

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Path to the Spiders' Nests [Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno] (1947)

Italo Calvino

OVERVIEW

Italo Calvino's *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* was the first novel he published. It is a coming-of-age story set in Italy during World War II, following the journey of Pin, an orphaned cobbler's apprentice who joins the Italian Resistance. After stealing a German soldier's gun on a dare, Pin is radicalized by a succession of violent incidents: arrest, interrogation, abuse, imprisonment. Following his escape from prison, he joins a detachment of partisans and witnesses explosive encounters between fascist soldiers and resistance fighters in the countryside. By presenting Italy's civil war through the eyes of a child, Calvino contrasts the uncomplicated and uncompromising idealism of youth to the ambiguity of adulthood, the complex political, social, and personal motivations of both partisan and fascist forces.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Italo Calvino (1923-1985) is considered one of the great contemporary Italian authors, known for his experimental fiction and fables. His first novel, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, was published when the author was twenty-four years old. It is distinct from his later works for its realism in both style and plot, growing out of Italy's postwar period. In 1964, Calvino published a new edition which included a preface and a rewriting of the more controversial sections of the novel, toning down themes of anti-feminism and political extremism. Calvino later stated that the violent elements of the novel he removed or edited reflected his "adolescent phase" as a writer.

Calvino described his first novel as an example of 'Resistance literature,' which he felt compelled to write after World War II. In 1943, German forces occupied Liguria, the region where the novel is set. Calvino was twenty years old at the time and, to avoid forced conscription into Mussolini's fascist militia, he went into hiding. In 1944, he joined the Garibaldi Brigades, a group of armed resistance fighters, and remained with them until the liberation of Italy in 1945. By Calvino's own admission, his personal experience heavily informs this fictionalized account of Italian life during World War II.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Pin: a young orphan and cobbler's apprentice
Rina: Pin's older sister and a prostitute
Cousin: Pin's companion and a resistance fighter

PLOT

First contact with the Resistance Group Pin is a young orphan and well-known troublemaker: he avoids his apprenticeship, eavesdrops on adult conversations in the local tavern, and antagonizes the German soldier who visits his sister. Quick-witted and foul-mouthed, Pin is widely considered to be a nuisance and a bad influence on other children. One day, Pin walks into the tavern to find a group gathered. There is a man there he has never seen before, who encourages the men to form a small-scale resistance group to fight the Germans. Pin's interruption is unwanted, and the men deride him as a fascist-in-the-making due to his family's association with their own local German soldier. Hoping to get rid of him, the men inform Pin that if he wants to prove himself as "one of them," he must steal the soldier's gun. If he doesn't, he won't be welcome in the tavern again. Pin leaves and later succeeds in stealing the gun. He is furious when he returns to the tavern to find the stranger gone and the locals disinterested in the gun he stole. They are busy debating the risks of joining the Resistance.

Prison Escape Pin hides the soldier's gun in a nest of spiders, but he is later caught with the belt. The Germans and their Italian allies detain him and demand to know who ordered him to steal the gun. When Pin refuses to give up his friends at the tavern, he is badly beaten. Pin is later transported to a prison where he meets a sixteen-year-old resistance fighter named Red Wolf. Red Wolf recruits Pin for his escape plan, relying on the younger boy to distract the sentry. The two escape together, only for Red Wolf to disappear while searching for Pin's hidden gun.

Joining the Resistance Pin recovers the gun from the spiders' nest but realizes he has no idea

what to do next. As he wanders across the countryside, armed and crying, he meets a large man, Cousin. Cousin belongs to a small detachment of the resistance, and he brings Pin into their camp. The detachment is made up of petty thieves, police officers, former soldiers, black marketeers, and those who have fallen on hard times. Dritto, the leader of the group, believes that Pin is too young to join the fight. He is not permitted to carry a gun or leave the camp; instead, he is taught how to prepare meals. Pin spends his days antagonizing his fellow resistance members and he is often called upon to sing at night. But he longs for the chance to prove himself. One evening, while Pin is entertaining the fighters after dinner and everyone is distracted, a fire spreads throughout the campsite. As a result, the group is forced to relocate, moving from the mountains to a barn. Dritto is blamed for the fire, and Pin notices the rising tension and resentment among members of the detachment. Later on, Pin witnesses the German army attack. A series of bombings rock the valley where the resistance fighters have made camp, close to the barn. Pin uses Dritto's binoculars to watch as great white clouds rise from the hills near the sea. German soldiers are advancing on the resistance camps, and it is revealed that they have been betrayed by one of their own. The detachment leaves for battle, but their leader, Dritto, claims to be sick. His choice to stay behind reveals him to be a coward, while Pin is considered too young to fight. While the battle rages, Dritto foos around with the cook's wife at the near-empty camp, interrupted by the sound of artillery and Pin's shouting. The resistance fighters eventually retreat from the battle, but it is not considered a defeat. Only one man died in Dritto's detachment, and the Germans were forced to call upon reinforcements to drive the rebels back into the mountains. News spreads from group to group: who has been arrested and who has switched sides. Pin antagonizes Dritto by revealing his adulterous actions to the rest of the detachment; in response, Dritto twists his arm until it hurts. Pin, angry at the retaliation and the laughter of the other men, decides to run away from the camp. He is determined to make his own way, but first decides he must be armed: he returns to the spider's nest where he hid the gun, only to discover it's been stolen.

A Family Reunion and Execution Eventually, Pin makes his way back to the village where he finds his sister. It is revealed that Rina has joined the side of the Germans and Italian fascists, who reward her with silk dresses. She tries to coax Pin into switching sides, but he simply steals a pistol from her and runs out of the village, taking the path to the riverbed. While walking along the irrigation channels, Pin reunites with Cousin. Cousin expresses an interest in seeing his sister and Pin, assuming that this is about sex, laughs and directs him to her. He notices his friend is carrying a gun, which Cousin shrugs off as a habit. The truth, which Pin does not understand, is that he plans to kill Rina for being a traitor. Cousin returns soon after the execution, and Pin, none the wiser, accompanies his friend to the countryside.

THEMES

Coming of Age: The central theme of the novel is Pin's coming of age during World War II. Calvino does not provide an exact age for the orphan, which underscores the instability of adolescence. Pin vacillates between childhood (his pranks, laughter, imagination) and adulthood (the gun, the reality of war, his knowledge of sex and violence filtered through his sister, the tavern patrons, and the soldiers he meets). Alienated from other children due to his rough upbringing, Pin struggles to fit into adult spaces: the apartment he shares with his sister, the village tavern, the resistance camp. He mimics those around him, their language, jokes, and secrets, but often does not understand the context or ramifications of what he says due to his lack of life experience. Midway through the novel, Pin wanders through the Italian countryside alone, holding a gun while crying. This image illustrates how Pin has "grown up too fast" under German occupation.

War: Calvino's novel is as much a war novel as it is a coming-of-age story. The author scales down World War II to a small village and the surrounding countryside in Liguria, a northwestern region of Italy. This gives the novel an opportunity to explore the social and psychological impact of civil war on a small community. Pin walks in on a clandestine meeting of disgruntled citizens and a recruiter for the Resistance; the tavern's occupants turn on Pin for his perceived rapport with German soldiers, revealing one of the most damaging aspects of a civil war: the inability to trust or rely on one's neighbor. But war not only destabilizes communities; it is also a source of violence. When captured by German forces and their allies, Pin is interrogated like an adult. He refuses to give up his "friends" and, as a result, is beaten to the point of tears. Abuse of a child draws criticism even within the novel itself, as characters question the necessity of the act. Later, as skirmishes between German forces and partisans unfold, Pin is not privy to the fighting itself: he sees the smoke rising from the hills and hears the gunfire but is not directly involved in any battles. As such, he is unable to describe the

conflict beyond a general sense of disorientation, violence, and fear. The brutality and senselessness of the war are conveyed through Pin's interrogation and imprisonment as well as his limited understanding of combat.

Broken Families: The formation and fragmentation of communal bonds is a major theme in this novel, present in both the coming-of-age story and the war narrative. Pin and his sister, Rina, are orphans, presented as village outsiders who lack strong familial connections: their mother is dead, and their father abandoned them. Rina and Pin have a contentious relationship as siblings, one that ends with Pin unknowingly setting his sister up to be killed once she is revealed to be working with the Germans and the fascists. In this way, Pin and his sister serve as a small-scale representation of the civil war: siblings end up on opposite sides of the conflict and families are destroyed.

Relationships: The dysfunctional familial bond is not the only relationship presented in this novel: Pin observes the mystifying sexual relationships between men and women, both as transactional encounters (prostitution) and affairs that provide comfort and respite in times of war. The camaraderie between men is explored through scenes at the village tavern and resistance camp, modeling connections that Pin is desperate to make for himself. He is a profoundly lonely child, eager to connect with others, seeking friends he can trust and rely on. In the absence of children his own age, he tries repeatedly to build these relationships with adults, and is frequently frustrated when he feels they have "betrayed" him. The secret location of Pin's stolen gun serves as a test for each potential friendship; at the end of the novel, it is Cousin who earns the right to see the spider's nest and the gun.

Betrayal vs. Loyalty Pin accuses the adults in his life of betrayal when they fall short of his expectations. These acts of treachery result from dismissal, abandonment, theft, laughter, and acts of violence. Pin repeatedly emphasizes one of the most unforgivable shortcomings of adults: they do not take their games seriously, the way that children do. This critique, presented through a young person's point of view, underscores the multiple betrayals of the novel, from adultery to treason. Promises are broken, allegiances are changed, and there is little guarantee of commitment or loyalty as the conflict continues to unfold. The damaging effects of betrayal – denial, anger, shock, grief – are also explored through Pin's journey, part of the author's larger commentary on the impact of the civil war on Italian society.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Pin Loud-mouthed Pin is mischievous and attention-seeking, caught between adolescence and adulthood. Feeling out of place, he is largely motivated by the desire for belonging and kinship. Growing up during a period of civil unrest in Italy, Pin also grapples with feelings of abandonment and the ever-present threat of violence.

Mischievous: Pin is established as a troublemaker who infuriates his neighbors with jeers and insults. When the German soldier who visits his sister refuses to give him cigarettes, Pin responds by loudly claiming that Rina has syphilis. The soldier struggles to understand Pin, but his sister overhears the joke and shouts at her brother. Pin's crass behavior and skinny, unimposing frame alienate him from other boys in the village; he takes great pleasure in mocking them whenever they ask him about "adult topics." He scandalizes the other children's parents with his intimate knowledge of sex and violence, sabotaging his own efforts to make friends. Many of Pin's pranks and jokes stem from the desire to be noticed – for good or bad – and nowhere is this more prevalent than in his decision to steal a pistol from his sister's German client. Pin later imagines the violent games he could play with the gun, though none of them come to pass during the novel. Pin's mischievous streak serves to establish his rough upbringing and his sense of isolation: trapped between childhood and adulthood.

Attention-Seeking: Pin spends much of his time at the local tavern, where he sings (about the gossip he has heard) and drinks (though he doesn't like alcohol) with the regulars. Both at the tavern and in the resistance camp, Pin establishes himself as a singer, storyteller, and entertainer. Performing gives him the rare opportunity to be the center of attention and he tailors his performances to his audience based on what he knows of their stories and secrets. Known for his cutting insults and shamelessness, Pin rarely insults someone without an audience: he acts out to elicit the laughter and applause from others, which he interprets as gestures of acceptance and approval. The pivotal moments in Pin's story are motivated by his desire for attention: stealing the soldier's gun at the behest of the tavern regulars, re-telling the story of the gun and promising to show it to curious parties, and distracting the prison guard so that he can escape with fellow partisan, Red Wolf. Pin's

bravado and his showmanship are both facets of this attention-seeking behavior, which reflects Pin's intense desire to belong, forge true friendships, and find his purpose (desires, one can argue, shared by both children and adults).

Precocious: Pin pays close attention to the world around him, while being largely invisible to adults unless he draws attention to himself. This allows him to collect sensitive information on "grown-ups" without their knowledge, the gossip giving him leverage with his insults. He mirrors the behavior and language of those around him, which makes his exact age difficult to determine in the novel. Pin often repeats words back to adults that he has overheard – about sex, prison, or acts of violence – without fully understanding the context. He is also privy to the romantic and sexual entanglements of adults in his life, through spying on his sister's sex work or walking in on Dritto's affair with a female partisan. He categorizes these encounters based on what he's overheard adults say about sex and gender roles, but he has not yet reached sexual maturity himself, so the motivation to engage in such acts is incomprehensible to him. While Pin understands *what* adults do by watching them, he does not understand the *why* behind their actions due to his relative inexperience.

Rina Rina, also referred to as the 'Dark Girl of Long Alley', is Pin's older sister and guardian. She is not a nurturing caregiver, and her treatment of Pin can best be described as neglectful: she makes no effort to shield him from her sexual exploits and shows little regard for his whereabouts throughout the day. She is a survivalist, who is indiscriminate about her clients, taking anyone willing to pay. Rina prioritizes financial stability and comfort over political ideals.

Neglectful: Rina's neglect of Pin is primarily seen through her brother's eyes: she left an infant Pin sobbing and dirty on the ledge of the wash-house and even now, shows little interest in managing their household. As a result, the siblings live in squalor. Rina is not present when he skips out from his apprenticeship at the cobbler's, shouts up and down the alleys, or drinks in the tavern. She openly engages clients in the same apartment she shares with her brother, contributing to his early (if incomplete) knowledge of sex with no attempt to contextualize the information for someone of his age and maturity level. When the siblings reunite towards the end of the novel, Rina claims that she has been worried about her brother, but he doesn't seem to believe it. Her concern, as far as he can tell, is an act. Rina's neglect – while not defensible – is likely the result of her own lack of familial support. Both she and her brother seek validation and security elsewhere; the fact that these siblings come from nearly identical circumstances and end up on opposing sides of the civil war underscores Italy's own complex internal dynamics during World War II.

Self-Serving: Rina is derided within the village for her lack of loyalty: she is willing to take both Italian and German clients if they can pay her. Her transactional relationship with the German soldier Fritz, for example, is a source of tension, viewed by some as evidence of fascist tendencies. Rina is either unaware of or does not care about the rising animosity of the village towards German occupants at first. Later, she is identified as a traitor to the resistance, selling out her neighbors to the fascist soldiers and their allies. She confirms this to her brother when he sees her again at the end of the novel: her wardrobe has improved, and she can now afford luxuries such as silk dresses. She has moved out of their squalid apartment into a hotel, carries a pistol for her own protection (which Pin subsequently steals), and attempts to persuade her brother to "be sensible" and join the fascists, who will compensate him well for being a spy. Rina's self-serving justification for aligning with the Germans and their fascist allies is echoed by several traitors in the novel: disenfranchised, they chose the promise of security and wealth over rebellion. For Rina (and, it is implied, for many Italian citizens), there is no fascist ideology that motivates her; rather, it is money and comfort.

Cousin Misogynistic and imposing, Cousin is one of the only adults Pin builds a long-term rapport with. He finds the boy wandering in the countryside and brings him to a resistance camp, thus introducing Pin to the life of a partisan. Desensitized to the violence of the civil war, Cousin's ideological commitment to the Resistance is decidedly lacking. There is a real sense that he continues to fight because he feels there is nothing else to do.

Misogynistic: One of the first lessons Cousin teaches Pin is that war is the fault of women, and that women are the source of all bad endings. His misogyny stems from the skewed perception that the only people who benefit from war are women, safe in domestic spaces. He is openly hostile to the only woman in the resistance camp, blaming her as the cause for misfortune (such as the fire that forces their detachment to relocate from the mountains to a barn). It is suggested that this attitude stems from a failed relationship: a woman he was in love with caused the deaths of three resistance fighters. In grappling with his own guilt over the tragedy, Cousin projects his hatred outward. At the

end of the novel, he takes advantage of Pin's trust to track down and kill his sister. Rina, both a prostitute and a spy, serves as a surrogate for the woman who broke his heart. Cousin's misogyny is one of the aspects of the novel that Calvino toned down in later editions. The character's mistrustful attitude towards women – to the point of superstition – gives readers some insight into gender roles and stereotypes within Italian society during this period.

Desensitized: Cousin first introduces himself to Pin as someone who is not a murderer but kills people "all the same." He complains about the endless cycle of war, his nomadic and meager lifestyle, and his envy of those who are "well-off" (women). There is little indication that Cousin is motivated by an ideological commitment to the liberation of Italy from fascist forces; rather, violence has become routine. It is revealed in the novel that Cousin suffered devastating losses in the previous year: not only did his romantic relationship collapse, but three of his compatriots were killed. Cousin's habitual violence and unresolved trauma can be read as part of Calvino's autobiographical reflection on the long-term impact of war on resistance fighters.