



FOREWORD BY MATTEO GILEBBI

Oh, Serafina!

A Fable of Ecology, Lunacy, and Love

GIUSEPPE BERTO

Translated from the Italian by Gregory Conti

More Praise for *Oh, Serafina!*

“Entertaining, profound, and timely, Giuseppe Berto’s *Oh, Serafina!* shows the marvels hidden in worlds that, despite their apparent marginality, teem with vitality and poetry. Perfectly attuned with the novel’s spirit and rhythm, Gregory Conti’s elegant translation prompts the rediscovery of this jewel of Italian literature.”

—Serenella Iovino, author of *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation*

“*Oh, Serafina!* is a bizarrely beautiful fable for the ages. Thanks to the deft work of translator Gregory Conti, this tale of industry, lust, mental illness, and ecological sensibility is a most welcome addition to the small but growing canon of Italian environmental literature available in translation.”

—Monica Seger, author of *Landscapes in Between: Environmental Change in Modern Italian Literature and Film*

“Fifty years ago, Giuseppe Berto wrote his fable of ecology, lunacy, and love against the backdrop of the industrialized Italy of his day. But books, fortunately, outlive their occasional contexts. In Gregory Conti’s flawless translation, *Oh, Serafina!* shines as a tale that belongs even, if not especially, to our own time.”

—Federica Capoferri, coauthor of *Badlands: Il cinema dell’ultima Roma*

Oh, Serafina!

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This book embodies many of the qualities that OVOI holds dear, surprising readers for its themes and topics that are just as relevant and valid today as they were fifty years ago, when the book first appeared in Italian. It is a modern-day fable that speaks a transgressive and progressive language set in a world where the protagonists suffer the alienation of being outcasts for simply loving each other without preconceived notions of class, status, or mental health. Their love of nature casts them further to the margins of a society that is wholly and solely focused on bourgeois profits and disregards the beauty of creation. This forges the pair into an archetypal duo resembling the first biblical couple in an uncontaminated Eden but with a Franciscan flavor transpiring through the love of birds. The abundant irony characterizing *Oh, Serafina! A Fable of Ecology, Lunacy, and Love*, which this brilliant translation renders beautifully, adds literary flavor to a text that could otherwise be a manifesto for the ecologically concerned or the neurodivergent.

Oh, Serafina!



*A Fable of Ecology, Lunacy,
and Love*

GIUSEPPE BERTO

Translated by Gregory Conti



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Foreword

A Personal and Planetary Tale: Giuseppe Berto's Bizarre Environmental Story

Although written fifty years ago for an Italian readership, *Oh, Serafina! A Fable of Ecology, Lunacy, and Love* (*Oh, Serafina! Fiaba di ecologia, di manicomio e d'amore*) speaks across time and place to contemporary readers around the globe. Through its bitter irony, which is also present in most of Berto's literary production, the novel emphasizes the importance of both ecological awareness and a reconsideration of societal attitudes toward mental illness, themes that are unique to this text.

Italian writer Giuseppe Berto (1914–1978) was born in a small town near Treviso, in the Veneto region of Italy, and grew up in a country dominated by fascist ideology. His father, a former police officer, assisted Giuseppe's mother with her millinery business. As many teenagers of that period, Giuseppe, at age fifteen, became a member of the Opera Nazionale Balilla, the Italian Fascist youth organization, whose goal was to educate young people about the ideals of Fascism and train them for possible future military service. Following the Fascist prioritization of education, Berto's

father compelled him to complete high school and enroll in college. Prior to entering college, however, Berto enlisted in the Italian army, continuing his active participation in the fascist project.

In 1935, when Italy invaded Ethiopia, Berto left the University of Padua and enlisted, receiving multiple commendations for bravery. After returning to Italy and graduating with a degree in art history in 1940, Berto published his first creative work, a short story (*La colonna Feletti*, 1940) in *Il gazettino*, a local Venetian newspaper, that recounted the events leading to the deaths of four of his fellow soldiers in the Ethiopian war. The autobiographical nature of this story is an aspect that will characterize Berto's future works. When Italy entered World War II in 1940, Berto's patriotism, driven by his fascist education, prompted him to re-enlist. In 1942, he was sent to fight in Tunisia, but the Italian military campaign failed disastrously, resulting in many casualties and imprisonments. Berto was captured in 1943 by Allied troops and transferred to a prisoner of war camp in Hereford, Texas, where he was detained for three years. Interestingly, despite the harsh conditions of the camp, Berto came into contact with American literature, particularly works by Hemingway and Steinbeck, which helped shape his own style. During his imprisonment, he began to question his involvement with Fascism and his participation in its the conflicts, exploring these themes in the writings he drafted in captivity that appeared in literary pamphlets he and his fellow prisoners created. During that time, he completed an initial draft of both a collection of short stories, *The Works of God and Other Stories* (*Opere di Dio*), later to be published by Macchia, and his novel *The Sky Is Red* (*Il cielo è rosso*), published by Longanesi in 1946, one of the most prominent publishers in Italy even today. *The Sky Is Red* was a commercial and critical

success both in Italy and abroad due to its status as one of the first novels to describe the tragedies of World War II. It was awarded the Florence Prize for Literature (the Premio Firenze per la letteratura) in 1948, selected by a committee of the most respected writers of that period. In *The Sky Is Red*, a story of the consequences of the U.S. bombing of Treviso told through the eyes of four children, Berto depicts the suffering of the innocent during conflict and grapples with feelings of his own regret and responsibility in the war.

With this book, Berto was categorized as a member of the neorealist movement that emerged after World War II. Neorealist works narrated the struggle of the antifascist movement, the guerrilla warfare of the resistance, the conditions of Italian society in the aftermath of World War II (particularly in the south), and accounts of those who endured concentration and work camps. Berto's text defies tenets of neorealist writing, however. Whereas neorealist texts are grounded in real events, Berto, having been in Texas at the time of the bombing of Treviso, had no direct knowledge of the experiences narrated in his book (he describes certain places in Treviso as having been bombed that were not). Therefore, his work can be interpreted more as an allegorical depiction of the trauma sustained by any victim of conflict and crisis and the resulting inequity of conflict itself. Additionally, whereas neorealist writers place their political engagement front and center, Berto had fought with the Fascists, not against them. Even though through writing the book he began to process his feelings of guilt and the negative impact of his participation in fascist nationalism and colonialism, he never publicly disavowed his fascist past. Therefore, ever since he entered the scene of Italian literature, Berto was never embraced by intellectual and literary circles, making his specific role challenging to identify.

Berto's next work, *The Brigand (Il brigante)* published in 1951 by Einaudi, was not as successful as *The Sky Is Red*; it sold poorly and was highly criticized for the quality of writing and its overly explicit Marxist ideology. Around 1954, Berto began to suffer from an anxiety disorder that severely affected his literary production, leading to no fiction publications over the next ten years. During this time, his only income came from working as a journalist and screenwriter. Interestingly, his most successful novel, *Incubus (Il male oscuro)* published in 1964, was a direct result of the journals his psychoanalyst encouraged him to write as part of his therapy. It was not until the publication of *Incubus* that Berto was nationally and internationally recognized as one of the most innovative and experimental authors of that period, creating a space for him in the canon of Italian literature. In addition to being a bestseller, *Incubus* was awarded both the Premio Viareggio and the Premio Campiello, two of the most prestigious literary prizes in Italy. *Incubus* utilizes stream of consciousness as its narrative style, focusing on Berto's difficult relationship with his father, brought on in part by his father's death; the conflict he experienced regarding his own sexuality; his obsession to become a successful writer; the struggle to find doctors who could help him overcome his anxiety; his evolving spirituality; and the solace he experiences as a result of leaving his family and moving to the Calabrian coast to live in solitude and in closer contact with nature.

The themes of death, psychological struggle, spirituality, and the desire to escape society and reconnect with nature are also key themes in *Oh, Serafina!*. Published in 1973, this book is part of the second phase of Berto's production after the publication of *Incubus* and the improvement of his mental health. Originally written in the form of a screenplay, *Oh, Serafina!* won the Premio Bancarella in 1974 and was turned

into a movie in 1976. It is the second fantastical allegory that Berto wrote; the first, *La fantarca*, published in 1965, is a science fiction story describing the arrival of a spaceship in southern Italy meant to save the last remaining Italians. Here, too, we see autobiographical elements (the protagonists escape from society to find a better world), biblical and religious themes (the story's connection to Noah's Ark), and satirical elements (the description of planet earth as divided into two giant blocs, West and East, parodying the Cold War).

These themes are further refined in *Oh, Serafina!*. The theme of escaping society and finding solace in nature, which is central to *Oh, Serafina!*, notably allows Berto to express a fierce skepticism toward the Italian economic boom of the '50s and '60s. Although rapid industrialization leading to economic development was still celebrated in the '70s, Berto was among those who criticized the material wealth brought by unchecked economic development. Whereas ecological issues connected to the economic boom were only partially addressed by these movements, they are, instead, at the heart of Berto's tale. Traditional criticism of industrialization by writers of that period focuses on the dissolution of the social fabric, in particular the exploitation of human and natural resources. For example, in the works of Paolo Volponi and Italo Calvino, environmental degradation is connected to human alienation inside the unnatural spaces of cities and factories. The human is always at the center of Berto's texts, but he also concentrates on the role of nature and the possibilities that an egalitarian relationship between humans and nature can bring. In other words, by showing how the well-being of nature corresponds to the psychological and physical well-being of humans, Berto does, in a sense, emphasize the arbitrary nature of the separation between the two realms and demonstrates the need to actively reconsider this divide.