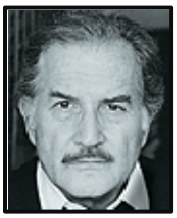
Emilio Salgari: Literature's Invisible Man



"The books Sartre had read as a child were the books we read in the Latin world, which I read as a child: Emilio Salgari, without whom there would be no Italian, French, Spanish, or Latin American Literature."

Carlos Fuentes*, The Paris Review, Vol. 81, Winter 1981*

High praise from one of Latin America's foremost writers for a man virtually unknown in the English speaking world. A remarkable statement given that no Italian literary scholar in the 80s would have made that remark, Mr. Salgari did not appear in Encyclopedias of World Literature until the late 1990s, if at all. So what would cause Carlos Fuentes to say something like that? Quotes like these:

" I found some of Mr. Salgari's books in an old trunk in my grandfather's basement, that trunk was the only legacy of my father who abandoned the family when I was very young. I read those books with a flashlight under the blanket in bed and those strong characters and great adventures shaped my taste in books for a long time."
~ Isabel Allende

"During my childhood I got the best of my information about exotic countries not from textbooks but by reading the adventure novels of Jules Verne, Emilio Salgari and Karl May."
~ Umberto Eco

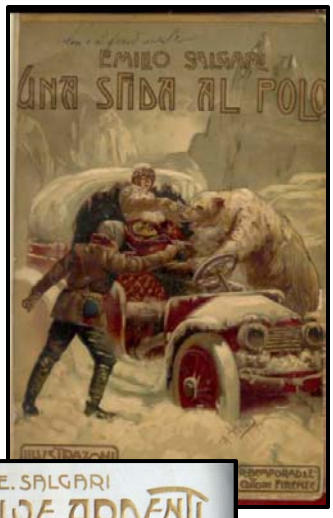
"In the summer of 1904, at age five, my mother gave me *The Black Corsair* and The *Pirates of Malaysia,* books I still own to this day. So at age five I entered those exotic worlds that Salgari created in his numerous novels. I think I even preferred those stories to the more popular and more sophisticated works of Jules Verne."
~ Jose Luis Borges

Many modern writers from Italy, Spain and Latin America first fell in love with stories and story telling by reading Salgari's adventures. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Pablo Neruda and Arturo Perez Reverte are but a few of those that read Salgari's novels in their youth, novels that got them hooked on reading. "He delivered excitement and stimulated the imagination of Italian readers," wrote adventure writer Vittorio G. Rossi, "providing a sharp contrast to the stagnant literature of his times."

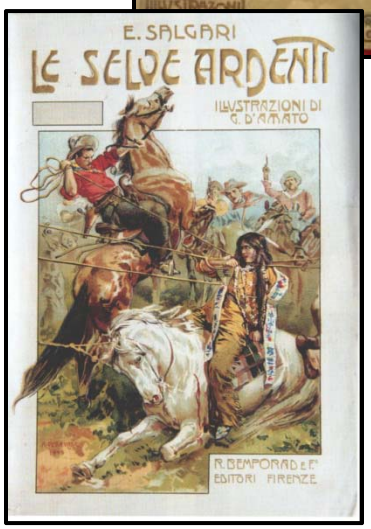
But who was this man that influenced so many?

The Emilio Salgari I grew up with was larger than life. His biography in his own words:

"I was born in Verona in 1862 to a family of modest merchants. At age 14, I entered the Naval Academy in Venice. I obtained my Captain's papers at age 17 and began to travel the Seven Seas. I retired at 26 and returned to Verona to become editor of the *Nuova Arena* where I wrote my first stories: *Tay See*, *The Tiger of Malaysia* and others. A few years later I became editor of the *Arena* then at 32 I retired from journalism and dedicated myself to writing novels. At 34, I was knighted by Her Majesty Queen Margherita of Savoy for my contributions to literature."



He claimed to have travelled throughout the American West where he met Buffalo Bill; he had explored the Sudan, lived at the Mahdi's court, loved Indian princesses, sailed among the many islands of the Far East. Here was a man of action that had explored the world and lived many adventures, adventures he would use for the basis of his 80 plus novels and hundreds of short stories to captivate readers worldwide. At dinner parties he regaled his hosts with tales from his many voyages, guests to his home would often be shown artifacts acquired in far off lands. Throughout the 20th century illustrations of him on the back of his novels showed him clad in his captain's uniform. His memoirs were filled with adventures in the most exotic lands. A remarkable life, envied by many.



Except that very little of it was true.

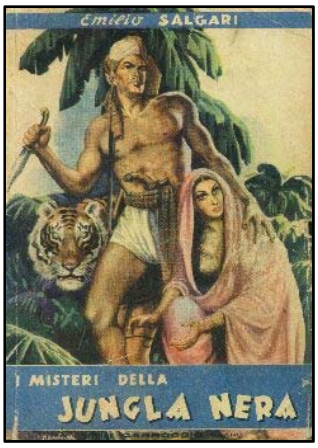
He did meet Buffalo Bill, but at Sherman's Wild West Show in Verona, not, as he claimed, while exploring Nebraska. He was knighted for his stories, that much was true; he founded the adventure genre in Italy, his tales captivating young and old, and inspiring many to take up the pen.

And what stories they were. Adventures in the American West, Polar Exploration, tales of civil war in Cuba and the Philippines, tales of love and adventure in Africa, Australia and the Far East. But he is most remembered for the pirates he created, Sandokan and The Black Corsair, characters known throughout Italy and Latin America even by those who have not read their adventures.

But like his many novels, Salgari's autobiography was a mixture of fact and fabrication.

He drew his facts from encyclopedias, maps and journals. He collected stories from sailors returning to port and passed them off has his own. Though he proclaimed to be a captain, Salgari's had actually failed out of The Naval Institute. He made only one sea voyage in his life, a three month journey from Verona to Brindisi aboard a merchant ship. When he came back, he showed his friends various artifacts from his travels in the Far East, artifacts he had purchased from some vendor along the Italian coast. The legend had begun; a legend he would promote and defend for the rest of his life.

Salgari was first hired as a young reporter for La Nuova Arena in 1882. The following year, he published his first serialized story *La Tigre della Malesia,* a tale of love and adventure that saw the birth of his most legendary characters: Sandokan a pirate, known as The Tiger of Malaysia, Marianna, his beloved, and Yanez de Gomera, Sandokan's loyal friend, a chain-smoking, unflappable Portuguese adventurer based on himself. It would later be edited and reissued as *Le Tigri di Mompracem*, translated into numerous languages and become popular worldwide. For writing that series, Salgari was given a cake and a bottle of wine in addition to his usual salary.

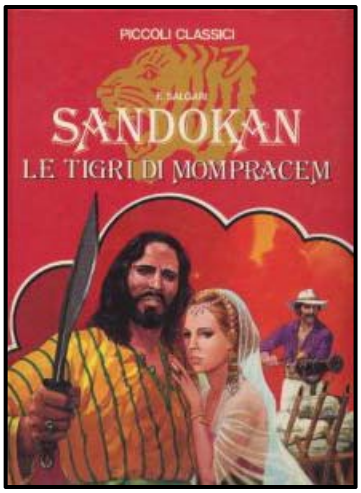


Tigre was so well received the owners of the *Nuova Arena* had Mr. Salgari write serials full time. His tales increased the paper's readership to the point where a rival paper, *The Arena* , lured him away by offering him an editor's position. As his popularity increased, jealous rivals began to dig for dirt. A reporter from another paper, discovered that Salgari had never graduated from the Naval Academy and derided "Captain Salgari" by calling him a "cabin boy" in an article.

Salgari, a talented swordsman, challenged him to a duel the next morning. He made quick work of his opponent, sending him to the hospital after a few rapid exchanges. Though victorious, Salgari was imprisoned for dueling and spent six days in jail, but he emerged more popular than ever.

At age 34 Mr. Salgari moved to Torino where he concentrated on writing novels for a series of publishing houses. He wrote 84 in all, of which three are considered his greatest classics:

I misteri della jungle nera – The Mystery of the Black Jungle, a story about a tiger hunter that falls in love with a young woman held prisoner by the Thugs, a band of stranglers that worship the goddess Kali.



Il corsaro nero: The Black Corsair, about an Italian nobleman Emilio di Roccanera turned pirate to avenge the murder of his brothers. The Corsair series was eventually expanded over a series of five novels.

And *Le Tigri di Mompracem* where Sandokan "The Tiger of Malaysia" the most feared pirate in Malaysia falls in love with Marianna, half Italian, half British, The Pearl of Labuan, the niece of one of his most hated enemies. It is Italy's second most famous love story, a story that spawned 10 sequels and was the blueprint for the majority of Salgari's tales of adventure.

The hero, usually a pirate, a bandit, an outlaw or a rebel, falls in love with a young woman who is the daughter of an enemy or imprisoned by an evil foe. Separated by "an abyss" the hero will face assorted trials: fending off enemies, battling wild beasts, sailing through storms, fighting battles on land and at sea until in the end, love triumphs. Sound familiar? Salgari, a native of Verona, rewrote Romeo and Juliet several times, setting their love against an exotic backdrop, to popular acclaim.

Where he differed from other adventure writers of his era was in his treatment of women. Most female characters in adventure novels at the turn of the century were love interests that would invariably need to be rescued at some point. Strong women most often appeared as evil rulers or enemy spies. Salgari's views were progressive. His women could hunt, shoot, fish, or wield a sword with the best of their male counterparts.

Captain Dolores del Castillo ran guns to the Spanish past the American blockade during the Cuban War of Independence in Salgari's *The Captain of the Yucatan.* Shima, the daughter of a Japanese daimyo, blows up a Russian ship during the Russian Japanese War in *The Heroine of Port Arthur*. His *Capitan Tempesta,* is a story about a young woman looking for her missing lover in the Holy Land during the Crusades. Disguised as a male knight, she quickly earns the reputation as the best and bravest warrior on the battlefield.

With such tales, filled with pirates, adventurers, explorers and non stop action, Salgari's novels soon began to be translated worldwide. His novels spread throughout Europe: France, Spain, Russia, Germany. In Latin America he rivaled Jules Verne.

His personal life however was not as fortunate. In 1892, Salgari married the love of his life, the theater actress Ida Peruzzi. The couple had four children. But despite the great success of his novels, financial security and social status always eluded them. Though knighted and widely read, Salgari's writing style was always panned by critics and academics who considered it crude and unrefined.

In early 1903 Ida began to show signs of dementia. Medical bills began to mount, keeping Salgari chained to his desk, writing prodigiously to make ends meet. He translated novels, edited his own adventure newspaper and wrote under a couple of aliases to bring in more money. At one point, too poor to purchase a replacement, he wrote with a broken fountain pen, held together by a piece of string.

As his wife grew worse, Salgari too began to suffer. His imagination, the source of so many stories, began to falter and he feared he was loosing his ability to write. In 1910 he attempted suicide, but was rescued and nursed back to health. In 1911 his wife was confined to a madhouse. Salgari found life without her unbearable. Six days after she was committed, he got up one morning, said goodbye to his children, then strolled to the park, drew out a knife and committed seppuku, the traditional suicide of the Japanese samurai. He was 49.

His final words were for his publishers, "I ask of you that have grown rich off my hide, all the while keeping my family in poverty, to at least have the decency to pay for my funeral."

But though the dreamer was gone the stories did not die. Demand for his adventures continued to grow. Publishers found lost manuscripts, hired ghost writers to work from outlines Salgari had left unfinished or simply had them create stories from scratch. In all, there were 64 novels attributed to Salgari after his death, written by authors long forgotten. Sandokan remained his most popular character, other writers were eager to write new stories about The Tiger of Malaysia, a fate shared by few characters in popular fiction: Sherlock Holmes, Conan, and the various Star Trek Crews.

Had he lived, Salgari would have seen his stories capture a new medium. Just three years after his death, one of his novels would help revolutionize the world of film.

Cabiria the landmark Italian epic directed by Giovanni Pastrone bears many similarities to Emilio Salgari's 1908 adventure novel *Cartagine in Fiamme* (*Carthage is Burning*). Salgari had never been employed or credited as a writer; however, it is evident that scenes and plot points had been "borrowed" from his novel. Gabriele D'Annunzio was billed as the official screenwriter, but D'Annunzio had been brought on board to help revise the film after it had been shot, earning the credit by changing the title to Cabiria, changing the name of some of the characters and rewriting the captions, using more grandiloquent expressions than those originally employed by Pastrone. The three-hour movie with its grand proportions and cast of thousands created a sensation throughout Italy. It pioneered epic screen production, camera movements, and foreshadowed the work of D.W. Griffith, Eisenstein, De Mille and others.

It would be the first of many films based on his work.

The majority of Salgari's big screen adaptations were taken from the pirate tales he had so skillfully brought to life. Just as Hollywood had its pirate swashbuckling era in the 20s, 30s and 40s, the early days of the Italian film industry brought many a high sea adventure to the screen. Mr. Salgari's Corsair adventures have been the basis for over 20 films, including 8 adaptations of *The Black Corsair*.

In the 1920s Vitale De Stefano made a series of silent films based on *Il corsaro nero* and it's four sequels. Amleto Palermi's 1936 version spared no expense. Ships were built specifically for the movie, the director filming a live boarding raid on location. It was popular throughout Italy and Latin America and subsequently remade as *El corsario negro* by Chano Urueta in Mexico in the 1940s.

PROXIMAMENTE SE ESTRENARA EN LA HABANA
LA MEJOR PELICULA DEL AÑO:

EL CORSARIO NEGRO

Esté al tanto de esta fecha, que marcará un acontecimiento artístico sin precedentes.

SERA DISTRIBUIDA EN CUBA POR LA REPUBLIC PICTURES OF CUBA

The movies fed book sales, which were also adapted to comic books and Salgari adventure magazines. Salgari's legend as explorer, adventurer, and writer knew no bounds. By the 1950s he was the best selling Italian author worldwide. Dante was number 2.

As the Italian film industry grew, directors and producers that had grown up on Salgari's novels decided to try to bring his novels to an American audience. First up was one of Salgari's unsinkables: *The Mystery of the Black Jungle*. In 1955 Lex Barker appeared as the tiger hunter Tremal-Naik in the 1955 B-movie of the same name. Though it did well enough in Europe and Latin America to spawn a sequel, it failed to make much of an impression in the US.

In the 1960's Primo Zeglio directed *Morgan the Pirate,* a Spaghetti Swashbuckler starring Steve Reeves. Reeves was the Arnold Schwarzenegger of his generation, a body builder that had risen to fame in the popular Hercules Sword and Sandal films. Even President Kennedy was said to have been a fan. *Morgan* was a great hit, generating novelizations and comic books in the US. Impressed by that success, MGM decided to venture into a coproduction to bring Salgari's most legendary creation to the screen. Sandokan would finally be introduced to American audiences.

Reeves was cast in the lead, exchanging sandals for pirate boots and a turban. Umberto Lenzi would direct, the locations were exotic, there were battle scenes showing off Reeve's great strength and a cigarette smoking chimp for a bit of levity. *Sandokan the Great* hit theatres in 1963 but though popular it did not generate the response *Morgan* had received. It made enough to generate a sequel *The Pirates of Malaysia*. Sandokan was modified for American tastes, Reeves got rid of the turban and his boots were replaced by sandals, perhaps to appeal to fans of his *Hercules*. But America took little interest.

Other Sandokan movies were made in the mid-sixties. Ray Danton took his turn playing the pirate in Luigi Capuano's *Sandokan against the Leopard of Sarawak* (aka *Throne of Vengeance*.) and later reprised the role along with most of the original cast in *Sandokan Fights Back* (aka *The Conqueror and the Empress*). But they too failed to impress.

Though Salgari's characters failed to capture North American audiences, his style of story telling, fast-paced, filled with great battles, blood, violence and punctuated with humour laid the foundations for a genre that became quite popular across the Atlantic: The Spaghetti Western. Iconic director Sergio Leone's outlaw heroes were inspired by Salgari's piratical adventurers as were the plots and characters in movies by Primo Zeglio, Umberto Lenzi and Sergio Sollima. Leone's work would influence numerous directors: George Lucas, Stephen Spielberg, Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino among them. Emilio Salgari, Grandfather of the Spaghetti Western, laid the foundations for the kinds of movies that helped to make actors like Clint Eastwood an international star.

It took a Spaghetti Western director, Sergio Sollima to give Salgari's characters to their greatest cinematic fame. In 1976, his 6 hour *Sandokan* miniseries starring Indian actor Kabir Bedi as Sandokan and Carol Andre as Marianna rocketed to # 1 in countries throughout Europe. Eighty million viewers a week tuned in to watch. Merchandising was spectacular. Books, comic books, soundtracks, action figures, posters… Sandokan was everywhere, battling across the tiny screen in Italian, Spanish, French and German. I'm going to give you a glimpse of this legendary production.

Just a little preamble before I run the clip: Sandokan disguised as an Indian prince, has met and fallen in love with Marianna. While staying with her and her uncle, Lord James, they are invited on a tiger hunt.

Now here it is, the coolest clip from the series.

Show clip: http://www.rohpress.com/Kabir_Bedi_Sandokan_clip.wmv

Pretty exciting, huh.

The cast proved so popular that Sergio, Kabir and Carole were reunited for another Salgari classic: *The Black Corsair*. It too did well. Kabir Bedi was a household name. Fans could not get enough swashbuckling action.

Pirate stories had reached the height of popularity. They left audiences begging for more, until, well … this happened…

Star Wars changed the story-telling landscape. They 80s quickly became about science fiction, fantasy, the future. *ET, Aliens, The Terminator* ruled the screens. Though some tried to adapt Salgari classics to those realities by revamping and updating his titles with such novels as *The Mystery of the Black Star* and *The Pirates of the Galaxy*, his books soon began to disappear from bookstores. Though a few TV movie adaptations of his novels appeared in Italy in the late 80s and early 90s, none captured the public imagination. Kabir Bedi even tried a comeback as Sandokan in two films*, Sandokan Returns* and *The Son of Sandokan*, mediocre efforts best forgotten; *The Son of Sandokan* was so disappointing, the RAI refused to air it.

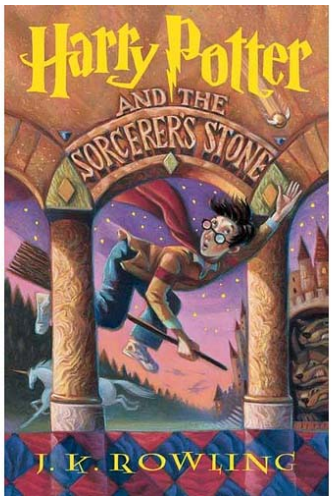
Libraries, and small societies would discuss his books from time to time, but for the majority of the reading public, Salgari's time had come to an end. *The Mystery of the Black Jungle* and a few Sandokan titles remained on the shelves, along with *The Black Corsair* but most of his work fell out of print.

Then in Spain in the mid 90s something happened. A new Sandokan cartoon caught the attention of viewers. Sandokan, drawn as a tiger quickly grew in popularity and was soon exported to France and Germany. Even England began to take an interest in the exploits of the Tiger of Malaysia.

Not to be outdone, the RAI made its own Sandokan cartoon. Filled with action and adventure, it quickly caught on with kids. A second Sandokan series was followed by a Black Corsair series.

Though the animated stories were popular, his novels, save for a handful of classics, were still not on shelves.

Until this happened …



JK Rowling made it cool to read, and as kids returned to books, publishers scrambled to meet the need.

In 2001 Fabbri published the first new Salgari series in over 25 years. Salgari's complete works with reproductions of the original illustrations were sold through newspaper stands throughout Italy. The first volume, *The Mystery of the Black Jungle* sold 100,000 copies in its first week. Salgari it seemed had made a comeback.

The first National Salgari Association was also formed that year. It began hosting national conferences discussing the author's work. New biographies began to appear as did reevaluations of his work.

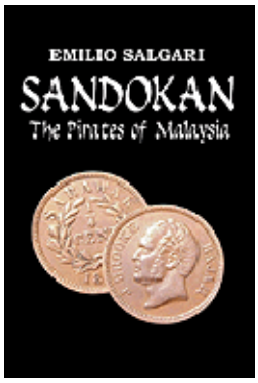
You'll note Che Guevara here in one of the posters. As a boy Che was a huge fan; he read 62 of Mr. Salgari's adventures. His biographer Paco Taibo went so far as to say that Che's ant-imperialism was salgariano in origin. Whether that's true or not can be debated by others, what we do know is that Che, the revolutionary, the idealist, used to read Mr. Salgari's books aloud to his daughter Hilda, passing on his favorite stories.

Salgari's resurrection was made complete by one last bit of unexpected help: *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Johnny Depp made pirates fun and exciting, and publishers scrambled to fill the shelves with new editions of Mr. Salgari's classic adventures.

Video games and DVDS of the Solima classics quickly hit the shelves. A play about two friends that stumble upon Salgari's ghost in their attic went on tour throughout Italy.

New modern translations appeared in Spanish, Portuguese, French, German, and Russian. The world it seemed was ready to rediscover an old friend.

Now as Italian Cultural Institutes worldwide are celebrating Mr. Salgari's works with exhibits and talks it gives me great pleasure to announce the publication of the first ever English translation of three of his most popular Sandokan classics: *Sandokan: The Tigers of Mompracem*, *Sandokan: The Pirates of Malaysia* and *Sandokan: The Two Tigers,* by Canadian publisher ROH Press. The novels are available thorough all major online retailers and can be ordered from your local bookstore.



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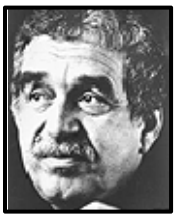
A few last quotes…



In 1936 Gabriel Garcia Marquez (age 8) went to live with his father for a time in Sucre. He studied at Zipaquirá, a place that still holds many painful memories and where he spent a great amount of time in solitude. Of that time he writes: "Zipaquira was a cold city… I studied in a large boarding school with two or three hundred children... Though there were no classes on Saturdays and Sundays, I would not leave the dormitory, not wanting to cope with the sadness and indifference of the townspeople. During those years of solitude, I spent all my free time reading the books of Jules Verne and Emilio Salgari."

From ages one to ten I lived in Cochbamba, Bolivia. With regard to that city, where I was innocent and happy, I remember not so much the things that I did and the people that I knew, but rather the books that I read: *Sandokan, Nostradamus, The Three Musketeers, Cagliostro, Tom Sawyer, Sinbad*. Stories of pirates, explorers and bandits, romantic love … occupied the best part of my time. And because it was intolerable that these magic books should come to an end, I sometimes invented new chapters for them, or else changed the ending. Those additions and corrections to other people's stories were the first pieces that I wrote, the first signs of my vocation as a story-teller. ~ Mario Vargas Llosa, *Making Waves: Essays*

"I spent a large part of my childhood in my grandfather's library, devouring the adventure classics of Alexandre Dumas, Emilio Salgari, Joseph Conrad and Robert Louis Stevenson."

~ Arturo Perez Reverte

"I grew older. Books began to interest me. Buffalo Bill's adventures and Salgari's voyages carried me far away into the world of dreams..."

~ Pablo Neruda, Memoirs