



**Matteo Sanfilippo.** *Storie, epoche, epidemie.* Viterbo: Sette Città, 2020. 156 pp. EUR 10,00, paper, ISBN 978-88-7853-877-1.

**Reviewed by** Alessio Baldini (University of Leeds)

**Published on** H-Italy (August, 2021)

**Commissioned by** Matteo Pretelli (University of Naples "L'Orientale")

## History and Epidemics

The historian Matteo Sanfilippo is a leading scholar of Italian migration and diaspora. He has published widely in this area, focusing on the transatlantic mobility between Italy and North America. His pioneering work on Italian migration to North America has led him to co-edit with Paola Corti the most comprehensive handbook on migration available in Italian,[1] and hold a number of positions, including co-director of the journal *Archivio Storico dell'Emigrazione Italiana* (<https://www.asei.eu/it/>) and member of the advisory boards of the Centro Internazionale Studi Emigrazione italiana (<http://www.ciseionline.it/>), the Centro Studi Emigrazione (<https://www.cser.it/>), and the *Rapporto Italiani nel Mondo* compiled by the Fondazione Migrantes (<https://www.migrantes.it/>). Another stream in Sanfilippo's scholarly output gravitates around cultural and media history with an emphasis again on exchanges between North America and Italy. Sanfilippo sees these two scholarly pursuits as intimately linked. Throughout his career, he has insisted that we must take into account the subjective side of history (how people imagine and conceptualize historical phenomena) and not just its objective side (what has actually happened). In Sanfilippo's view, these two sides of history are inextricably intertwined. And this is true for migra-

tion as for any other complex historical phenomenon.

Sanfilippo's most recent book fits this second research strand. In *Storie, epoche, epidemie*, Sanfilippo tries to map the ways in which European and North American historians, writers, filmmakers, video game designers, and comics writers and illustrators have conceptualized and imagined history, both retrospectively (the past) and prospectively (the future). And he does so through a series of case studies, each of which constitutes a chapter in the book. In the first chapter ("Passati, presenti e futuri alternativi"), Sanfilippo explores the "alternate history" tradition in English-speaking fiction from the late nineteenth century to the present. This chapter spans a couple of centuries and a number of artforms and media, from novels to films, TV series, and video games. The main focus is the dystopian fiction inaugurated by writers such as Edward Bellamy, Herbert G. Wells, and Mark Twain. This kind of fiction employs a number of narrative devices to let audiences imagine alternate histories in the past or present and speculate about possible futures.[2] So, this genre overlaps with historical and science fiction. In fact, the best-known examples in this tradition are some of the classics of science fiction writing, from the

*Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell. Leaving aside science fiction, alternate history presents audiences with what is called “counter-factual history,” namely, imagined alternative outcomes of the historical past. For example, *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) by Philip K. Dick, which has inspired the recent eponymous TV series (2015-19) created by Frank Spotnitz, represents an imagined alternative scenario where Nazi Germany has won WWII.

Chapter 2 (“Medioevi inventati e medioevi alternativi”) investigates how American mass culture has shaped the general public’s relationship with the Middle Ages in the past few decades, and how current political concerns with gender and race have in turn reframed the ways in which the Middle Ages are being reimagined through mass art and games.[3] Fantasy fiction across different artforms and media looms large here, from novels and comics to cinema, TV series, and video and role-playing games. Beyond the mainstream production of fantasy fiction, from the TV series *Game of Thrones* (2011-19) to the video game *World of Warcraft* (2004- ) and the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974- ), Sanfilippo focuses his attention on alternative forms of medievalism inspired by feminism, critical race theory, and post- and de-colonial thought. Author Nora Keita Jemisin has explicitly criticized the white male able-bodied Middle Ages presented by mainstream fantasy fiction where women, nonwhite people, and disabled people are conspicuously absent or marginalized. And in *The Broken Earth Trilogy* (2015-17), Jemisin sets center-stage precisely these kinds of characters to counter the biases embedded in the genre. Other authors have tried to dislodge Western-centric fantasy and science fiction by setting their stories in imagined worlds modeled on the African, Middle Eastern, and East Asian Middle Ages. Kim Stanley Robinson has thus merged alternate history with science fiction in his ten-part novel, *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002), in which he imagines a few hundred years

of history, from the Middle Ages to the twenty-first century, in a world where the Black Death has almost wiped out the European population, which leaves American indigenous peoples to fight against the Chinese and Muslim armies of the now dominant powers.

With a sudden change of scenery, Sanfilippo then moves from English-speaking fiction to French historiography. Chapter 3 (“Jules Michelet: raccontare il Medioevo e la peste”) is entirely devoted to the life and works of Jules Michelet (1789-1874), the most influential nineteenth-century French historian, and his twentieth-century reception in France and the United States. Providing some link with the preceding two chapters is Sanfilippo’s claim that Michelet’s account of medieval France in the first two volumes of his *Histoire de France* (1833-75) shares in the medievalism of the coeval English-speaking culture (p. 111), which will then influence all fantasy fiction through the mediation of the philologist and writer J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973). Sanfilippo’s commentary on the explanatory function played by the Black Death in Michelet’s narrative of the rise of modernity, which he thinks has been propelled by the seismic impact of this epidemic, serves as a transition to the last chapter of his book. Originally written as a blog post at the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, chapter 4 (“Epidemie e fine del mondo”) evaluates the analogy that is often made between the Spanish influenza and the current pandemic and discusses how fiction and historiography throughout the centuries, from the Middle Ages to the present, have imagined and tried to shed some light on epidemics. So, in a detailed analysis of *The Journal of a Plague* (1722) by Daniel Defoe, which is one of the central cases discussed in this chapter, Sanfilippo argues that Defoe’s text provides audiences with a yet unparalleled account of everyday life under an epidemic that resonates with our current predicament (p. 137).

There is a lot to admire in Sanfilippo’s book. It is erudite, wide-ranging, full of insights, and cov-

ers a wealth of primary and secondary sources in a number of domains, from historiography to literary and cultural history. It is particularly striking how Sanfilippo has managed to command such a rich material that spans a few centuries, countries, and languages. And yet, this is also a problematic book for two main reasons, one of which is structural and the other has to do with what seems to be Sanfilippo's main claim here. First, the book retains the structure of a collection of essays that were written independently from one another, which makes it difficult to get the main argument. And this is also because the chapters themselves are designed more as surveys rather than single sustained arguments. It is true that there is a core thread that runs through the book, which is an exploration of the relationship between historical research and popularized accounts of history through a number of mass artforms and media (p. 17). And the suggestion seems to be that mass art and culture, which are largely made of fiction, frame the general public's capability to imagine and understand the past, the present, and the future (p. 23). If this is the main claim of the book, however, it remains underdeveloped. To go back to where I began this review: I would have liked to know more about how Sanfilippo sees the relationship between the objective and the subjective side of history, between what we can say with some confidence about what has actually happened and the ways in which we imagine our past, present, and future through fiction. For what we can learn from fiction, as the philosopher Gregory Currie has recently argued, is unclear.<sup>[4]</sup> Notwithstanding my criticism, I will definitely commend this book to anyone interested in the reception of North American mass culture in Italy. For Sanfilippo is not just a professional historian, but he is also a public intellectual, and reading this book will give anyone a privileged entry point in the ongoing dialogue and cultural exchange between North America and Italy.

## Notes

[1]. Paola Corti and Matteo Sanfilippo, eds., *Storia d'Italia — Annali 24: Migrazioni* (Torino: Einaudi, 2009).

[2]. Throughout this review, I am using the term "audience" to refer to people who engage with any kind of narrative work, including history books, novels, comics, films, and games. In my use, "audience" can thus refer to viewers, readers, and players.

[3]. In this review, I am using the qualifier "mass" in the sense defined by the philosopher Noël Carroll in his *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). In my usage, "mass culture" or "media" refer to a larger set of works than "mass art" and "artforms" because they include games, which I do not consider to be art. For a powerful argument in defense of the contrary thesis that games are a kind of art, see C. Thi Nguyen, *Games: Agency as Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[4]. Gregory Currie, *Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-italy>

**Citation:** Alessio Baldini. Review of Sanfilippo, Matteo. *Storie, epoche, epidemie*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. August, 2021.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55969>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.