

Collective Writing and the Historical Novel in the Information Age: The SIC method

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Global Perspectives of Journalism instructor Vanni Santoni shares an insider's perspective of a highly regarded collective writing method he has helped to develop. A recent published project involved 78 total writers in a plot about the Italian Resistance during the Second World War.

SIC indicates a collective writing method and the open community that uses it. The project was first made public on May 12, 2007 at the Fiera del Libro in Turin. In the following years, six short stories and a novel – *In territorio nemico*, which was published by minimum fax in 2013 with huge commercial and critical success – were completed, with the overall participation of about 135 authors (115 for the novel alone).

The guiding principles of the SIC method were devised through the observation of the pros and cons of many collective writing practices. The most carefully studied cases were the so-called “round-robin” practices (where every part is written by a different author); crowdsourcing writing and novels by Luther Blissett and Wu Ming. Every practice had its own advantages, but none seemed to be able to fully exploit the potential of teamwork. On one hand, we wanted to overcome the expressive limitations inherent to round-robin writing; on the other hand, to conjugate the creative freedom of crowdsourcing and wiki with the necessity of curbing the natural tendency of authors to control and determine every aspect of their work, which in a collective effort often damages the coherence and effectiveness of the result.

The first innovation introduced was to divide the narration in parts, not only sequences, but characters, places and so on, each one addressed in a specific file or “sheet”.

The second innovation was to divide the participants in two different roles: writers and composers. The latter edit, but don't write. They have a regulatory and organizational function, necessary to minimize the problems arising from group work as writers can have a tendency towards egocentrism. Since the composer doesn't participate in writing, she is impartial, and can tie her judgment to parameters of quality and usefulness.

Each sheet is filled out by a group of three or more writers. The composer collects the individual sheets and “composes” them. The process of composition is the third and main innovation of the SIC method: it consists in the selection of the best, most useful or most coherent parts of each individual sheet, which are then all meshed

together in a new “final” sheet. When the composer completes a sheet, he forwards it back to the writers for reading.

When all the elements of the story have been written, composed and returned to the writers, the drafting begins, with the same procedure of individual sheets and their composition.

This mechanism ensures maximization of the two main benefits of having “many heads” available:

1. According to a purely quantitative principle, the more material is produced, the more good quality material is produced as well (whichever the quality standard employed). We call this “principle of redundancy”: in group work, it is better to have many different versions of the same thing to choose from, as well as many different options for the development of a story, than relying on a fixed path. The principle is reflected by the SIC motto: “*Tutti scrivono tutto*” – no part of the text is ever written by a single person.

2. The second principle is qualitative. When a collective text undergoes a number of rounds of writing, revision, editing, a positive feedback cycle can arise that makes the participants more individually conscious and collectively attuned.

THE GREAT SIC NOVEL

With the undertaking of *In territorio nemico*, which dates from November 2010, the method was modified to handle a much larger group of writers. While the short novels had four to six writers, the Great Novel would have at least fifty – eventually they would be more than twice as many. At first, we asked writers to send us stories and anecdotes of events occurred to their relatives and their acquaintances during World War II in Italy. They could send what they wanted, the only requirement was that they send stories passed down orally and not yet coded by historiography. We outlined a story based on these recounts: a historical drama that tells three parallel stories of an Italian naval officer dispersed after the armistice of September 8, 1943; of his sister, alone and in distress in a Milan sub-

ject to devastating bombings, eventually becoming a factory worker and later a partisan; and of her husband, who spends the war hiding out in a garret in the countryside where he gradually loses his mind. The sheets phase was accomplished through a system of reservations: every sheet had between four and eight available slots, depending on its importance. We prepared a staggered schedule for the delivery of the sheets, so that the ADs could handle the production of an average of four final sheets per week. First, we completed the sheets about characters and locations. Then, we focused on the “treatment” – a term borrowed from cinema – which consisted in an elaboration of the story aimed at providing us a detailed specification of every scene of the novel. Lastly, we proceeded to drafting. The whole work process took fifteen months.

Some stats:

41 “war stories” inspired the plot.

8 composers

78 writers

20 proofreaders, historians and dialect translators

935 individual sheets delivered

170 final sheets: 24 characters, 35 locations, 18 treatments, 93 drafts

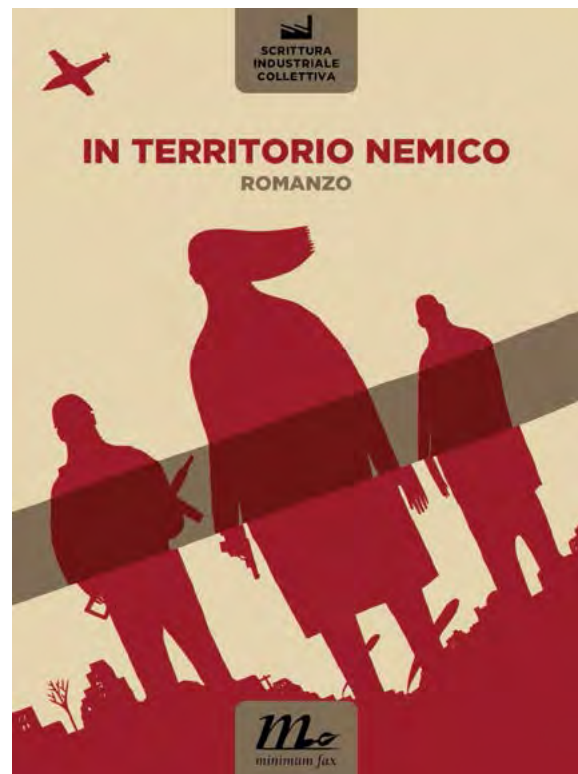
COLLECTIVE WRITING AND THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

When, after two years of experimentation, we decided to test the SIC method in this complex endeavor, that is, the production of a novel written by one hundred people, the choice of the historical genre was almost automatic for a number of reasons. We were first and foremost struck by a glaring analogy: if writing a historical novel necessarily involves working with a system of external sources, one could say, taking the suggestion to the extreme, that every historical novel is by definition a form of “collective writing.” On the other hand, the SIC method is based on the creation of a system of literary sources. Indeed, the method leads the writers to a shared narrative vector, by referencing on each step to the final sheets already produced. When the writers complete the characters, the locations and the treatment, they are aligned, and can find the necessary shared vision. But this is not merely a “workflow”: the sheets remain, and during the production of the draft the writers are bound to what has been written. The final sheets become a source system of sorts, and it is not rare to find reworked parts of the sheets in the drafts, sometimes very similar to one another, because the writers quote the “useful” parts of a certain character or location sheet. The sheets are and remain the main focus of the writers during the whole process. The corpus defines the perimeter of the novel, in a way that is not at all dissimilar from how the choice of a certain set of historical sources defines the perimeter of an historical novel.

MEANING OF THE HISTORICAL NOVEL FOR THE CONTEMPORARY READER

If one simply enters a bookstore and takes a look at the historical novels shelf, he or she understands that nowadays the genre is entirely inscribed in the category of popular fiction – of the most effusively commercial sort. In 2010 in Italy, the most popular sub-genre seemed to be the historical thriller. At the same time, every Italian reader knows that the historical is a genre where scores of great old and new books are located. Faithful to our first declaration of intents (“*scrivere innanzitutto un buon libro*”), we refused the idea that there is no intermediate territory between the extremes of “high” and “low” literature, and wanted to take advantage of the forked nature of the genre in order to write a book that would be appealing to the average reader, without giving up complex and challenging content.

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LITERATURE OF THE RESISTANCE AND THE ADVENTURE NOVEL

The choice of the historical period originated another important second-tier motivation: in Italy, the literature of the Resistance – that is, the literature that deals with the armed resistance to nazi-fascism – was for a long time at the center of a debate on the possibility that a book (a novel) could be written that described the totality of that historical period, and simultaneously grasped the “spirit” of the time. The common school of thought wished for this novel to have never been written (with the notable exception of Italo Calvino’s opinion, who had found it in Beppe Fenoglio’s *Una questione privata*), even though Italian Resistance literature counts thousands of books and the commitment of many prominent postwar Italian authors such as Vittorini, Pavese, Calvino, Fenoglio, Eco, etc. This fact was often regarded as a “failure” for Italian literature, especially until the late seventies, in a time when literary engagement was seen by most as a particular sort of cultural and political militancy of the intellectual, in favor of the construction of a more “just” society. In particular, it was seen as a painful contradiction that the Resistance could nurture the democratic synthesis of the Italian Constitution, while at a literary level, even though many great works were produced, no comparable achievement was seen. ⑤