

Still telling tales

## Italy's enduring love affair with Emilio Salgari

*A century after his death, the author and his creations still occupy a prominent place in the cultural imagination*



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LAST month, Neapolitan anti-mafia investigators announced plans to indict Francesco “Sandokan” Schiavone, a local gangster, for the killing of a policeman in 1989. Naples has long been used to Mr Schiavone and his ilk: he is already in jail for murder, along with dozens of his colleagues. What distinguishes Mr Schiavone is his nickname. “Sandokan” was first conjured by Emilio Salgari, a writer who died over a century ago. That his most famous character is still considered relevant hints at his influence.

Born in Verona in 1862, Salgari led a sad and quietly dramatic life. Although he was prodigious—writing more than 200 novels and stories in his short life—and popular, Salgari struggled with poverty. He was also crippled by personal tragedy: his wife was sent to an asylum, and his father committed suicide. Salgari eventually took his own life, disembowelling himself in the style of a Japanese samurai. “You have kept me and my family in semi-penury,” he wrote to his publisher. “I salute you as I break my pen.”

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Far removed from his bleak personal circumstances, Salgari’s stories pant with life. He never travelled far, but deployed his frantic imagination to render faraway places like the American West or the golden beaches of the Caribbean. Whatever the setting, Salgari filled his stories with

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swordfights, hidden treasure and beautiful maidens. His descriptions are heady.

Clouds rush through the sky like “unbridled horses” while “gigantic crocodiles, always desperate for human flesh” stalk the forest floor. In “The Tigers of Mompracem” (1900)—his most famous novel—pirates wait “like a legion of demons” to attack the enemy.

Salgari’s characters hum with adventure, too. Hiram, the hero of “Carthage in Flames” (1908) is a dashing warrior. Afza, a stunning Tuareg princess, is at the heart of “On The Atlas Mountains” (1908). But in terms of fame and glamour, none of Salgari’s heroes can match Sandokan. A Malay pirate, he has the kind of charisma that can turn ten men into “an army”. With his sidekick, a Portuguese buccaneer named Yanez de Gomera, Sandokan ranges the Indian Ocean looking for trouble. At one point he fights a gang of Indian bandits; elsewhere, he hacks through the jungle on a tiger hunt.

Although Salgari romanticised his protagonists, he tried not to patronise them. A strong anti-imperialist living at a time of rampant Italian expansionism, he often cast his “native” characters as heroes. In “The Massacre in the Philippines” (1898), Salgari strongly sides with the locals against Spanish oppression. The villain in Sandokan’s adventures is James Brooke, a British official and pirate “exterminator” who chases Sandokan from his homeland. The respect Salgari had for his indigenous characters is also evident in his careful research. He scoured books, maps and journals to craft believable settings for his tales. It shows: in “The Tigers of Mompracem” Chinese sailors sport traditional *bianzi* haircuts, and the rigging on Sandokan’s ship is made from *rattan*, a type of South East Asian palm.

This mix of swashbuckling drama and period detail has intoxicated generations of Italians. Salgari's books have not been out of print since his death, and a new Sandokan comic is due for release later this year. Several novels have been turned into children's shows. A television version of Sandokan from 1976, starring Indian actor Kabir Bedi, remains a cult favourite (Mr Schiavone got his nickname from the scraggly beard he shared with Mr Bedi).

Unsurprisingly, Salgari has also influenced dozens of Italian writers. "Tex Willer"—a wildly successful Italian comic published in the 1940s and 1950s—was based on Salgari's energetic style. More recently, he can be seen in Sergio Leone's "Spaghetti Western" series, while Umberto Eco admired Salgari for his ability to craft a sense of place. He has been hammered into new forms, too: David Van De Sfroos, a singer, has released a track about Yanez de Gomera in Lombard dialect. "The Tigers of Mompracem" has just been published in Sardinian. Even recent arrivals have taken on Salgari. In March, asylum seekers in Florence put on a play linking Sandokan to their own travels.

But if Salgari has burrowed deep into Italian life, he remains almost unknown in English (though he is popular in the Spanish-speaking world: he has been read by everyone from Pablo Neruda to Gabriel García Márquez). Only a few of his books have been translated. A pity: a century after his death, Salgari can still yank readers into his magical world. Hopefully one day an English audience will discover him too—if only so they can meet Sandokan, with his "long hair that drops to his shoulders" and his "black eyes, which burn, and make whoever's looking drop their gaze." With features like this, it's hardly surprising that Sandokan lives on—and that tough guys like Mr Schiavone seek to emulate him.

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