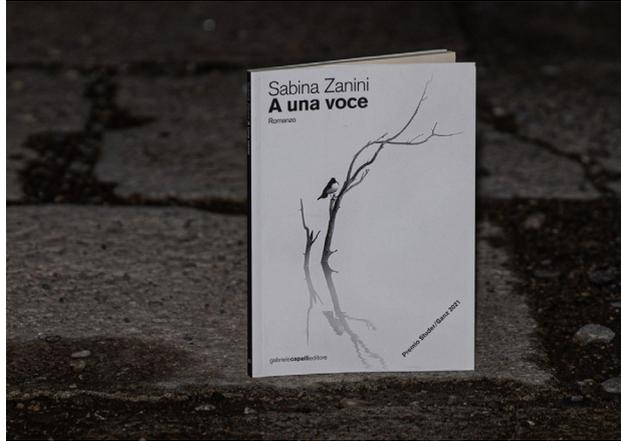


With One Voice

Sabina Zanini

Novel

Italian



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Gabriele Capelli,
gabrielecapellieditore@gmail.com

The first novel by Sabina Zanini, With One Voice, follows the day of a character who has decided to live in complete solitude outside the mechanisms regulating contemporary society. The nameless narrating voice reflects through an interior monologue about the surrounding world, observing with detachment the aberrations of a lifestyle that she strongly disavows. Rejecting the “beliefs” of Western society and detaching herself from a consumerist logic of appearances and waste, the nameless protagonist reduces herself to a life of habits which allows her to minimise the contact with the external world and escape within her own imagination.

“In a world divided between black and white, I want to be the first insignificant piece to be cast aside at the edge of the chessboard, the one that the player light-heartedly sacrifices just to start the game. The one that is soon forgotten within the course of the game, especially during those crucial moments when the most important pieces are facing each other, and the king trembles while trying to guess its destiny.”

Author

Sabina Zanini was born in Sorenago in 1972 and studied Modern Literature in Pavia. She works as an editor for RSI Radiotelevisione svizzera. Her novel *A una voce* awarded her the Studer/Ganz Prize 2021 for first unpublished prose.

Photo: Alain Pasquali

With One Voice

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Excerpt translated by Ruth Clarke

I leave through the building's garage. It reduces the likelihood of meeting anyone leaving via the front door. There is always someone buzzing around the door-step, like bees round a hive. They prune, sweep, shake doormats, walk their dogs. At this time of year it's the leaves, shrugged off by trees in autumn, that become the issue of the day. They pile up in front of the main entrance. Someone collects them, but, every windy day, the leaves come back in greater abundance. Whose turn is it to sweep them up? A sense of civic duty has seen shifts established, but it doesn't work, several residents have demonstrated a flagrant disregard for the system. I am one of them, admittedly. The leaves strike me as a passing inconvenience, all things considered. Like snow in winter.

Even today, exiting through the basement, I will have to walk past my neighbour. He's in his parking space wearing blue mechanic's overalls, even though that's not his line of work. He's happy here, in the gloomy surroundings of the carpark, perhaps he can pretend he's in a secret Axis Forces bunker. He collects Wehrmacht vehicles supplied to the German army during the Second World War. He keeps them polished and ready for the conventions he regularly attends. Who knows how many of them gather together, among the tents and the mud, gawking at other people's hardware. All with a passion they call 'historical interest'. Always on the alert for a push that, for now, is mired in their own nostalgia. What are they hoping for? A return to the good old days when their machines paraded with hooked insignia? Over the years and in the twilight, our watchman has grown rotund and is taking on the same grotesque childlike appearance as Goering. Today, he's fixing a small amphibious vehicle that breaks down every time he tests it in water. That must be why the Nazis lost the war.

But he is ready, just in case the partisans should be hiding in the patch of shrubbery behind our house. You never do see a bandit pop out from behind a compost

heap. He can relax, my neighbour, given that they keep on cutting back the woods: they prune, lop, pollard, even fell. The branch trembles in the knowledge that the green revolution will never come.

In the meantime, we exchange something approaching a nod. I walk away while he looks up to check who is skulking around his precious relics. He has even rigged up an alarm system to keep them safe from thieves. Or the Allies, perhaps.

I am perfectly aware that, as much as he loathes all humanity, I am one of those that irk him the most. It is quite possible that my very existence, in those dark times, would have been deemed unworthy of living, since I would never have offered it up in sacrifice for the fatherland. And yet his hostility is ultimately a comfort, because it is sincere. Whenever anyone accosts me with positive sentiments, I wonder if they aren't simply struggling against an undercurrent to the contrary. My neighbour is not a man to be cowed into a veneer of respectability. We both know that we should stay out of each other's way. No misunderstandings.

At last, I am on the street. Every morning, the problem is crossing it to reach the bus stop. I am always afraid; I hunch my shoulders up and squeeze my eyes half closed as I step off the kerb. As though simply not looking would make the danger disappear. Many years ago, one foggy night, I set out to tempt fate, throwing myself into the middle of the road with no thought for the traffic. I wanted to challenge destiny at a moment when I'd accepted that there was surely no getting away with it. I remember the metallic, yet vaguely cushioned, blow to the thigh and the curses of the driver I had selected at random. "It was my fault", I repeated, in the hope of getting rid of him. No injuries, just a memory blank that I have never been able to remedy. I don't recall waiting for the ambulance, I don't recall the journey to hospital. When the film resumes, I am already in the waiting room for x-rays. Yet the fear remained intact. A wounded animal will always be wary of the situation that put it in danger. The fear lasts forever.

As I approach the bus shelter, I put my earphones in. The cable in my pocket is not attached to anything at the other end, I do this purely to inform the person beside me of my isolation. I have no talent for conversation. Above all, I wish to avoid exchanging remarks about the weather. Who knows where this meteorological obsession stems from. The individuals gathered at the bus stop don't look like farmers unsure of the best time for sowing. We have never been so far removed from nature and its cycles. We are struck by it only when it gets in our way. Rain: outing cancelled. Snow: curses, traffic chaos.

Today, for example, it is raining, and that suits me, because I can angle my umbrella down and hide my face. It hadn't rained for a while, and now dirty rivers of water are carrying away a mush of blackened leaves. I watch all this filth disappear down a drain. A futile cleanse, the dirt will always prevail, it doesn't have a hiding place, a lair from which it will never emerge.

Beside me here, there is a ginkgo biloba dressed for autumn. Its leaves are delightful little fans that should be in the hands of Chinese actresses with powdered faces. But no one had the audacity to rob the emperor of the yellow only he was allowed to wear. The ginkgo survived deep time, when the world was young and volcanoes spewed gold collected from the centre of the Earth. This planet is a crucible and we inhabit its rough terracotta crust. But two hundred million years ago, the ginkgo was already engaged in photosynthesis, and when it dons its autumn foliage, it evokes the memory of the Golden Age.

I could project any legend onto a past beyond the reach of the human mind. We are incapable of thinking about time. The world already seems different from fifty years ago. Going back a couple of centuries takes us into a dimension that is purely theatrical. Thousands of years of ancient civilisations seem to have passed in the blink of an eye, with no upheaval. Unchanged for the period spanning from the year 1000 to the year 2000. The millions of years of dinosaurs might simply be a palaeontologist's dream, had traces of them not been preserved.

And now, here we are measuring the minutes. I see people getting anxious because the bus is slightly delayed. One minute in this bus shelter, and the millions of years that separate us from the giant reptiles. Time encompasses everything, it is a skeleton for reality; cheers to the music that clothes it in harmonies.

A woman walks past with a dog in a tiny raincoat. What would its life expectancy be in the wild? I wonder whether the great paleoherbivores would have survived the ice age if they had had raincoats. Luckily, naked man arrived to assimilate them to himself, to dress these furry, warmblooded animals. Things can always change, and perhaps the dogs of the future will not have hair, but scarves and jumpers. As for us, how long do we deserve to be at the top of the food chain? Carnivorous dinosaurs occupied the top spot before us. Suddenly, the world was no longer enough; not for the vegetarians who destroyed giant ferns, and not for the carnivores, who survived a little while longer on the bodies of the former.

For now, on schedule, the bus arrives. We are all velociraptors, casting around, studying the hierarchy to see who will board first. I voluntarily stand aside. I am not after privilege of any kind. As one of the last to board, I can choose who to avoid having beside me. And I am well aware that my travel companions will breathe a secret sigh of relief if I decide not to sit next to them.

The bus is packed to the rafters. I will be standing, crushed in amongst the other swaying passengers. The air turns damp and malodorous from the soggy umbrellas, people's breath and the sweat beneath their raincoats. The rain streaks the windows. Droplets that chase one another like tadpoles in the ponds in springtime. I love this game superimposed on the landscape behind the glass; built up in layers of scenery, like a stage set.

So many recurring faces, even I must be familiar to someone, even if most of them generally can't place me, especially outside the usual contexts. I have no distinguishing features. And I am grateful to everyone who joins me in the performative act of not recognising

one another. Blessed anonymity. I don't understand why some sociologists are quick to describe this fragmented and compartmentalised society in such alarmist tones. I don't think there's anything wrong with attending to one's own solitude without taking anyone else hostage. Anonymity is freedom. It is much more exciting to watch. Almost a luxury.

New acquaintances can be avoided. It's the old ones that frighten me. Sentinels from the past. How many times have I had to duck around a corner, caught off guard by an old schoolmate or suchlike. It embarrasses me to stand on a street corner, recounting my life story in one minute. I can say only what I have or have not done, important and wonderful things are better off hidden, I don't want anyone to trample over them. It's best to communicate only the adversities of fate. Then your interlocutor will feel that the kind thing to do is affect chagrin. A sentiment that can be discarded at the next bend in the road. But envy of success runs deep and brings to bloom terrible thoughts and malicious gossip. A stubborn mould on the soul.

Our only hope is robots. Provided that we learn how to programme them better than ourselves, which is to say incapable of envy. In Japan they are already used to interface with humans. And people like it, they welcome it. They actually enjoy it. The Japanese have even coined a term to describe people who choose to isolate themselves: hikikomori. And definitions are not invented for the sake of a single case.

There is always someone who, in the middle of this crowd, is deeply engrossed in a conversation on their mobile phone. Are they speaking to the person on the other end of the line, or is there something for the benefit of the audience around them? It is as if they were in a pulpit or on a stage. Thundering Sunday sermon, or nightly improvisation? Up until a few years ago, there were telephone boxes: four windows that insulated a private and often urgent exchange. Anyone waiting outside would pretend not to listen, staring at their shoes, or their watch if haste needed to be signalled. But telephones have been freed from glass cages, now they walk

around on our legs and perhaps even find themselves invited to dinner, with their own specially assigned place at the table. The stone guest is a cumbersome marble statue no more. Let's just hope they're not here to drag us all down to Hell.

I reach my destination. One of the last to board, therefore one of the first to escape. It's a small victory, hardly the sort of thing that earned anyone a place in the kingdom of heaven. I always take the same route to get to work. I have found a safe commute along which, at this hour, I don't cross paths with anyone, or barely anyone. There's nothing like solitude to make us fear an encounter. From time immemorial, we have imagined that if we were to bump into a stranger, they would most likely be a criminal. Such people are not looking for solitude, but for the solitary, to commit their atrocities unseen. Would a crowded street be safer? The scoundrel might get lost in the fray. There is no respite, there is no right choice. Evil is truly unpredictable. We are always at the mercy of other people's decisions, of the potential enemy who chooses us as their victim.

On the other hand, this town is orderly, peaceful, offers very few opportunities for journalists. Wealth is fairly well distributed and those who are not rich can still delude themselves that they might one day become so. Or, at least, that their children might be able to get a foot on the so-called "social ladder". And thus we all go on untroubled. Like a cohesive society. I don't buy it. Society is like holding mercury together, as soon as you take away the barrier, it disperses into ever smaller and ever more elusive balls. What the barrier is, I don't know. Meanwhile – taking the usual backstreets, but no detour – I reach my destination. Just as I do every morning.