

# Chiara Carminati **fuori fuoco**



ASSAGGI DI NARRATIVA BOMPIANI





CHIARA CARMINATI  
OUT OF FOCUS

translated from the Italian  
by Denise Muir

**SAMPLE COPY**

BOMPIANI



It wasn't a short war. It wasn't over quickly.

A year later nothing had changed. The war went on, the dead went on. No bombs fell on Martignacco, only letters. They would arrive regularly, for this or that person, announcing that someone in the family had died. No, that's not true, the letters didn't say "died", they said "sacrificed for his country in the most beautiful, enviable and holy way." Assunta had been waiting for months for news of her husband when a Red Cross telegram came, announcing that he'd been taken prisoner by the Austrians and sent to a concentration camp in Hungary. Some men were discharged and returned home wounded or seriously ill. Others harmed themselves on purpose, either shooting themselves in the foot or trying to catch an eye disease. Antonio and his father came back on leave a few times but never for very long. Francesco and Sandro would occasionally go down to Cividale and send a postcard from there saying they were good. It was usually Sandro who'd write and he usually wrote to me.

The only event of any interest in our family was the birth of a baby donkey. Modestine prepared a little surprise for us when she had ran away with Luigi Tonutti's stallion nearly one year

ago. It dawned on me one day in spring, when I was grooming her in the sun and I felt her stomach move under my hand.

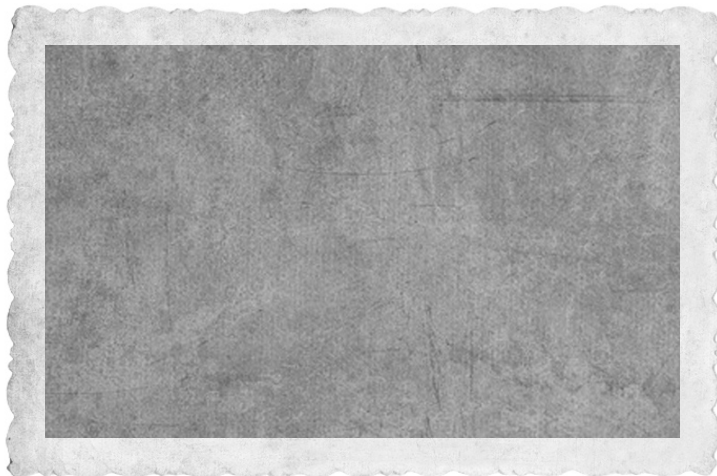
“Mother, Modestine’s carrying!”

“Carrying what?” Mafalda asked.

Modestine’s foal was born at the end of July. Mafalda took care of both of them and taught the foal the secret language she claimed to know. When it was six months old, we sold it to a man from Fagagna; Mafalda secretly gave Modestine a handful of salt.

Apart from that, our life continued in a rather strange equilibrium. It seemed on the verge of toppling over yet remained in the balance. It was like having a kestrel hovering over you in the Holy Spirit position. Kestrels fly like that when they remain perfectly still in the sky, their wings beating rapidly, their bodies tipping down almost vertically. Perhaps they do it to pick out a potential prey on the ground. Then they dive down and grab it with their talons.

A bird of prey had been flying in the Holy Spirit position over our lives for months. Then one fateful day, in August 1917, it came swooping down.



Out of Focus 4  
**Family photo**, Udine, 1915

This photo was taken at one of the town's most important studios, Pignat, but it doesn't bear the photographer's stamp because it was among those rejected. The background is the traditional one with heavy velvet curtains, two imposing armchairs on which husband and wife, Domenico and Antonia Melchior, are seated, and a small table that son Francesco is leaning against, arm-in-arm with the eldest daughter, Jolanda. Antonio, the eldest son, stands behind his father holding an accordion. The youngest daughter, who should've been on her mother's lap, has jumped down at the last moment to run towards the camera. That is why her blurred face fills most of the frame and the photo was rejected.





**Part II**  
**1917, from Martignacco to Udine**



Not far from Villa Linussa, on the river Cormor, was a bridge guarded by soldiers. It was along the road that the King travelled daily, on his way to visit the war zones. Since it was a narrow bridge, the King had ordered for this particular stretch of road to be made one-way only so that the bridge would always be empty when he needed to cross it in his motor car.

One day, my mother had received piles and piles of laundry to wash, because who knows how many commanders or heads of state and their relative entourages were staying in the large villas of the area. We'd loaded the laundry onto Nena's cart, and with Modestine pulling it, headed to the Cormor river, via that very bridge. We were allowed across on the way there. Not on the way back. "You can't cross here. This bridge is one-way only for all wheeled vehicles."

"But this is a just cart, it's not a motor car," my mother replied.

"His Majesty clearly states, 'All wheeled vehicles,' not 'all motor vehicles.' Your cart has wheels so you can't cross."

"How are we supposed to get home?"

"Go down to the crossroads, take the other road back up and you'll join up with this one here again in the village square."

“Soldier, I hold your job in great respect but you should hold mine the same. It’ll take me hours to go all that way, I have a pile of clothes to hang up and if I cross this bridge I can be home in five minutes. Let me past.”

The soldier addressing us had the broadest shoulders and blankest face I’d ever seen. The other one guarding the bridge came over when he heard us arguing. He was tall, thin, sure of himself and of his carefully-waxed moustache.

“What’s the problem, pretty lady?” the second soldier said. As he approached, I saw him looking at my mother with some interest. He was studying her from head to toe, as if measuring her up.

“You can’t cross the bridge back if you have a wheeled vehicle,” the one with the blank face repeated. The guard with the moustache kept looking at my mother. He shrugged.

“Well, we’ll take the wheels off,” he said.

I couldn’t believe they were actually going to do it. They dismantled the wheels from Nena’s cart, the burly guard hoisted the bed of the cart onto his back, wet laundry on top, and carried it to the other side of the bridge where the wheels were put back on.

The soldier with the moustache gave my mother a small bow. She thanked him, but only because she had to.

This scenario was to recur several times over the next few days. Only, the man with the moustache started leaning against the parapet of the bridge, trying to get us chatting as we washed. He commented on our work, told pointless stories or asked inappropriate questions. My mother replied in monosyllables, trying not to encourage him. She clearly found the attention he was paying us annoying. Yet he seemed oblivious to her blatant iciness. If anything, he seemed to be pushed rather than put off by my mother’s indifference. He insisted on helping her to load and unload the laundry, or to tether Modestine, and even though my mother said there was no need because we could do

it ourselves, he leapt at every chance to walk past her, brushing against her arm or touching her hand. The last time I went with mother to do the laundry he even dared an arm around her waist, with the excuse of helping her up the riverbank. My mother yanked his hand off and whipped it away as if it were a poisonous spider.

“Don’t ever do that again!” she yelled. The soldier just laughed.

“Playing hard to get, are we Antonia? Maybe you Austrian sympathizers should be a bit more collaborative with the nice Italian soldiers here to protect you.”

That word again. My mother shut her eyes for a second and when she re-opened them, they were a much darker blue. She didn’t reply and she didn’t turn round. We also didn’t stop there that day to take the wheels off the cart. Walking at Modestine’s pace, we followed the road down to where it met the other one and took the long way round to get back to the village.

My mother didn’t go back to wash at the Cormor for a while. Not until the Monday of that dreadful week.

I wasn’t with her because I had to finish sewing uniforms at Assunta’s. None of the other women were free to go, so mother went on her own. She took Mafalda to hold Modestine while she was loading laundry onto the cart.

I don’t know what happened.

I tried to get Mafalda to tell me but it was useless. All I know is they came back earlier than usual and mother was very uptight, her movements brusque and she kept staring at the polenta pot or a corner of the table cloth. Mafalda was unusually quiet.

Maybe the soldier with the moustache had gone too far this time. My mother may have done more than simply decline his advances towards her, she may have reacted as well. Perhaps she insulted him. Or even punched him. Are you allowed to punch a soldier?

The next day someone knocked at the door. It was a police officer. He was holding a paper for “Mrs. Antonia Zuliani, spouse of Domenico Melchior.” Mother and I froze, rooted to the spot: we thought it was a letter saying that something terrible had happened to my father, or to my brothers, or to the three of them. Instead it was a warrant of arrest: mother was to go with the officer to the prefecture in Udine and would be detained there until further investigation had been carried out. She was accused of being “pro-Empire”, meaning she sided with the Austrians, and was also suspected of being a spy. It was the soldier with the moustache getting revenge. It had to be. What a horrible man. I hoped he fell off the bridge, that the bridge fell on him, that the river carried him away, him and his disgusting moustache. Mother tried to defend herself but her protests were vain: the police officer ordered her to move. She barely had time to run into the other room, pick up her shawl and headscarf, and write something on a piece of paper that she put into my hand.

“If I don’t come back, go to her. Take Mafalda with you. Stay together.”

Her voice trembled and she hugged me tight. I felt my muscles give way, like roots turned to mush in the water. Where were they taking her? What would they do to her? What were we going to do? Panic filled my chest, I felt like I was falling over a cliff. Falling, falling, falling...

“Mother?” was all I managed to say. Then sobs choked my throat and my voice snapped. Mother prised open Mafalda’s fists, fixed tightly to the folds of her skirt.

“Promise me you’ll be good, my darling girl,” she said, kissing her hands amid the tears.

Then the police officer took her away.

“Father Andrea! Father Andrea!”

I didn't know who else to turn to. Luckily we found him right away, in the rectory. As he looked at us over his round glasses, his lovely smile vanished.

"What's wrong?"

Before I managed to catch my breath between the tears, Mafalda had already answered.

"Mother was arrested because she didn't want to make a baby with the soldier on the bridge."

I went bright red. What was she thinking saying something like that? And to a priest! Thank goodness Father Andrea wasn't shocked. He had us sit down on the wooden bench, in the dim light of the rectory, made sure there was no one listening outside then asked us to tell him everything.

I started by explaining that we didn't know if the soldier had actually anything to do with it but someone had reported mother, accusing her of being pro-Austrian, and they'd taken her away. Father Andrea hissed through his teeth, like a punctured bicycle tyre.

"Didn't they say where they were taking her?"

"To the prefecture in Udine"

"After that, I mean."

"After what?"

Father Andrea checked for eavesdroppers again then sat down beside us on the bench.

"Listen carefully, Jolanda. I have a friend," he said, lowering his voice, "a priest, a very good priest, with a well-established parish, esteemed by many in the congregation, who lived an honoured life. Well, just because one Sunday at mass he said they should pray that peace might come and that peace was the supreme will of God's love.... well, because of that he was accused of being against the war and of colluding with the Austrians to demoralize Italian souls. It's a difficult time. Military commands see spies and traitors everywhere, they'll stop at nothing. We

can't even hope for a trial, they don't have time for trials."

"But mother didn't talk about peace or war! Why did they arrest her?"

He shook his head, "I'm sure all it took was for that soldier to rouse suspicion. He must have told them she comes from Grado then tacked on a few lies. Everyone knows that Grado was once called the beach of Vienna and that many of its inhabitants are Austrian at heart. Add the two together and you've got enough for an accusation."

"But what will they do? Where will they take her? What happened to your friend, the priest?"

Father Andrea took off his glasses and wiped the sweat from his brow with a white handkerchief. Without his glasses he couldn't see me very well so instead of looking me straight in the eyes his gaze drifted, as if following an ant scurrying across my face. Maybe he thought that would make it easier to tell me what he had to tell me.

"My friend, the priest, was interned, Jolanda. That means he was sent to inland Italy. To Abruzzo."

"Abruzzo!" Mafalda exclaimed, horrified. "I know where that is. I saw it on the map of Italy, on the wall at school. It's so far away!"

Mafalda's voice broke in a flood of tears. Imagining mother so far away on the map finally brought to me the extent of our misfortune.

I made to dry her eyes and realized I was still clutching the paper mother gave me before she left. It was sodden with sweat and tears. I opened it.

"Now you girls don't worry," Father Andrea continued. "Let me take care of it. I'll go to Udine tomorrow and do some probing. I'll speak to a Monsignor I know well, I'll go to the prefecture, don't worry, I'll do everything I can. I promise to bring you back some news and..."



“*Adele Sartori*, who’s she? Do you know her, Father Andrea?”

I handed him the paper. There was an address beside the name: *Piazzale Cella, Udine*.

“Mother said to go to her if she.. if we... if she doesn’t... if she doesn’t come back.”

Father Andrea folded the note and slipped it into his cassock.

“I have no idea who she is but it won’t be hard to find out. I’ll take care of this tomorrow too. Now, come into church with me, let’s go and say a prayer. And let’s hope there’s a saint somewhere who has time to listen to us.”

That night, Mafalda and I slept in each other’s arms, on the kitchen bench. I woke at intervals and struggled to separate the real world from the nightmares that tasted bitter in my mouth. The first thing I saw, along with the rising sun, was the Delser biscuit tin. It had been empty for a long time, but mother had left it on the mantelshelf, like a treasured souvenir. Suddenly it came to me: the Queen! She was our neighbour, what if...? I dressed with great haste, left Mafalda asleep and rushed over to Ines’ house.

She was on the doorstep when I arrived, ready to set off for Villa Linussa. I told her everything. She hugged me.

“Poor Jole, that’s so unfair. What will you do now?”

“You see the King and Queen every day. Can you speak to them? Will you tell them? Can you ask them to do something for us?”

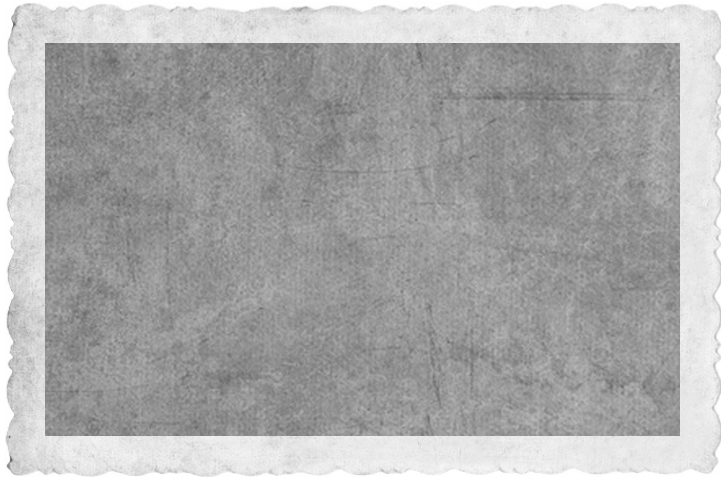
“The Queen’s not here, who knows when she’ll be back in Villa Linussa. The King leaves early every morning for the front and comes back late at night. I hardly ever see them. But I’ll do everything I can, Jole, I promise. In the meantime, tell me who the snake was that went to the police. I’ll take care of him.”

It was the longest Wednesday I can remember. I threw myself into work to take my mind off, but I made one mistake after another. When finishing the hem on a sheet I even managed to get a side mixed up with a corner and made a right old mess. Assunta looked askance at me but said nothing. She already knew. Everyone in the village knew.

Mafalda sat off to the side, on her own, hands on her lap, looking miserable. She didn't want to sew. Every now and then, she'd get up to look out the window at the road below, to see if Father Andrea was on his way back.

We didn't bother to eat. We weren't hungry. At dusk, we went to wait for Father Andrea outside the rectory. *Tu tramontis tu soreli, tu tu cjalis par duc' cuanc... You set, sun, you watch for us all...*

"They're sending her to an internment camp in Florence. It's a bit closer than Abruzzo, Mafalda, but it's still far away. No, I didn't get to see her. I spoke to the Monsignor who is the parish priest at the Our Lady of Graces Church. He knows a lot of people. He said he'll try to write to someone in the Ministry, in Rome, to have her sent home as soon as possible. But for now, the machine has been set in motion and nothing can be done to stop it." Father Andrea stopped to catch his breath. I think he was allowing us time to take it all in. He continued, "There is some good news too. I found Adele Sartori. Apparently she's some kind of relative to you. Did you know you had an aunt?"



Out of Focus 5  
**A woman's face, 1917**

This is not a studio portrait. The person who took the picture caught the woman's face outside, in the street. In fact, a restaurant sign can be seen in the background. The woman in the picture is very old, her hair is pulled tightly back in a bun, she has a broad face, strong bones, and high cheekbones. The most striking thing about her are her eyes: the colour is not clear, they are slightly veiled. She is looking towards the photographer and while her expression could almost be considered sweet, her gaze is firm and direct, piercing the objective as if she can see beyond it. It is not the subject who is out of focus this time but the photographer.



We set off for Udine, Mafalda and I, with Modestine in tow: we were going to stay with the mysterious aunt Adele who wasn't actually a blood relation but had known our mother in some way when she was a child, had grown fond of her and considered her a niece. It was strange mother had never mentioned her to us. But Father Andrea had said that this Aunt Adele of ours had agreed right away to take us and try to help us. So we did what mother had wanted and embarked on the journey.

Going back to Udine with Modestine was quite an endeavour. She seemed to want to stop and salute every tuft of grass she recognized along the way, and even Mafalda, with all her secret languages, couldn't convince her to keep moving. Free of Nena's cart on her hocks and with no other women around her, like the days we used to go to market, the walk to Udine on that vivid green August day must've felt like she'd won a prize: freedom.

We'd tied two sheets together, like a sack, and hung them over her back. Inside we'd placed a few clothes, three kilograms of flour and the Delser biscuit tin. I'd put all our savings into the tin, including the money we'd earned from selling the foal, and

on top was the family photo we'd had taken at the Pignat studio before father and Antonio left for the war. We didn't have much else to bring.

We arrived in Udine in the late afternoon. We crossed the market square and the city centre, heading south towards the inn in Piazzale Cella. Father Andrea had told us that Adele Sartori's house was right beside the inn: a two-storey house made of red brick, with sage-green shutters. We were to knock, three hard raps and two light ones, so she would recognize us.

When the door opened, I thought Adele Sartori was the oldest woman I'd ever seen. Her skin was a nice colour but was scored by so many wrinkles you got lost just looking at them. Her white hair, pleated and rolled round and round into a bun at the nape of her neck, must've been really long. She wasn't wearing a headscarf. Even her dress wasn't like the ones usually worn by old women: she had a kind of billowing smock, a pale lavender blue, secured at the back with a round brooch. The most surprising thing were her hands: even though they were gnarled and bony, and there was no flesh left under the skin, they moved as lightly and lithely as dragonflies. Her hands were the first thing that struck me and the first thing I encountered: when the door opened, her hands flew towards us and fluttered across our heads, cheeks, eyes, cheekbones, ears, eyebrows; Adele Sartori was blind.

She gave Mafalda a caress then lingered on my face.

"Antonia," she said softly. Then she nodded, as if my face had answered a question that only she knew. She felt Modestine's breath and sought confirmation in the reins I held in my hands. "It's a donkey, isn't it? Good creature. Tie it up in the courtyard, around the back. Then you girls come in. You must be hungry."

Her voice was like her hands. Old and young.

I don't know when was the last time I had eaten so much. The bread was so good! Lately, because of the war, we'd been ordered to save flour by adding more bran to the bread. It had become near impossible to swallow. Aunt Adele's bread was different, it was soft, spongy, even a little sweet. Mafalda was munching on it greedily, eyeing up the hunk left on the table.

Aunt Adele watched us, her head back, rocking gently, as if her thoughts were spinning around inside. I say she was looking at us, clearly that's not true: in the dim light of the house, I don't think she could even make out shapes. Yet she seemed to be looking straight at us, as if she could see more than our presence could tell her.

She waited for us to finish eating then asked us to tell her everything, from the beginning: about Austria, father, our brothers, the King, the market, the bridge, and then, finally, about the police officer who arrested mother.

She listened without commenting or asking questions, just rocking her head back and forth as before, with the same small, silent rhythm. It wasn't clear if she was nodding or following our words as if they were music. She did ask one question when we finished though. Just the one. One we could never have expected. In that voice of hers that cut cleanly and calmly, like a warm knife through butter, she asked,

"And does your grandmother know about all this?"

Mafalda stifled a giggle. Our father's parents, grandma Teresa and grandpa Gelindo, had always been just photographs for us, looking out from a large oval frame on the mantelshelf.

"Grandma and grandpa died before I was born," I explained to Aunt Adele while glowering at Mafalda, her hands over her mouth to stop herself laughing. Aunt Adele shook her head.

"I'm not talking about them. I mean Antonia's mother. Your mother's mother."

My mother's mother. She had a mother? She must've had one. It was crazy, but it had never occurred to me before. No one had ever mentioned another grandmother in our house, whether dead or alive. Who was she? Where was she? Why had mother never mentioned her? The questions were burning inside my head, I didn't know where to start. Mafalda had stopped laughing now. She was looking at me, puzzled, waiting for me to say something. Aunt Adele read our silence.

"You don't know anything about your grandmother?"

"No, we don't. Who... where is she?"

I was hoping Aunt Adele would tell us more but she sighed noisily instead and ended the conversation deep in thought.

"Your grandmother, who knows. Poor Antonia. And she didn't say a word to you! She must've thought it better this way." She brushed a thought away and continued in a voice that was suddenly cheerful. "Never mind, girls, it's getting late. Family affairs are like tangled skeins, they take a long time to unravel. Can you hear the bells? It'll be time to go to bed soon, we need to get ready. I'm old, I do things slowly and I tire easily. We'll think about it all tomorrow. You'll find a mattress upstairs, I hope you'll both fit on it. The sheets are in the second drawer, near the wardrobe. I sleep down here in the kitchen because I can't manage the stairs anymore. Sleep well. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

"Are we going to see our new grandmother?" Mafalda asked, never one to be easily fooled by an attempt to change the subject. Aunt Adele took her hand and lifted her fingers, one at a time.

"The first thing we're going to do tomorrow is look for a roof for your donkey. Second, we'll go into town to send a postcard to that nice Father Andrea to tell him you've arrived. Third, we'll look for someone who can sell us some milk because you seem to take a lot of filling. Four, we'll light a candle to the Virgin Mary to ask her to watch over you since I can't."



“And five,” Mafalda added, now lifting up Aunt Adele’s pinky finger, “we’ll unravel the tangled family skein.”

Aunt Adele gave her a half smile. I think she liked that Mafalda was so bold.

“Jole?”

“What?”

“Are you asleep?”

“Yes.”

There was no hope of sleeping. Mafalda was as agitated as a grasshopper in a sack. If she had something gnawing away inside, the silence wouldn’t last long. It didn’t.

“Jole?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I think we should celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?”

“Like you do when a baby’s born. Didn’t you hear? We had a grandmother born to us today!”

Children are amazing. They can often sweep aside the saddest of thoughts in the time it takes to yawn. Our mother had been arrested, our father and brothers were at war who knows where, the only person who could help us was an old blind woman, and Mafalda was thinking about celebrating.

“Mafalda, go to sleep. We don’t know anything about this grandmother. Who knows where she is. Maybe she’s dead. Maybe Aunt Adele is getting her mixed up with someone else. You’ve seen how old she is; at a certain age, memories get mixed up like flour in bread.”

“You don’t understand, Jole. I know tomorrow’s going to be a day we’ll never forget.”

Well, she was right about that at least.

It’s just that we didn’t light any candles the next day, or send postcards or buy milk, or even start looking for our grandmother.

Because at nine o'clock the next morning, the sun was warm already; at ten o'clock Aunt Adele came in from her vegetable patch; at half past ten we put Modestine's reins on; at a quarter to eleven, just as we stepped out into the street, the world went up in smoke.



# Chiara Carminati

## Out of Focus

FUORI FUOCO

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*1914-1918. The story of a family told by a bright young girl. Talking about war from the viewpoint of one who doesn't make it*

“When war broke out we were all pleased”. Jolanda known as Jole was already working at the spinning-wheel at the age of thirteen during the summer of 1914. It didn't take her long to understand and suffer for the consequences of a conflict that sends the men away and leaves the women alone. Separated from her mother, traumatised by the bombings, she and her sister will roam the countryside looking for a grandmother that they had never met before. Through the voice of Jole – a penetrating, vivid first person narrator – their experiences are those of all the women who stay out of the line of fire, far from the front, blurred, almost invisible, while History proceeds, ruthlessly. Thirteen narrated images, like photos missing from a family album, punctuate a narration based on diaries, testimonies, reports and documents.

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**Chiara Carminati** is the author of stories, poems and plays for children and youngsters. She holds workshops and meetings to promote reading in libraries, schools and bookshops. Specialised in the didactics of poetry, she gives courses for teachers and librarians, in Italy and abroad. With the musicians of Linea Armonica she has realised performances of poetry and narrative that combine words, music and images. Among her books *L'estate dei segreti* (Einaudi Ragazzi), *Rime chiaroscure* (with Bruno Tognolini) and *Mare* (Rizzoli), *Parto* (Panini), *L'ultima fuga di Bach* (rueBallu) and the handbooks *Fare poesia* (Mondadori) and *Perl'aparola. Bambini e ragazzi nelle stanze della poesia* (Equilibri). In 2012 she received the Andersen Prize as Best Author. Her website is [www.parolematte.it](http://www.parolematte.it).

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FICTION

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