but all incoming Wikipedia links, for instance those pointing to the Wikipedia page about a certain literary work, are also, according to the description on the online encyclopaedia, “a rough indication of how important or popular a page is”.³¹ Thanks to the Wikipedia API,³² the variation of in-links from language to language can be automatically counted, even though in-links for only 165 works were found. The average number of in-links mirrors the original rank, with Andrea Camilleri's books, which also have a TV adaptation, shifting into the upper ranks. If we were to consider Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* as a series as well, it would still appear within the first ranks, also thanks to the success of the TV series. Higher up with respect to the number of language versions on Wikipedia, is the novel by Italian singer Fabrizio de André written with Alessandro Gennari, as well as sci-fi and fantasy novels (for instance, Valerio Evangelisti's *Nicolas Eymerich, inquisitor*), while other works with pages in multiple language versions do not have as many in-links pointing to them (*I'm not scared* by Niccolò Ammaniti is an example). For what concerns languages with the highest number of in-links to those pages, they follow closely the Wikipedia pages languages division ([Table 4](#)).

²⁸ See Ziliotti; Tabbert.

²⁹ For an overview of contemporary authors classification, see Di Nicola.

³⁰ See Hube et al.

³¹ Wikipedia, [What Links Here](#), accessed March 31, 2022.

³² Wikipedia, [Wikipedia API:Main page](#), accessed March 31, 2022.

Table 3. Number of in-links pointing to Italian contemporary literature 1980–2020, sorted by highest average (first twenty results).

Work	Author	Average number of in-links	Total number of in-links
Montalbano's Rice Balls	Andrea Camilleri	70.5	141
The Name of the Rose	Umberto Eco	68	1701
La concessione del telefono	Andrea Camilleri	66	132
Il campo del vasaio	Andrea Camilleri	65	130
Excursion to Tindari	Andrea Camilleri	53.3	160
Rounding the Mark	Andrea Camilleri	52	156
Paper Moon	Andrea Camilleri	52	156
The Patience of the Spider	Andrea Camilleri	51.6	155
The Wings of the Sphynx	Andrea Camilleri	51.6	155
La pensione Eva	Andrea Camilleri	43.6	131
The Snack Thief	Andrea Camilleri	41.5	166
Un sabato, con gli amici	Andrea Camilleri	41.3	124
The Track of Sand	Andrea Camilleri	41.2	165
Voice of the Violin	Andrea Camilleri	40.7	163
Un destino ridicolo	Fabrizio De André, Alessandro Gennari	40.6	122
Gomorra	Roberto Saviano	31.5	379
Mr. Palomar	Italo Calvino	28.6	86
The Terracotta Dog	Andrea Camilleri	27.8	167
Foucault's Pendulum	Umberto Eco	26.8	402
Nicolas Eymerich, inquisitor	Valerio Evangelisti	25.3	76

Table 4. The ten most common language versions of contemporary literary works exist on Wikipedia according to number of in-links.

Language	Total number of in-links
Italian	5427
English	1646
French	742
German	638
Spanish	393
Dutch	154
Portuguese	102
Catalan	82
Polish	64
Norwegian (Nynorsk)	63

Wikipedia and Goodreads compared

Dainotto's analysis of the "brand Italy" has for the first time taken into account a critical review of "Italy books,"³³ "Italian books,"³⁴ and "best Italian novels"³⁵ on Goodreads. As he noted, there are some notable common characteristics,

33 Goodreads, [Shelf: Italy Books](#). Accessed March 31, 2022.

34 Goodreads, [Shelf: Italian books](#). Accessed March 31, 2022.

35 Goodreads, [Shelf: Best Italian Novels](#). Accessed March 31, 2022.

especially within the shelf “Italy books”. These are classics, books with strong regional connotations and/or bestsellers, which may also coincide with representation by an international literary agency such as Wylie Agency, cohabit with books not written by Italian authors, but set to give an image of the stereotypical “Italian lifestyle”: *Beautiful Ruins* by Jess Walter or *Under the Tuscan Sun* by Frances Mayes. “Italian books” and “best Italian novels” exclude this last genre and have a ranking more similar to the Wikipedia one ([Table 1](#)): in the case of Wikipedia, Elena Ferrante’s novels are not so prominent, there are more award-winners and of course, at the top, there is *The Name of the Rose*; on Goodreads, bestsellers and award-winners like Baricco’s works or *Gomorrah* happen to be ranked below less traditionally represented genres like Fantasy and Children’s Books.

Goodreads ratings

When the resulting works derived from the Wikipedia query are compared by their rating on Goodreads ([Table 5](#)),³⁶ two different ranks emerge. The first 20 positions for what concerns Italian literature 1980–2021 may not exactly coincide with Dainotto’s aforementioned analysis, as they include, for instance, the fantasy genre, but is indeed representative: the quality, agent-represented winners of literary awards, the classics, and the “made in Southern Italy” identity rooted in the Italian suburbs like Ferrante’s or Saviano’s, are all present. In this context, the primacy of Umberto Eco as seen on Wikipedia is less dominant. With respect to the Wikipedia rank, in this comparison, Elena Ferrante’s *My Brilliant Friend* saga, even if the first volume is actually lower rated than the others, occupies the first places and Saviano’s *Gomorrah* disappears to make space for other popular noirs (Camilleri’s novels or Donato Carrisi’s thriller *The Whisperer*). Historical books remain prominent (Primo Levi’s novel, and *Q* by Luther Blissett, *Alexandros* by Valerio Massimo Manfredi, Margaret Mazzantini’s *Twice Born*, Marco Balzano’s *I’m Staying Here*), and according to Goodreads, “historical fiction” is indeed the genre most of the books belong to after “fiction”, followed by “mystery”, “fantasy” and “nonfiction”. It is also interesting that the presence of *Twice Born* by Margaret Mazzantini, as the book only has two article versions on Wikipedia and 21 in-links in total pointing to it despite a movie adaptation with an international cast being made. On Goodreads, it was liked by 95% of the people who read it, has more than seven thousands reviews and a very high user rating.³⁷

In this analysis, it is not possible to generalise for all readers: demographic biases are inevitable. Firstly, Goodreads is limited to a number of languages and countries. In 2017, there was a high prevalence of women, mostly coming from

³⁶ The data has been extracted thanks to Antoniuk and Walsh, [Goodreads.Scraper](#), Python, 2020.

³⁷ Goodreads, [Venuto al mondo by Margaret Mazzantini](#). Accessed March 31, 2022.

Table 5. Wikipedia results sorted by highest adjusted average rating on Goodreads (first twenty results).

Work	Author	Adjusted average rating ^a
The Story of a New Name	Elena Ferrante	4.37
The Story of the Lost Child	Elena Ferrante	4.37
The Drowned and the Saved	Primo Levi	4.29
Those Who Leave and Those who Stay	Elena Ferrante	4.28
Twice Born	Margaret Mazzantini	4.19
The Name of the Rose	Umberto Eco	4.09
The Whisperer	Donato Carrisi	4.09
Pereira Maintains	Antonio Tabucchi	4.09
Q	Luther Blissett	4.04
L'arminuta	Donatella Di Pietrantonio	4.01
Ocean Sea	Alessandro Baricco	4
If not Now, When?	Primo Levi	3.99
The Eight Mountains	Paolo Cognetti	3.98
La casa delle voci	Donato Carrisi	3.96
My Brilliant Friend	Elena Ferrante	3.96
Mr. Gwyn	Alessandro Baricco	3.96
I'm Staying Here	Marco Balzano	3.92
The Snack Thief	Andrea Camilleri	3.91
Alexander: Child of a Dream	Valerio Massimo Manfredi	3.89
The Voice of the Violin	Andrea Camilleri	3.89

^a The data has been extracted thanks to Antoniak and Walsh, [Goodreads Scraper](#). Python, 2020.

the United States and more likely to be under 35 years old.³⁸ Also, many of the readers of Italian books are Italian, so the data on Goodreads cannot reflect worldwide popularity.

Through Goodreads, it is possible to buy books that are directly linked from the platform to different online sellers. Looking at the total number of available editions as listed on the platform, Dainotto's observations of the brand "Italy" abroad become more evident, as classics, award-winners and works with a glocal dimension coexist in the first twenty positions ([Table 6](#)). This ranking differs from the Wikipedia one, with Ferrante's books in a higher position. Italo Calvino's *Mr. Palomar* shows almost a hundred editions, although it is apparently less translated than other contemporary bestsellers. On the other hand, some of the books with many language version pages on Wikipedia have very few editions, which may correspond to a particularly interested editor or the authors themselves adding information to the online encyclopaedia (for instance, *Assandira* by Giulio Angioni and Laura Mancinelli's *Twelve Abbots of Challant*, with respectively 3 and 6 editions).

³⁸ Goodreads, [Who is the average Goodreads user? You'll be surprised!](#). Accessed October 3rd, 2022.

Table 6. Italian novels 1980–2021 with more than one language version on Wikipedia sorted by highest number of editions according to Goodreads (first twenty results).

Work	Author	Total number of editions
The Name of the Rose	Umberto Eco	568
Foucault's Pendulum	Umberto Eco	236
My Brilliant Friend	Elena Ferrante	210
Silk	Alessandro Baricco	193
Prague's Cemetery	Umberto Eco	158
Story of the New Name	Elena Ferrante	156
Follow Your Heart	Susanna Tamaro	145
Baudolino	Umberto Eco	143
Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay	Elena Ferrante	143
The Solitude of Prime Numbers	Paolo Giordano	141
The Island of the Day Before	Umberto Eco	134
Pereira Maintains	Antonio Tabucchi	126
Gomorra	Roberto Saviano	125
Number Zero	Umberto Eco	117
I'm Not Scared	Niccolò Ammaniti	108
The Shape of Water	Andrea Camilleri	108
The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana	Umberto Eco	102
Ocean Sea	Alessandro Baricco	96
The Lying Life Of Adults	Elena Ferrante	96
Mr. Palomar	Italo Calvino	94

It is worth mentioning the presence of *Follow Your Heart* in this ranking. Published in 1994 by writer Susanna Tamaro, the book was loved by the public—a book had not sold so well since *The Name of the Rose*, the success exceeded even *Pereira Maintains*, which came out the same year and won two national awards—and attracted many critiques concerning its literary value. It is not considered to be within the academic literary canon, although it is said to have marked the beginning of a more consolidated establishment of Italian women writers.³⁹ On Wikipedia, the book has only five dedicated pages in different languages.

Wikipedia and Italian literary awards compared

Italian literary prizes are a yearly subject of discussion—writer Teresa Ciabatti's statement concerning her exclusion from the finalists of Premio Strega 2021, “in Italian Literature, I think it's right to remain an anomaly”,⁴⁰ highlights the institutional role of Italian literary awards in preserving cultural tradition in the thematic and linguistic sense, along with a certain coherence of the narrating voice. After this episode, the critic Gian Paolo Serino remarked that it is a mirror of the publishing dynamics today and stated that the choice of

³⁹ As Prof. Alberto Casadei stated when interviewed by Ranieri Polese on *Repubblica* (October 13, 2008): “Talking about the canon, it is necessary to distinguish two phases. Up until the Eighties and after. Or, better, before and after Susanna Tamaro's success.”

⁴⁰ [Premio Strega](#), Twitter account. Accessed March 31, 2022.

the finalists for that year was “the best it was possible to come up with to make people believe it is an award and not an agreement between editors”.⁴¹ This dissent has quite a history—the book *Q* also made it to the final of Premio Strega in 1999, but, although it was required that the authors behind the pseudonym Luther Blissett appear at the ceremony, they did not: “We are not interested in winning, also because the first place is always assigned in advance [...] this year it has already been decided in favour of Maraini”.⁴² As they predicted, the writer won with *Dark*, a work that despite this success has only one Wikipedia page, in Italian. Similarly, when Elena Ferrante was nominated for the Premio Strega in 2015 with the fourth volume of her *My Brilliant Friend* tetralogy, she stated her certainty she had no possibility of winning—indeed, she did not—, but was happy about the idea of making an entrance and turning the tables in a fake competition.⁴³ Nominations to such awards may represent conceptions of literature different from the expectations of what a first place should be, but it is a matter of fact that winning works tend to appear in multiple Italian literary awards and are given priority concerning their diffusion abroad.⁴⁴ That year’s winner was *Ferocity* by Nicola Lagioia, which also won the Premio Mondello, and is also not represented on Wikipedia, except with the usual page in Italian.

If we consider nine prestigious Italian literary awards (Premio Napoli, Premio Stresa, Premio Bagutta, Premio Grinzane Cavour, Premio Viareggio, Premio Strega, Premio Bancarella, Premio Campiello, Premio Chiara), all of which already existed in 1980, with the exception of the Grinzane Cavour award (since 1982) and Chiara award (since 1989), do award-winning works tend to have more visibility on Wikipedia or instead, do public successes make it to online representation regardless of their trophies?⁴⁵

Among works with with more than one language version on Wikipedia, only 35 out of 207 have won one of the aforementioned prestigious Italian literary prizes. Four of them twice: *If Not Now, When?* by Primo Levi, *Pereira Maintains* by Antonio Tabucchi, *L’arminuta* by Donatella Di Pietrantonio, and *La chimera* by Sebastiano Vassalli. Some authors have won more than once, like Sandro Veronesi with both *Quiet Chaos* and *The Hummingbird* (both for Premio Strega). However, this does not necessarily coincide with a high number of editions listed on Goodreads or a high number of language versions on Wikipedia: despite winning twice, *L’arminuta*, *La chimera* and both Veronesi’s winning works have only one Wikipedia page besides Italian, even if the last two have been adapted into film, and respectively 46 and 31

⁴¹ See Aimi.

⁴² As declared to *Io Donna* of *Corriere della Sera*, 15 May 1999, and in another interview on *L’Unità* on 30 April, 1999.

⁴³ Elena Ferrante, “Elena Ferrante: “Accetto la candidatura allo Strega””, *Repubblica*, 21/02/2015. Accessed March 31, 2022.

⁴⁴ See Salvador Pereira da Costa.

⁴⁵ Literary prizes for this analysis have been chosen according to longevity, relevance and completeness of information about the winners. Some of them have more than one winning category: in this research, only awards to novels were considered.

editions listed on Goodreads. Still, transmedial representations of books enhance the number of in-links to those pages. In some cases, other books by winning authors reach better results: for instance, Andrea Camilleri's *Excursion to Tindari* won Premio Bancarella, but other novels of his are better represented and translated on Wikipedia. If the contemporary canon is at least in part moved by the concept of translatability both in language and content, this phenomenon can only be a symptom of detachment between the international market and national value recognition.

More generally, 39 authors with respect to the initial dataset won a literary award for their novel, which means works of winning authors have no direct correlation with their presence on Wikipedia. It is still surprising when works by internationally acclaimed authors barely have a page on the online platform: Helena Janeczek, for instance, the first woman to win Premio Strega in 15 years with *The Girl with the Leica*, won Premio Bagutta in the same year; Igiaba Scego, winner of Premio Mondello (in 2011, for *La mia casa è dove sono*) and Premio Napoli (in 2020, for *La linea del colore*); bilingual writer and translator Claudia Durastanti, awarded five literary prizes and Premio Strega finalist in 2019 for *Strangers I Know*. Apart from the gap between international public success and critics' choices, another cause of this phenomenon could be related to the outlining of a new sense of Italian identity that is irreducible to a unitary category, thus receiving "an isolated critical treatment" (Horn).

Conclusion

The analysis of the contemporary Italian literary canon on Wikipedia 1980–2021 confirms that it is tightly connected to the concept of national identity and therefore cannot be described from a single perspective, but rather by taking into account different value recognition conceptions within different communities, both online and offline. Works on Wikipedia with more than one language version may actually be an intermediate representation between user-oriented views of the canon, as user ratings on Goodreads and the editions listed there privilege bestsellers and classics, even if belonging to genres that are considered second-rate in Italy; as well as less diverse, critical-academic ones, as shown by literary awards winners or internationally acclaimed authors awarded prestigious prizes whose works may still tend to be considered "extra-literary". Furthermore, in-links may indicate that transmedial and serial representation of novels matter in terms of works' online visibility and findability.

Both in-links and article translations mostly come from the languages of countries neighboring Italy such as French, German or Spanish, excluding English, but relevant actors in the international diffusion of the novels are also literary agencies and, content-wise, a peculiar *glocal* dimension far from a stereotyped Italy. From a gender perspective, in all cases, there is a strong gap between the representation of male and female authors. In addition, an analysis that will take into account page views as well will show whether more recent

books tend to be less internationally represented on Wikipedia, which may indicate a general national confusion in the criteria for addressing distinguished books.

At the same time, all these sources give back a partial vision of receptions of the Italian contemporary literary canon. Academic data, especially syllabi and scientific articles, along with further information about translations of novels, would be a useful addition to give a more comprehensive view of the situation; there is further exploration of online information to be done, including Wikipedia-specific data. The Italian case has only started to be analyzed from these standpoints, and there are now many sources to draw from for a comparative analysis of works reception ready to embrace a new, multifaceted Italian identity that does not look back at its past with nostalgia.

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