

Copyright © Insight Publications

Copying for educational purposes

The Australian *Copyright Act 1968* (Act) allows a maximum of one chapter or 10% of the book, whichever is greater, to be copied by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or the body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) under the Act.

For details of the CAL Licence for educational institutions, contact CAL, 19/157 Liverpool Street, Sydney, NSW 2000; telephone (02) 9394 7600, facsimile (02) 9394 7601, email: [info@copyright.com.au](mailto:info@copyright.com.au)

Copying for other purposes

Except as permitted under the Act (for example, any fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review) no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission. All inquiries should be made to the publishers at the address below.

First published in 2004.

Insight Publications Pty Ltd  
ABN 57 005 102 983  
128 Balcombe Road  
Mentone  
Victoria 3194  
Australia.  
Tel: 61 3 9583 5839  
Fax: 61 3 9583 9573  
Email: [books@insightpublications.com.au](mailto:books@insightpublications.com.au)

**[www.insightpublications.com.au](http://www.insightpublications.com.au)**

Cover Design: Graphic Partners  
Internal Design: Sarn Potter  
DTP: SPG  
Series Editor: Robert Beardwood  
Editing: Dianne Bramich  
Printed by Hyde Park Press, South Australia

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication data:  
Beardwood, Robert, 1966-.

Insight text guide: I'm Not Scared – Niccolo Ammaniti.  
ISBN 1 920693 67 3

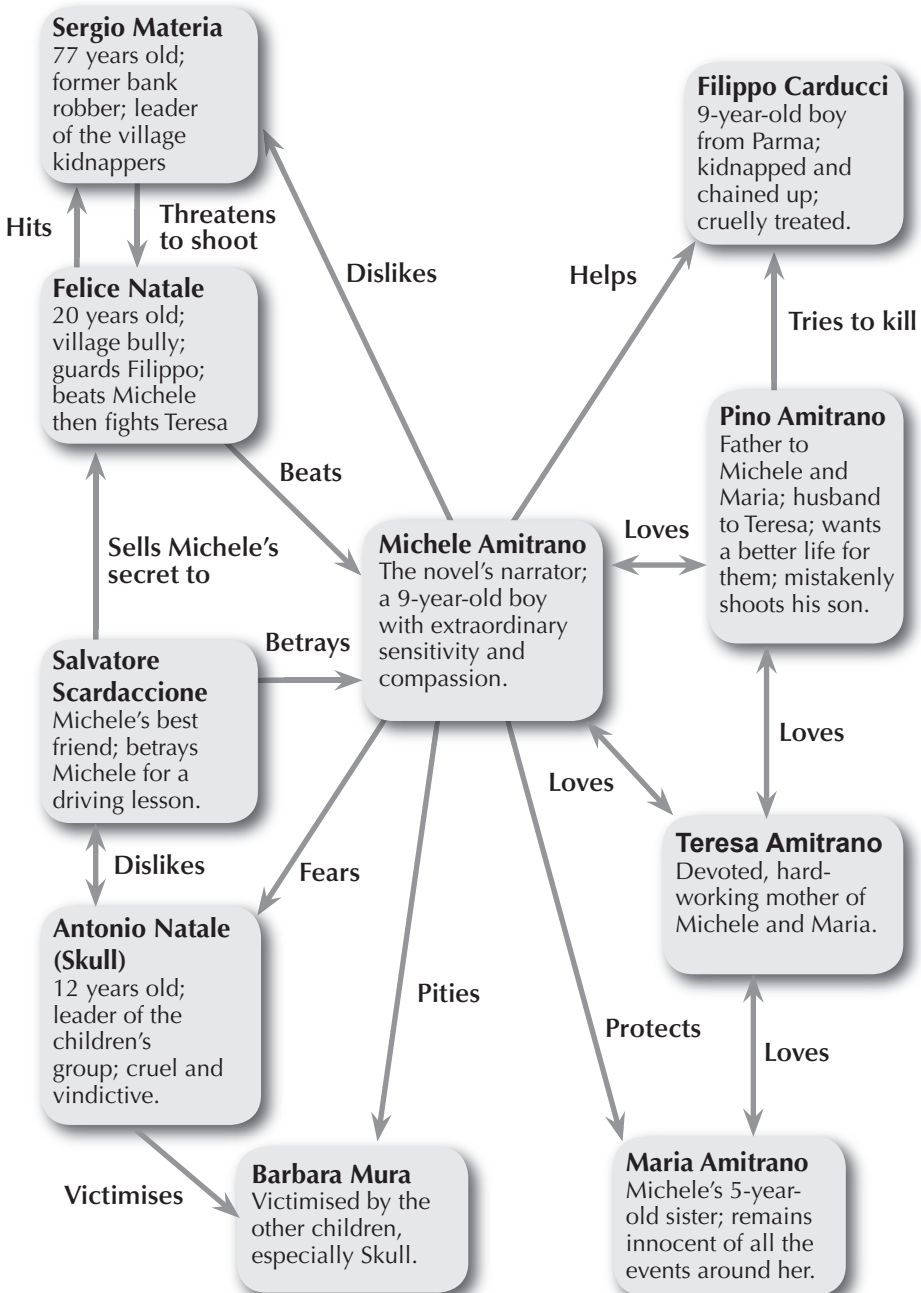
1. Ammaniti, Niccolo, 1966-. Io non ho paura. I. Title.  
(Series: Insight text guide).

853.914

# **contents**

<b>Character map</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Background &amp; context</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Genre, structure &amp; style</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter-by-chapter analysis</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Characters &amp; relationships</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Themes, issues &amp; values</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Questions &amp; answers</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>References &amp; reading</b>	<b>59</b>

## CHARACTER MAP



## INTRODUCTION

Told from the simultaneously naive and discerning perspective of a nine-year-old boy named Michele, and set in the sun-scorched fields of southern Tuscany, *I'm Not Scared* is a thriller with a moral vision. It explores the complex, yet necessary obligations of morality – both for the individual and for society as a whole – and the paralysing grip that fear can exert on the human psyche.

On one level it is a coming-of-age story, in which a precipitous discovery propels Michele from childhood innocence into a world that requires difficult choices to be made and serious responsibilities to be borne. On another level, *I'm Not Scared* is a fable about the persistence and rewards of simple virtues: the loyalty and love of family and friends; the value of compassion for those who are suffering; an appreciation of the natural world in all its phases. It is when the adults of Acqua Traverse lose sight of these virtues, betraying the very values they have taught their children, that things go awry, threatening the existence of everything secure and pleasurable in their lives.

### About Niccolò Ammaniti

The perfectly executed combination of an irresistible narrative drive and Michele's quirky, often comical narrative voice, of compelling characters and universal themes, have launched *I'm Not Scared* onto bestseller lists around the world. Born in Rome in 1966, Niccolò Ammaniti is a young author whose success with this novel follows a relatively modest start to his writing career. Prior to the 2001 Italian publication of *Io non ho paura* (more literally, 'I have no fear'), Ammaniti had published a collection of short stories and two other novels, and had been involved in film adaptations of his fiction. An interest in horror and the grotesque runs through his writing, and is evident again in *I'm Not Scared*. Ammaniti has also worked on the screenplay for the film version of the novel, which began screening in Australian cinemas in 2004.

## BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

### Places in Italy

Acqua Traverse is a fictional place in Italy. Although its name suggests there is 'water across' the region, the novel's landscape is parched and water has to be trucked in each fortnight. Lucignano, the closest main town where the characters shop, is a real town in southern Tuscany, with a history dating back to medieval times. This combination of real and fictional places allows Ammaniti to fuse elements of social realism – especially through his evocative descriptions of the Tuscan countryside, the poverty of the village and the rigours of the summer – with elements of fable and fairytale.

The Carducci family lives in Pavia, which is south of Milan in the northern region of Italy known as Lombardy (in the news report, Giovanni Carducci is referred to as 'the Lombard businessman', p.85). Thus, the Carduccis live in Italy's relatively prosperous north, while the Amitranos live in the south, poor and apparently unable to improve the quality of their lives, at least by legitimate means. As Michele reflects, 'the North was rich and the South was poor. And we were poor' (p.32). The text is certainly sympathetic to the Amitranos' sense of an unfair gap in Italian society between rich and poor, but by narrating events from Michele's perspective continually questions the adults' moral judgments as they attempt to bridge this social divide.

The other important Italian city referred to is Rome, which is where Sergio comes from, and where Salvatore's father, the Avvocato Emilio Scardaccione, is 'a big shot' (p.3). As the centre of Italian government, Rome represents the larger forces of the world, seemingly remote from the isolated village of Acqua Traverse but also able to reach into it through the influence of these two characters. Intriguingly, the Avvocato works on the side of the law (Michele refers to him as 'the lawyer' on p.155), whereas Sergio appears to be a career criminal. In the events of the narrative, though, both work together as criminals, suggesting that those who are powerful attend more to their own interests than to the interests of society or of the law.

## Italian Terms

From time to time in this text the translator, Jonathan Hunt, leaves a few words in the original Italian, allowing the narrative to retain something of its local colour and distinctive cultural identity. However, this can leave English-speaking readers (at least, those who don't speak Italian) unsure of what is actually being said at a particular point; below are translations of some of these Italian terms and phrases.

- The title, *Io non ho paura*, translates literally as 'I have no fear', although in informal contexts – such as those portrayed in the text – the translation 'I'm not scared' is accurate.
- Salvatore's father is 'the Avvocato Emilio Scardaccione' (p.3): 'Avvocato' means 'solicitor'.
- Michele hears an aria from Verdi's opera *La Traviata* on the radio as his mother smacks him for returning home late (p.79); the line he remembers is: '*Croce. Croce e delizia. Delizia al cor*'. This translates in the operatic context as 'agony and ecstasy', or in more prosaic terms, 'pain and delight', with 'Croce' meaning 'cross to bear'. The aria thus provides an ironic commentary on the action, since Teresa is finding Michele to be a source of both pain and delight in her life.
- Barbara Mura sings "*O bella ciao!*" (p.96): this means 'O beautiful day' – a form of greeting to the morning.

## GENRE, STRUCTURE & STYLE

### Structure

The novel is divided into ten chapters, which are neither numbered nor titled. Each of the first seven chapters corresponds to a single day, typically beginning with Michele waking and ending with him falling asleep. In this way, a relatively ordered, predictable existence is reflected in the structure of the narrative. The ordering of time signifies the continuity of other kinds of order, such as the integrity of families, community life and the moral order that governs human interaction. However, the seventh chapter begins with the line 'Everything was in disarray' (p.159), indicating that this existence is under threat.

The eighth chapter (pp.168-73) begins with 'And everything stopped', signalling the end of any kind of certainty about what will happen next. The days continue to pass, but uneventfully and undifferentiated. This marks the suspension of known structures, including those of the family and of the moral order. In the text, the moral order includes being true to one's promises, being compassionate towards those who are less fortunate, and being able to trust one's parents unquestioningly. Such structures make sense of existence, providing explanations of causes and effects. However, from chapter 8, such structures are (at least for Michele) no longer a 'given' of existence; even questions are suspended.

The feeling of taut stillness in the eighth chapter is partially relieved by the restoration of the friendship between Michele and Salvatore and then, in the following chapter (pp.174-87), by the breaking of the storm and the information that Filippo is still alive. In the tenth and final chapter, the inversion of any kind of natural order in Michele's life is reflected by his waking not in the morning (as in the earlier chapters) but in the middle of the night.

## Language: Images of Cruelty and Capture

Although the narrative is apparently simply told, it is in fact intricately crafted. Many images introduced early in the narrative – innocuous enough at first – anticipate later incidents of much greater weight and significance.

Images of cruelty and capture introduce these topics as central concerns for the text from the beginning. At Michele's suggestion, a hen is placed in a bag to be fed to Melichetti's pigs, but is later impaled on a stick; this is merely the first of many images of entrapment and cruelty towards animals. Italo Natale's dogs are kept 'locked up...summer and winter, behind wire netting' (p.66), and their howling one night makes Michele look 'towards the hill' (p.66), thinking of the boy whose freedom, like that of the dogs, has been taken away from him.

Another image that puts the adults' treatment of Filippo in a chilling light is that of a cat playing with lizards, dismembering them until they become bored, when they leave their prey to a long, slow death (p.184). This sense of cruelty being for amusement, rather than survival, and of indifference to the suffering of another creature, is inconsistent with most

people's conception of ethical behaviour. Yet Michele makes a clear link between this image and his own father's treatment of Filippo.

Michele's imagination also furnishes images of entrapment, mostly through the figures of the Wicked Witch who catches Pierino Pierone and 'tied him up in a sack' (p.90) and the ogre who has 'a sack full of children' (p.114). These images provide a commentary on Filippo's capture and entrapment, suggesting that his experience is less an isolated case than a symptom of a society regulated not by pity and compassion but by fear, greed and cruelty.

## Images That Gain Significance Through Repetition

Some incidents referred to early in the narrative are later reprised, or echoed, thus giving them much greater emotional impact. These include Teresa giving Felice 'a thrashing' (p.77) after Felice had pulled the ears of Michele and Skull. This incident is echoed when Teresa fights Felice over his treatment of Michele at the abandoned house; on this occasion there is much more at stake, and Felice is a much more threatening figure (pp.151-2). Additionally, the fact that Felice had pulled at the boys' ears anticipates the threat that he will cut off one or both of Filippo's ears (p.86).

When Michele wonders about the boy's identity, he remembers his father telling him that 'Monsters don't exist...It's men you should be afraid of' (p.49). It seems to be sensible, father-to-son advice, but Michele does not imagine that it is his own father, in fact, of whom he needs to be afraid. Michele remembers his father's words on the last afternoon (p.184), and their real significance becomes apparent to him.

**Q** There are several images of falling in the narrative. What are they, and how do they relate to Michele's feelings of fear and vulnerability?

## Style: The Use of Humour

The narrative tension steadily increases throughout the novel – which follows the overall form of a thriller – but it is leavened by humour. Elements of the horror genre in this narrative are generally comic in their effect, not least because Michele realises that the fantastical creatures inhabiting his imagination – ogres, witches, and so on – do not actually

exist. Also, these horror elements are usually so exaggerated that they tend to relieve narrative tension rather than heighten it. When Michele imagines the boy in the hole to be dead, he envisages the corpse with ‘worms coming out of his blue lips’ and eyes ‘like two hard-boiled eggs’ (p.39). It is the exaggerated grotesqueness of this image, the incongruity of a person having hard-boiled eggs as eyeballs, that makes it partly horrific, and partly comic.

Similarly, when Salvatore tells the ‘true story’ (p.80) of a man’s son brought back to life by a wizard, he describes in graphic detail the son’s ‘brains running out’ (p.81). The story, initially tragic in tone, comes to seem so divorced from reality that the image is more comic than distressing. Salvatore’s laconic, understated style further enhances this effect.

Humour also enters the text through references to bodily functions and excretions. The idea of boys urinating in unusual places invariably introduces a comic note, as when Michele’s ‘pee drummed on the tarpaulin of the truck’ (p.87) or Sergio’s son died ‘with his dick sticking out of his pants’ (p.118) after (apparently) relieving himself by the side of a road. Maria is always amused by stories ‘with doo-doo in them’ (p.90), and there are several such episodes in *I’m Not Scared*. Michele ‘thrashed about in the shit’ (p.47) after tipping over Filippo’s bucket, and then at the end of the narrative he smears himself with the ‘piss-soaked earth’ around Melichetti’s pigs to avoid provoking them (p.203) – only to slip ‘in the dung’ moments later (p.204).

## Michele’s Unique World View

The most consistent source of humour, though, is Michele’s innocent, idiosyncratic way of viewing the world and imagining how things operate in it. Even as he contemplates being unable to return to Filippo, and understands the serious danger that Filippo is in, he imagines his father passing on his apologies: “Michele can’t come...If he comes they’ll kill you. He sends his regards” (p.162). It is a vision of a simple, decent action that is so inconsistent with reality that even Michele realises its incongruity.

At other times, Michele provides a whimsical image to explain his experience, frequently relieving the dramatic tension of his narrative in the process. For instance, when describing the knock to his head while fighting Felice, he explains that: ‘A kettle started whistling in my head’ (p.152).

Similarly, when Michele realises that Salvatore has betrayed him, he recalls his image of the Scardaccione sisters 'on the edge of the quicksands beavering away on their sewing machine and me sinking' (p.148), a poignant image of human indifference to suffering that is injected with a comic note by the idea of the women throwing honey drops at the sinking Michele. Again, this is a very significant, serious image of a vulnerable person sinking or having fallen and of those above being able to help but unwilling to do so – yet it is lightened with humour.

## CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER ANALYSIS

### Epigraph

Ammaniti prefaces the narrative with a brief epigraph by the American novelist Jack London (1876-1916), who became famous for adventure and travel narratives such as *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906). The importance of the epigraph lies in its image 'fallen into darkness', which anticipates not only Filippo's entrapment in a hole in the ground, but also Michele's 'fall' into a world of moral 'darkness' and even the fragmentation of the village community. This sense of uncertainty and confusion is hinted at in the epigraph's third sentence: 'And at the instant he knew, he ceased to know', which encapsulates Michele's bewilderment from the moment he comes to 'know' about Filippo's plight.

### (Chapter 1) (pp.1-41)

**Summary:** *The six children of Acqua Traverse discover an abandoned farmhouse; Michele discovers what appears to be a dead boy in a concealed hole, but tells no-one.*

The novel opens on a summer's day in mid June 1978, in the vast wheat fields surrounding a tiny Italian village called Acqua Traverse. The six children of the village are in the midst of a race to the top of a hill; the narrative thus begins with action, only later filling in the details of the setting, the characters' names and attributes, and the circumstances that have led up to the race.

The narrative style is extremely simple, consistent with the world view of a nine-year-old, relatively uneducated country boy. However, many of these early descriptions of characters and landscapes are loaded with meaning, anticipating later events. The intensity of the summer heat