

"Ota Benga". Small Stories That Make History

Stefano Albertini (July 09, 2015)



Antonio Monda, writer, essayist, director, and professor in the Department of Film and Television at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, is one of the most famous faces of the Italian cultural scene in New York City. He has just published the third book of a "ten-volume novel." In the following interview, he and Stefano Albertini, director of NYU's Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, discuss this book, entitled *Ota Benga*, set in Monda's beloved New York at the turn of the twentieth century. Through the true story of *Ota Benga*, a Congolese pygmy kidnapped and brought to the United States to be exhibited in a zoo in 1904, the novel merges fiction with history and touches upon issues such as the practice of "pseudo-science" and racism in the era of modernization.

You've mentioned that this novel is part of a ten-volume series. Was this project born this way? Or is it a decision that came with time?

Actually, it wasn't born this way. I wrote the first book of the series called *L'America non esiste* (America Doesn't Exist) four years ago. Then, when I wrote the second book *Casa sulla roccia* (House on the Rock) I realized that I liked having a recurring character. And then I thought of making this a multi-volume saga. The character of *Ota Benga* is tied to both the previous volumes and the project is to have ten volumes on twentieth century New York with recurring characters and also a few recurring jokes.



Definitely, the city of New York is what ties all these books together. It's your personal love statement to the city that you chose as yours and you have loved continuously.

New York is my stepmother. She welcomed me twenty-one years ago. And, unlike many other experiences in my life, New York kept its promises. Whatever she promised has arrived in a way or another. I'm not saying that it isn't tough living here, but I still feel the same excitement, the same enchantment of day one. Yes, this is a love letter to this city.

And it's a city that obviously changed immensely through the decades of the twentieth century. Let's talk about the decade of Ota Benga: roughly the first fifteen years of the century. And tell us briefly about this character who gives the name to the book. Your other books don't get their names from their main character. In this case, you decided to give central stage to this person, a real person who truly existed. And perhaps we should mention that you always mix fictional characters with historical events, figures, and backgrounds. So who was Ota Benga?

First of all let me tell you that the best compliment my books have gotten so far was written in an Italian newspaper and said "this book reminds us of Wizard of Oz novels". Of course, I don't want to compare myself to the Wizard of Oz but there is something similar: the idea of putting together history with the small stories of some tiny made up characters. In this case, Ota Benga really existed. He was a pigmy from Congo, part of the Mutu pygmy tribe, who was kidnapped by slave merchants and sold to America to be exhibited in the world's fair in 1904 in St. Louis. He was exposed alongside the great warrior Geronimo, with whom he became friends. But this is only the beginning of his tragic adventure because a few years later he was exposed in another exhibition in the Bronx Zoo, in 1906. The so-called "scientific" point of this exhibition was to "demonstrate" that this pigmy, being very short, was the missing link between monkeys and humans.

And this touches upon the central theme of the book: that is the confrontation of science and spirituality in the modernizing city of New York. And this type of science was so inclined to use some human beings as specimen, as things to be exhibited in museums or zoos, while on the other side there were a series of ministers, of clergy members who protested, arguing that these were human beings, and bringing up ethical issues focused around what constitutes a human being.

First of all, thanks for explaining the theme of the book so well. One of my main interests is in fact to show readers that when science - in this case distorted science or pseudo-science - becomes an icon, it loses the notion of empathy, of mercy, and creates monstrosities like this one. How can you show a human being in a cage alongside orangutans and chimpanzees? This poor man, who was still very young when he was kidnapped, suffered tremendously, not only because his family was slaughtered, but because he was treated like an animal and no person should ever be considered an animal. And worse of all, this was done for the purpose of science, setting this case apart from many others like the one of the elephant man and of all the people who were part of freak shows all around the world.

And there's a strong racial component here also.

Absolutely. And it's interesting to note that the creator of this "scientific" exhibition was a man named Madison Grant, extremely famous at the time. If you google him, you will find lots of information. He did many good things for the environment, he loved animals, but he was a racist. He was convinced of the scientific truth of this project. In 1915 he wrote a bestseller entitled *The Passing of the Great Race* and by "great race" he meant the "Aryan" race, the Nordic white race. He was a racist, he hated Africans, African-Americans, Jews, Latinos. And his book was the primary inspiration for Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Even more disturbing is that a pupil of his became close friends with Heinrich Himmler and discussed genetics at length with him. This shows how distorted scientific ideas can lead to Nazism, genocide and horror.

Now let's talk a little about the character you created. So far you've talked about the background characters, who have mostly negative, but important roles, that touch upon extremely important issues, so much so that they capture the attention of the reader. But let's remember that this is also a novel, one about a boy and a girl.

Yes, the "real" protagonist is a young woman called Arianna Salis. She's a fictional character, a



young woman of Greek origin, who's trying to understand who she is. She wants to be independent and studies anthropology at a time when that was really revolutionary. In the New York of the early twentieth century, for a young woman of Greek origin was not easy to travel the road of emancipation. Arianna finds work in the Bronx Zoo just at the time when Ota Benga is brought there to live with the orangutans and the chimpanzees. Arianna is in crisis before this affair, also because one of the organizers is her boyfriend. Here she starts a journey that leads her across the U.S. and beyond, while intertwining with Ota Benga a silent distance dialogue. In the end she will discover that the greatest treasure in life is not intended for those who have eyes full of certainties, but to those who know how to cultivate the doubt and research.

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