

From Sardines to Sponge Cake: Heritage Preservation and Gastronationalism in Anna James' *Tilly and the Bookwanderers* and Laura Walter's *Mistica Maëva e l'anello di Venezia*

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Food and the consumption of food has always been a staple ingredient in children's literature, no doubt because in addition to providing comfort and safety it functions as an important vector of cultural and national identity (see Keeling and Pollard; Katz; Carrington and Harding). The recent, international drive to safeguard the world's gastronomic traditions from the homogenizing effects of global capitalism has seen home-cooked fare make a come-back in contemporary children's literature and given rise to a plethora of cookbooks based on the foods in children's classics,¹ some of which have even been written by the authors themselves.² The use of food, its history, preparation, production and consumption to promote nationalism and national identity has been described by Michaela De Soucey as "gastronationalism" (432-55). This chapter sets out to explore the relationship between heritage preservation and gastronationalism in two contemporary children's fantasy novels: *Mistica Maëva e l'anello di Venezia* by the Veronese author Laura Walter and *Tilly and the Bookwanderers* by the British author Anna James.

These works lend themselves particularly well to a comparative study because in addition to having remarkably similar heroines, magic portals and dynamic quests, they are both set in an idealized imperialist past. Walter's fantasy world is located in the eighteenth-century Venetian Republic, a period when the country's trade with the Middle

East was at its height. *Tilly and the Bookwanderers*, on the other hand, takes its protagonists back to Victorian Britain, a time when a large proportion of the spices and other exotic ingredients used in the country's iconic cakes – including Queen Cakes, Chelsea Buns, Scones, Teacakes, Crumpets, Simnel Cake, Trifle, Battenberg Cake and the ubiquitous Victoria Sponge Cake³ first arrived on British soil. Moreover, the eating and cooking scenes in these novels must be read within the broader separatist context in which they emerged. Recent years have witnessed a surge in anti-foreigner discourse in both Venice and Britain, a rhetoric which has had a significant impact on national as well as global politics. Twenty-first century Venice comprises two groups: those who want the city to remain Italian and those who, led by the right-wing ideologies of the region's separatist party, the Liga Veneta, would rather see the city regain its seventeenth-century autonomy. Present-day London, similarly, contains two groups of Londoners; those who view themselves as Europeans and those who believe that the country will only be “great again” if shakes off the “shackles” of its European neighbors, a conviction which has resulted in the country's withdrawal from the European Union.

Saving Cultural Heritage through Local Food Culture: *frittelle* and Currant Buns

Mistica Maeva e l'anello di Venezia describes how Mistica Maëva Vendramin and her friend, Giacomino Monti (Giaki), save their heritage city from sinking into the lagoon by tracking down the *commedia-dell-arte* figure, Arlecchino, and stealing a wedding ring from under his hat. The children enter the secondary world where Arlecchino resides by passing through a magic portal at the top of the *Scala Contarini del Bovolo*, a fourteenth-century tower with an external spiral staircase that has become one of the city's most treasured possessions. The ring that the children are looking for is the one that was thrown into the lagoon from the Bucentaur, the Doge's ceremonial barge, to commemorate the city's “Marriage with the Sea” every year until Napoleon ordered the destruction of the barge in 1797. The children are convinced that by re-enacting this public ritual they will be able to reassert the city's autonomy and restore the delicate balance between the city and the lagoon. *Tilly and the Bookwanderers*, meanwhile, relates how Tilly and her friend Oskar Roux secure the future of “book-wandering”, that is, the ability some humans have to travel in the world of stories through books, by travelling to the British Underlibrary, and saving its source texts from oblivion. The Underlibrary is positioned directly underneath its twenty-first century counterpart, and the children reach it by taking a magical lift from the ground floor of the British Library to the hidden basement beneath.

The British Library and the *Scala Contarini del Bovolo* are both cultural repositories with historical significance. They are in this sense *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 7-24), and it is the national and folk literatures associated with these buildings that enable the children

to succeed in their respective quests. It is, however, the love that they have for their favorite foods that serves as the impetus for their magical adventures. Mistica decides to follow Arlecchino into the Carnavalesque world of *La Corte del Tempo* after she has tasted the fragrant and enticing *frittelle* that her grandmother has baked. *Frittelle*, sugar-coated doughnuts that contain raisins, pine nuts and orange zest, have become synonymous with the Venetian Carnival. Venice was the first city in Europe to use sugar, thanks to the cane crops that they possessed in Cyprus and Crete⁴, and these fragrant fritters were such a popular delicacy in sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that they were immortalized in a painting by Pietro Longhi (1701-1785) entitled “The Fritter Seller” (currently on display in the Venetian Museum, Ca’ Rezzonico). Tilly, on the other hand, is pulled into Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* after its eponymous protagonist offers her one of her jellybeans.

One of the reasons why food is such an effective cultural lure in children’s books is because the intergenerational transmission of recipes and cooking skills lies at the heart of both personal and national identity (see Gunawan; Porciani and Montanari). Tilly and Mistica both have grandmothers who are excellent cooks, and it is the foods that they make for their granddaughters in their cosy kitchens that solidifies the intergenerational bond between them. Mistica’s favorite meal is *sardée in saor*, a Venetian dish which is made of fried sardines that have been left to marinate in onions and vinegar. This delicacy is traditionally prepared on the Feast of the Redeemer, a holiday which celebrates the city’s deliverance from a terrible plague in 1577. The predilection that Walter’s protagonist has for this particular dish may have been intended to instill a sense of patriotism in its young Venetian readers, the majority of whom would be familiar with the festivities and fireworks that mark this historic occasion. Sweet foods are, of course, far more tempting to children than are their savory counterparts, and the Venetian biscuits and cakes that Mistica’s grandmother makes for her include *zaleti* and *baicoli* as well as *frittelle*. *Zaleti* and *Baicoli* are the most well-known biscuits from the Veneto region and their history can be traced back to the eighteenth century. *Zaleti* biscuits are made from maize flour, butter, sugar, pine nuts and raisins and were traditional eaten during Lent (on account of them having no egg). *Baicoli* are simpler biscuits made from butter, sugar, yeast and egg, and they were often taken on board ship on account of their having a long shelf life.

The children’s books in which Tilly bookwanders all contain many famous eating and baking scenes. The most famous of these is the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party, a topsyturvy celebration that has come to symbolize the British tradition of Afternoon Tea, even though no food is actually consumed. L. M. Montgomery’s novel, *Anne of Green Gables*, is also replete with puddings, cakes and biscuits, and Anne particularly enjoys raspberry tarts, pound cake, fruit cake, apple dumplings, gingersnap, lemon pie and plum pudding. She is taught how to bake by Marilla, her adoptive mother, and the scene in which she

accidentally puts liniment into the layer cake she makes for the Minister's wife is one of the funniest in the book. The most important literary baking scene in *Tilly and the Bookwanderers*, meanwhile, is that in which Sara Crewe, the young heroine of Frances Hodgson-Burnett's *A Little Princess*, finds a four-penny piece on the street and uses it to buy some currant buns. This scene in which: "a cheerful, stout, motherly woman with rosy cheeks [is] putting into the window a tray of delicious newly baked hot buns, fresh from the oven—large, plump, shiny buns, with currants in them" (*A Little Princess*, p.186) is the scene in which Tilly first spots her mother (a figure who she later learns has been trapped for eleven years in the novel's Source Edition).

The sixteenth-century Venice that Maëva and Giaki visit is associated in the book with quintessentially Venetian delicacies, even if these do not feature in the alternate Venice that the children discover, with the exception of the sugary *frittelle* that the Carnevale figure, Dottor Balanzone is eating. They appear instead in the dishes and delicacies that Maëva's grandmother leaves in the *calle* (street) outside her house in an attempt to trap Arlecchino. These local specialties, which include the Venetian dishes *sardée in saor* and *risi e bisi*, a soup-like dish that consists of rice and peas, all date back to the early years of the Venetian Republic, and these, like the foods that Tilly sees on her book-wanderings, are firmly embedded within the intergenerational fabric of family life. Maëva is convinced that she can save Venice because her grandmother is Venetian in origin, and she uses the word "*doc*" (an abbreviation that is commonly used to indicate the authenticity of Italian wines) to convey her grandmother's quintessential Venetianness. Tilly also has an "authentic" British lineage having been born to a real-life English mother and a fictional British father (Tilly finds out the true identity of her father when she enters an altered version of Hodgson-Burnett's *A Little Princess*, and witnesses a scene in which her mother falls in love with the father of the book's protagonist, Sara Crewe).

This authenticity is, however, problematized by the very nature of the foods that the protagonists prepare and enjoy. Indeed, as well as subordinating other cultures, imperial rhetoric elides difference, and the manner in which Venetian and British cuisines are regarded as national is problematic (see Grasseni; Capuzzo). It should not be forgotten that the Venetian dish, *sardée in saor*, is flavored with spices that arrived in Venice from the Middle East and that the raisins and vanilla in the cakes that Tilly's grandmother makes for their *Alice in Wonderland*-themed Tea Party were imported from the New World. Even the tea that Alice attempts to drink at the afore-mentioned Tea Party is not native to Britain but was brought to the country in the late seventeenth century via the Dutch East India Company.

Local Nationalism and Gastronationalism: Asserting Identity through Food

A key component of gastronationalism is the conviction that the authentic and distinctive cuisines of the nations of the world need to be protected from foreign influences, and Venice, a city that has been on UNESCO's World Heritage List since 1987, is currently imperiled by tourists. The city's tourist population far outnumbers that of its resident population, and the city is experiencing irreversible damage from the abundance of tourists that visit its narrow *calli* and historic *piazze* every day as well as by the cruise ships whose presence in the lagoon is destroying its native flora and fauna. This process of "touristification" has forced the city's native Venetians to retreat to the suburbs of Mestre and Porto Marghera (see Bertocchi and Visentin), and the mass exodus has led to a rise in anti-foreigner sentiment, a rhetoric that can be discerned throughout Walter's novel. The conversations that take place in the novel between the stray cat, Baicolo, and his pigeon friend, Pastoccio, are emblematic of this attitude. Pastoccio's motto is "crappy tourists, crap on the tourists" (21),⁵ and his admission to the cat that "I have bombarded half a dozen" (21) is justified in his eyes by the fact that "these Italians, Japanese, American, Hungarian and French tourists, all these humans in short, were always taking photographs with their digital cameras without ever putting their hands in their pockets for the poor birds" (22).⁶ The fact that Walter's list of tourists includes Italians may seem surprising given that Venice is a city in Italy; recent years, however, have, as previously mentioned, witnessed a significant growth in separatist ideology, and the Venetian political party, the Liga Veneta, now occupies a prominent position in Venetian politics. This right-wing party is known, not just for its anti-Southern mentality, but for its strong racist ideologies, and it is striking that Maëva's grandmother has a deep-rooted dislike for the illegal African immigrants who sell their counterfeit leather handbags and belts in the Campo San Marco. These foreign nationals who have been disparagingly referred to since the mid-1980s in Italy as *Vu cumprà* (on account of their poor pronunciation of the phrase *vuoi comprare*, "would you like to buy") are described by Maëva's grandmother as duplicitous individuals whose only reason for learning Venetian is to better sell their wares.

Tilly and the Bookwanderers does not contain the same overt racist sentiment as does Walter's novel; James' choice to include only British children's novels and picturebooks is,⁷ however, rooted in a nineteenth-century imperialist perspective, and it is not by chance that the three novels in which Tilly bookwanders were written during Britain's "Age of Colonialism" or that Sara Crewe's father has made his fortune in the diamond-mining business in India. The colonial ideologies that these books espouse are of significance when they are contextualized within contemporary British politics, a politics which has witnessed a rise in separatist ideology. The notion that Britain will only be great again if it removes itself from the EU is fueled, in part, by a long-held anti-German sentiment, a

sentiment which was solidified during the Second World War and exacerbated in recent years by Germany's economic growth and its dominant position within the European Union's law-making institutions. *Tilly and the Bookwanderers* hints to this past and present tensions through the strong resemblance between the training that Tilly and Oskar receive before they are officially allowed to bookwander and that of Britain's secret operatives during the Second World War. Like these undercover spies who were taught how to get in and out of enemy territory safely, Tilly and Oskar acquire their book-wandering prowess by being sent into Ladybird books.⁸

The parallel that is drawn in *Tilly and the Bookwanderers* between Tilly and Oskar's undercover operations and those of British spies during the Second World War is an important "undercurrent" of the novel's gastronationalist ideologies. The first scene in which the young Sara smells the aroma of the currant buns, enables Oscar and Tilly to meet Tilly's mother and exposes them first-hand to the deliciously fragrant buns, cakes that like so many other baked goods almost disappeared during the second world war due to the strict rationing that was imposed upon the British people. Milk, butter and sugar were all hit by rationing and in the absence of these staples the nation's baking traditions was brought almost to a halt. The survival of a country's culinary traditions is dependent on transmission down the matriarchal line, an intergenerational bond that is depicted as being under threat in James' novel. The pivotal scene in the book that contains both Tilly's mother and the quintessentially British buns exerts a powerful gastronationalist message.

In *Mistica Maeva e l'anello di Venezia* the survival of local culinary traditions is threatened not by the loss of ingredients but by the glut of mass-produced inferior produce. This threat is exemplified in the book by showing how local producers of the Veneto's high-quality wines were obliged in 1963 to use the word "doc", an abbreviation for "denominazione di origine controllata" (of guaranteed origin) on their bottles of wine in order to distinguish their high quality. Mistica is effectively telling her grandmother that the culinary lore passed down over generations of Venetian women will be safe with her. She refers to her as "veneziana doc" because wine is an essential part of a Venetian meal and because the Venetian dishes that the children leave outside their grandmother's house to catch the one true Arlecchino, are always accompanied by a glass of wine.

Conclusion

The analysis conducted in this chapter shows that studies of food in twenty-first century children's literature have the potential to offer valuable insights into the connection between food heritage preservation and gastronationalism. The love that the protagonists of *Mistica Maeva e l'anello di Venezia* and *Tilly and the Bookwanderers* have for the dishes and cakes that their grandmothers make in their cosy kitchens is portrayed as an integral part of their genetic ancestry. The familial rhetoric that surrounds their ethnic background

is the very same as the discourse used to describe love of nation, region or political community. Their quests can thus be seen as symptomatic of contemporary, separatist politics, a discourse which is rooted in the erroneous belief that foreign threats can be countered by the recreation of a glorious imperialist past.

The gastronomical ideologies in these books are especially problematic when one considers that they, like almost all children's books, have been written by adults with explicitly didactic purposes. Their plot and characters are different, but their separatist messages are the same. They are both fundamentally political as well as cultural texts; analyzed together they serve as a caution not to be fooled by the fragrant *sardée in saor* or the wonderfully decadent Victoria sponge cake.

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Notes

¹ See for example: *The Little House Cookbook: Frontier Foods from Laura Ingalls Wilders Classic Stories* by Barbara M. Walker (Harper Collins, 2016), *The Official Harry Potter Baking Book* by Joanna Farrow (Scholastic, 2021), *The Anne of Green Gables Cookbook: Charming Recipes from Anne and her Friends in Avonlea* by Kate Mac Donald (Race Point Publishing, 2017), and *Alice in Wonderland: The Official Cookbook* by Elena Craig (Insight Editions, 2023). The cakes in Frances Hodgson's Burnett's *A Little Princess* have not appeared in their own book; there is, however, a cookbook dedicated to one of Burnett's other novels, *The Secret Garden Cookbook: Inspiring Recipes from the Magical World of Frances Hodgson Burnett's A Secret Garden* by Amy Cotler (Harvard Common Press, 2020).

² Some recent examples of these are *Paddington's Cookery Book* (Harper Collins, 2020) which was written by Michael Bond, *Marvellously Revolting Recipes* by Roald Dahl (Puffin, 2025) and *Gruffalo Crumble and Other Recipes* by Julia Donaldson (Macmillan, 2016). Laura Walter's *Mistica Maeva e l'anello di Venezia* has three recipes at the end of the novel each of which has been mentioned in the book. These are: AttiraBaicolo in saòr, Bigoli in salsa and Zaletti. Her novel can thus be considered a hybrid text and Walter tells her readers that "they give even more flavour to the text" [danno più gusto all'Avventura!] (191).

³ These are the some of the cakes that are made by the contestants in the popular, long-running British TV series, *The Great British Bake Off* (2010-present).

⁴ Cyprus was colonized by Venice in 1571 and Crete between 1654.

⁵ "turisti di cacca, cacca ai turisti" (21).

⁶ "ne ho bombardati un mezza dozzina" (21) and "quegli italiani, giapponesi, americani, ungheresi, francesi, insomma, tutti quegli umani, però, erano sempre presi dalle foto con le macchine digitali e non mettevano

spesso mano al portafoglio per i poveri pennuti” (22).

⁷ Other British books that are referenced in the novel include the much-loved children’s classic, Micheal Bond’s *A Bear called Paddington* (1958) and one of England’s most famous children’s picturebooks Michael Rosen’s *We’re Going on a Bearhunt* (1989).

⁸ The most iconic of these are the ones that recount the everyday exploits of the two well-behaved children, Peter and Jane in their local village. The comparison that is drawn in the novel between these “early-readers” and the “early-training” books in which Tilly and Oskar acquire their “book-wandering skills” would, of course, only be funny to an English reader.