

# Divergent futures

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Dan Gunn

THE EMPEROR OF ICE-CREAM  
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Dan Gunn's erudite and poignant novel is set against the darkening political landscape of interwar Europe. The narrator, Lucia, now in her eighties, is prompted by a memorial service at the Albert Hall for the victims of the *Arandora Star* – the ship torpedoed and sunk off the Irish coast by a U-boat in July 1940, as it was transporting German and Italian internees to a camp in Canada, with the loss of more than 800 lives – to recount the story of her family growing up as Italian immigrants in Edinburgh during the interwar years. The narrative moves deftly between Scotland and Italy, and in particular the family's native village of Maclodio: the site of a fifteenth-century battle in northern Italy made famous by the great Risorgimento poet and novelist Alessandro Manzoni, in a verse drama that decried (appositely for the novel) the historic propensity of Italians to internecine strife ("Brothers have massacred brothers / This horrendous news I bring").

The book traces the divergent fortunes of Lucia and her three brothers. Dario, the eldest, becomes the founder of the Edinburgh Fascist club, and spends the novel veering between unctuous support for Mussolini, sparring with a vicious local supporter of Oswald Mosley, fighting in Ethiopia (where he becomes a victim of his own side's deployment of mustard gas) and lying low in the war so as to avoid internment. He ends up as an opportunistic supporter of the Allies and partisans, and a would-be mayor of Maclodio, before

descending into alcoholism. The second brother, Giulio, eschews politics and opts to become the creator of a luxurious ice-cream parlour. He is interned in June 1940, an "enemy alien", and finishes on the *Arandora Star* along with his younger brother Emilio, who struggles in vain in the oily Atlantic waters to save his sibling. Emilio survives the war to become a poet and academic at the University of Sussex – a nod of homage, perhaps, towards John Rosselli, the distinguished historian and son of the celebrated anti-Fascist, Carlo Rosselli.

If the three brothers encapsulate in varying ways three dominant strands of Italian identity, Lucia's story has an equal measure of metonymy. She spends the novel searching for love, and seems to have found the answer in Rome in the high-minded Valerio, to whom she loses her virginity on a sumptuous bed signalled for the use of the Fascist Party Secretary, Achille Starace, during their engagement function. But Valerio's Jewish background impels him towards anti-Fascism and to an eventual breach both with Lucia and his own family. He is last heard of being rounded up in 1944 and imprisoned in the

notorious deportation centre of Fossoli, in northern Italy, before being sent to his assumed death in a Nazi concentration camp. Lucia meanwhile falls for an English public schoolboy with pugilistic skills, Harry, only to find her dreams of happiness being shattered (and here, as in a few other places in the novel, there are faints creaks of stereotype) when she discovers him in bed with Giulio.

The novel takes its title from Wallace Stevens's well-known if elusive poem, whose haunting refrain – "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream" – strikes Lucia as a fitting epitaph for her brother, and more generally as an epigraph for her family's largely tragic story. In an age of violent dictators, ideological polarization and rampant imperialism, the celebration of transient sensual pleasure has a certain piquancy, and Gunn's novel brings vividly to life the huge price the world paid for losing its humanitarian moorings. The book is firmly and for the most part convincingly embedded in its period. There are, however, occasional anachronisms (Cinecittà, for instance, did not exist in the 1920s, and there is a curious reference to "Prime Minister Chamberlain" in the same decade), and the prominence given to anti-Semitism in Italian Fascism is odd, certainly for the period before 1938. But these minor historical solecisms do little to detract from what is a highly readable, well-paced and moving reflection on the fragility of identity and human decency in the face of emotive and partisan politics.