

Circulating Women's Stories

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Figure 1. Lucciola, August 1910. © Archives of Società di Verona

During the first thirty years of the twentieth century, *Lucciola* (meaning ‘firefly’ in Italian) was founded as an original, handwritten monthly journal, the postal exchange of which lasted for almost 18 years. These were years subsuming Giolittian Italy’s successes and crises, the First World War, discussions on suffragism, and Fascism’s rise to power.

The authors of the journal – who were also its readers – were all young women from ‘good’ families. They were educated and refined but imprisoned in the silence and isolation of their domestic and provincial lives. *Lucciola* was their ‘travelling intellectual salon’ and today it represents a precious and relatively rare testimony of female ideas – and to some extent feminist views – of the middle and upper-middle classes of the early nineteen-hundreds. Of the 115 booklets produced in total, 107 (each existing as a single copy) are stored at the cultural centre Società letteraria di Verona in Veneto, Italy, where they have been digitalised and made available for online consultation.

An Inkwell and a Ream of Papers

In a photo from the early years of the twentieth century (Fig. 2), one may see *Lucciola*'s founder, Lina Caico. The image shows a young woman sitting next to a wall whitened by lime. She wears big dusty shoes, her hair collected in a chignon, and a simple dress protected by an apron as if it were to indicate that no woman, not even the landlady or the landlord's daughter, could avoid her female duties. The year is 1908 and she has a ream of papers on her knees; these papers are the first issue of *Lucciola*.



Figure 2. Lina Caico working on the first issue of *Lucciola*, 1908. © Archives of Società Letteraria di Verona

Lina Caico lived in Montedoro, in the province of Caltanissetta, with her father Eugenio, an aristocrat who owned *solfataras* (sulphur mines), and her mother, Louise Hamilton, a French-Irish noblewoman who was an ethnologist, photographer, translator and writer. Lina spent her youth between Bordighera, Nice, Montedoro and London. She studied in

an English college, spoke French and translated the work by the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, winner of the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature. She also held a considerable correspondence with various early twentieth-century intellectuals, including Ezra Pound. Upon returning to her remote and underdeveloped Sicilian village, she decided to escape her intellectual isolation. She mustered other women from distant places around Italy who, like her, had returned to their father's or husband's provincial home after studying abroad, and who similarly wanted to avoid the destiny of mother or housewife. The monthly arrival of *Lucciola* became for all of them, in Lina Caico's words, a 'true ray of sunshine'.²

² Translated from the original: 'Un vero raggio di sole' (*Leggere Le Voci: Storia Di 'Lucciola' Una Rivista Scritta a Mano 1908-1926*, ed. by Paola Azzolini and Daniela Brunelli (Verona: Cierre Edizioni, 1995), p. 17).

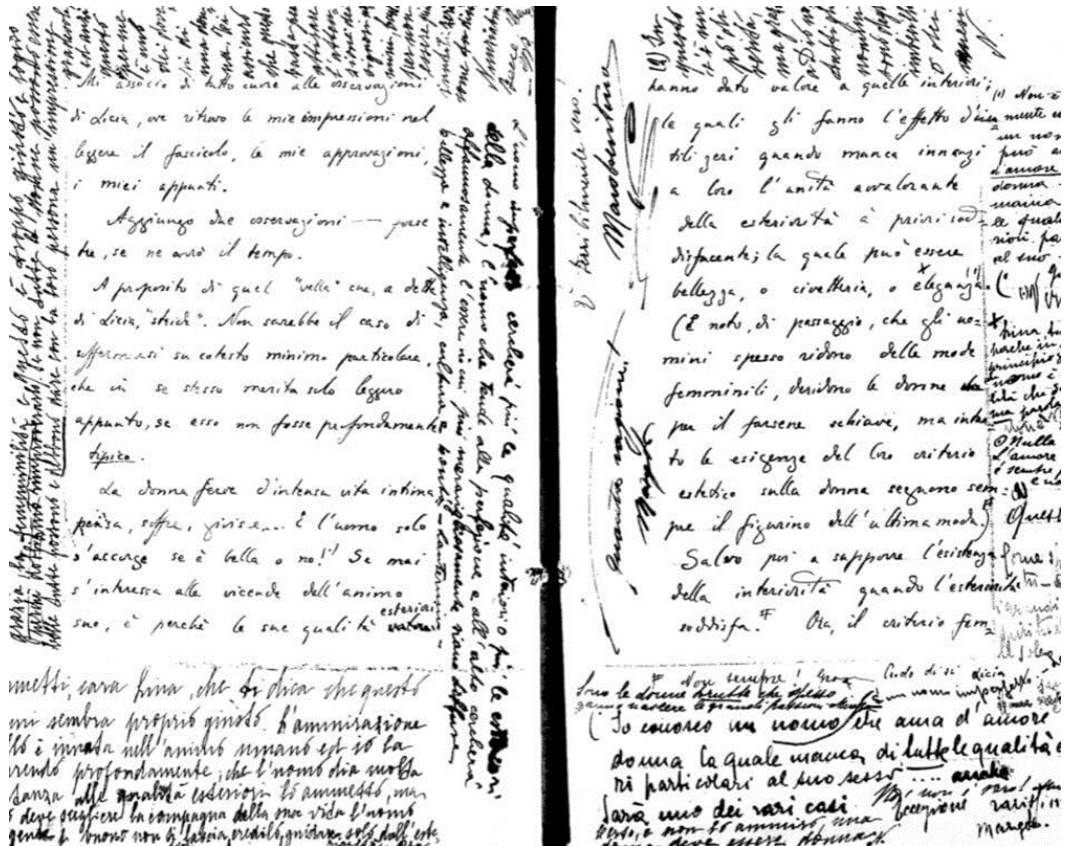


Figure 3. Observations and comments on a page from Lucciola, January 1914.

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For *Lucciola*, Lina Caico was inspired by other women's journals – like *Mouche volante*, *Parva favilla* and *Firefly* – that were circulating in French, German and English female boarding schools. Thus, she decided to create a similar project. She wrote in the periodical *Rivista per signorine* explaining all the necessary criteria for her future journal which had to be, first of all, handwritten.

In her presentation, she writes:

Handwriting is repulsive at first for our modern eyes, so used to printing: but in the long term we grow fond of the author's calligraphy, the different writing gives us almost the impression of hearing her voice, of seeing the look of each author, thus, what can

seem to be a blemish ends up being considered a virtue.³

Her request resulted in a number of admissions that exceeded her expectations: at first 24, then soon nearly 40, an amount considered conducive to make the periodical operate effectively.

Shipping Plan

During *Lucciola*'s years of activity – from 1908 to 1926, with a pause of three years due to the First World War – some contributors abandoned their endeavours, though many remained faithful, while some were added and others were expelled. Overall, the subscriptions numbered over 150. Among the criteria of admission (sent via a form that would be evaluated by a special committee) the place of residence was particularly significant. Since its beginning, the periodical wanted to guarantee a widespread and variegated origin of the opinions and experiences but also to involve women who lived in the most isolated and underdeveloped areas. In some specific periods, there were editors from Tripoli or Switzerland; some *luciole* wrote from cities, but the majority were from villages of the entire peninsula, from Montedoro to Val di Scalve in Bergamo's province.

Due to the distance of contributors, it was necessary to work out a rather complex 'shipping plan': the editorial director used to buy a notebook and send it to the writer of the closest province, who added her contribution. Then she sent it to the nearest *luciole*.⁴ In every location, the notebook could stay for two days at the most. If writers did not abide by this, the penalty was fining or expulsion. During the periodical's initial journey, a first part of the manuscript was composed: the texts, concluded or episodic, could be short stories, poems, pages from diaries,

³ Translated from the original: 'L'essere manoscritto dapprima fa senso ai nostri occhi moderni, così abituati alla stampa: ma a lungo andare ci si affeziona a vedere ogni lavoro colla scrittura dell'autrice, le diverse scritture ci danno un po' l'impressione di sentire la voce, di vedere l'espressione di ciascuna autrice, sicché quello che può parere un difetto finisce coll'essere considerato come un pregio'. (Azzolini and Brunelli, p. 12).

⁴ The term *luciole* (singular), *luciole* (plural) is used to refer to the female contributors of the journal.

descriptions or semi-journalistic reportages about important events experienced first-hand, like the Gleno Dam's structural failure in 1923 in Val di Scalve, or the construction of a railway bridge on the Po river between 1907 and 1911.

Every *lucciola* used to write under a pseudonym, despite the fact that the readers were the writers themselves. Among the many pseudonyms selected were Asfoldelo and Fulvetta; Lucciola forense and Oneira; Rosa sfogliata and Chiarezza.⁵ While this choice was possibly due to reasons of authorial bashfulness, it can also be read as reflective of a society that constantly asked women to hide their intelligence and creativity. However, those *luciole* who chose mottos as pseudonyms wanted to be recognised and to hint at their deepest and secret nature: Gina Frigerio, the last editor of *Lucciola*, used to sign her works as v. f. s., the acronym of *Veritate, Fortiter, Suaviter* ('For the truth, with more strength and more sweetness' in Latin).

Some men also took part in the project of *Lucciola*. They belonged to the family circle of the journal's female writers, being, for instance, brothers or cousins, and there were about 15 of them in total across *Lucciola*'s various publications. 'However, this never undermined the gender mark of the journal,' as explained by Daniela Brunelli, president of the Società letteraria di Verona and curator of the periodical.⁶

Every manuscript was composed of 300 pages on average, numbered by that year's editor who also took care of binding it and creating an index. The journal was also gradually enriched by a vast iconographic paratext: small paintings created with different techniques, sketches, drawings, works of embroidery or crochet, prints, photographs, and postcards accompanied by articles about current news.

Moreover, the covers were embroidered or branded on the velvet; the

⁵ Asfoldelo means 'asphodel', Fulvetta is a feminine endearment from the adjective 'fulvo' meaning 'red'; Lucciola forense means 'forensic firefly'; Oneira derives from the Greek word which means 'dreams'; Rosa sfogliata means 'Rose losing its petals'; and finally Chiarezza is the Italian word for 'clarity'.

⁶ Translated from the original: 'Ma questo non scalfì mai il segno di genere del progetto' (Brunelli, Daniela. Interview. Conducted by Giulia Siviero. February 2022).

frontispieces were drawn according to the different avant-garde styles of the time; and the decorations inside the journal were made of silk, velvet or braided straw.

Every booklet began with an index for the literary part and another one for the artistic part. The first article was always the editorial in which the editor wrote about the events of the *Lucciola* community – births, marriages and deaths – and summarised the content of the published texts.



Figure 4. *Lucciola*, April 1910 and *Lucciola*, July 1914. © Archives of Società Letteraria di Verona

The editorial was often followed by a financial report (every writer contributed to the journal's operating costs), a table reporting the time and date of reception and shipping of the periodical, and another one with the marks given by every *lucciola* to what they believed to be the most interesting literary or artistic work.

Similarly to printed journals, there were literary and artistic competitions – the prize was a book – alongside recurring columns and polls (for instance, in the first issue it was asked: ‘Which virtue do you appreciate more in a man and which one in a woman? And why?'). Additionally, there was a section on book recommendations wherein citations from the texts in the original language were reported near the titles and authors' names. This testifies to the high cultural level of this community.

The creative process was extremely slow, and while a manuscript was travelling, the following one had already been dispatched: a booklet took months to go around and just as long to make a second journey. This allowed each writer to read every article and make notes on the white pages of the journal's second half. As one of the *luciole* wrote, comments, questions and critiques had always to be guided by candour, spontaneity, and frankness.⁷

In the second edition, titled ‘Observations’, the annotations densely followed one another and were written around a central and longer comment. In this way, the final pages of the journal were transformed into the tangible graphic image of the long-distance dialogue among women.

The Social Debates of the Time.

With the passing of time, the *luciole* developed from voices unknown to each other into pen-sisters. Some of the writers met in person and became long-lasting friends. On some occasions, they decided to live together.

The journal deals with the political and social themes of its time, especially connected to women's condition and their cultural and juridical subordination to their husbands' authority. Its contributors discussed issues including the abolition of prostitution, female education, pedagogy, and maternity. At the beginning of the First World War, they also debated interventionism and pacifism, feminism and women's right to vote. This last theme was one of the most divisive and about which

⁷ Azzolini and Brunelli, p. 41.

they moved many doubts and uncertainties. One contributor wrote: 'Female politics should be limited to the home'.⁸ Another replied: 'This right must be given to women: they may use it wrongly, at first, but maybe also men sometimes make mistakes...'.⁹ They agreed more firmly on the themes of marriage's limitations, as well as on the necessity of being socially active as it was required of women from their social condition.

Paola Lombroso, daughter of Cesare, a phrenologist, and already founder of the children's journal *Corriere dei Piccoli*, wrote for *Lucciola* with the pseudonym zia Mariù (auntie Mariù). She was, for instance, the promoter of the creation and expansion of rural libraries, the so-called *Bibliotechine rurali*, which had the objective of distributing books to the poorest schools in Italy in order to foster literacy. Many other writers of *Lucciola*, urged on by her, made this project one of their main philanthropic commitments.

Even if the writers of the journals remained within Catholic feminism and were always less radical than feminists of the time, their discussions initiated a new process of self-discovery. After a pause during the war years caused by disruption to the postal service, *Lucciola* changed format; the notebook was replaced by an album for commercial use, composed of papers with margins and lines. However, the most significant transformation was mainly in the sensitivity of its members.

Time had passed, they were not young women anymore, and they had survived the ordeals of the war. From their writing began to emerge how, while the men were at the front, many of them had to take on new tasks and this brought them to a different consciousness of their gender: their voices started to outline the delicate balance between work and new responsibilities on the one hand, and a greater awareness of their freedom and demand of rights, on the other. Eventually, before the last editor declared the end of *Lucciola* in 1926, it was politics that divided

⁸ Translated from the original: 'La politica femminile dovrebbe limitarsi alle pareti domestiche' (Azzolini and Brunelli, p. 79).

⁹ Translated from the original: 'Bisogna darglielo questo potere: potrà magari sbagliare nell'esercitarlo, a tutta prima, ma via magari gli uomini qualche volta sbagliano...' (Azzolini and Brunelli, p. 79).

the writers. Some of them were passionate about Fascism and others stood against it, writing an emotional praise of a public holiday, International Workers' Day, that had recently been abolished by the Fascist regime. They declared that, unlike Fascism, the workers' festivity looked at the future and not at the past.

The most substantial corpus of *Lucciola's* journals, 107 out of 115, is today stored at Società Letteraria di Verona (Italy). It was given to the association in 1991 by the heirs of Gina Frigerio, the journal's last editor, thanks to the mediation of a former librarian, Francesco Monicelli. Before the donation, six journals had already been sold to a Milanese antique dealer and bought by the historian Annarita Buttafuoco, who entrusted them to the association Unione Femminile Nazionale in Milan. Two other manuscripts belong to a private collector.

A Heritage to Preserve

Daniela Brunelli claimed that from the indexes and some articles in the journal, it is possible to deduce that many other unknown issues exist. For this reason, it is feasible to speculate that some booklets may have been lost or are to be found somewhere else. There have also been reports of the existence of other periodicals derived from *Lucciola*, and demanded by its contributors: *Lucciola Braille*, to make the journal accessible for blind women, and *Lucciolina*, a version for minors under 17 years old. Nonetheless, no proof remains of these projects.¹⁰

During the 1990s the Società letteraria di Verona promoted several initiatives to add value to the periodical: two exhibitions and a book *Leggere le voci* edited by Paola Azzolini and Daniela Brunelli that reports a wide anthological selection of the texts contained in the manuscripts. In 1998 *Lucciola's* booklets were recognised as cultural assets by Sovrintendenza archivistica per il Veneto, the regional archival superintendence. Moreover, the State Archive of Verona was subsequently also permitted to microfilm and digitally convert the journals. Today, they are available for everyone to consult online. Meanwhile, Brunelli has now stated that a new investment is necessary

¹⁰ Brunelli, Daniela. Interview. Conducted by Giulia Siviero. February 2022.

to sustain operations of conservative restoration upon past issues of *Lucciola*, especially on the booklets that present chemical deterioration caused by the acidity of papers, inks, and other mechanical damages, mainly in the bindings.¹¹

¹¹ *Ibid.*

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