

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT BOOKS

A bedtime story, a killer disease and a quest to save the world

A brand new Maltese book, set in the post-coronavirus reality we all now inhabit, has been written especially for children confined to their homes. As the English language version of *Melanie and Karl's Enchanted Adventure* is released, *Times of Malta* talks to its author and illustrator, university professor and cartoonist **Gorġ Mallia**.

LAURA SWALE



One of the main themes of this story is the experience of being in quarantine. The book is also a result of you being in lockdown yourself. Was being stuck at home in fact how this story began, and if so, what exactly inspired you to write it?

I knew that if being in self-isolation was difficult for me, it was going to be massively more difficult for schoolchildren and their parents. I was hoping they'd read a lot as one of the ways of spending their time indoors but realised there was no book in Maltese they could identify with in their present situation. Which is why I wrote and illustrated *L-Avventuri Msahhra ta' Melanie u Karl* in just over a week and decided that the best way to reach as many children as possible was to have it as an e-book and give it to them as a gift. Lockdown has translated into an explosion of creativity for me and this was one of the ways it manifested itself. Giving it away meant that the burst of creativity left a little mark on society.

Besides the lockdown, there are two other themes explored in this fantasy adventure: reading and environmental destruction. What made you focus on these particular aspects of the coronavirus situation?

The story is a fantasy quest, but that is just a vehicle. It is set against the pandemic lockdown for children who are bemused by it. I wanted my young readers to see their plight projected onto characters they could relate to. I also wanted them to know that reading is a wonderful way of escaping the four walls of their homes. The natural environment

is one of the recurrent themes in my children's books. I know how its devastation affects children and will affect their future even more. So I wanted that to be central to this book.

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Beyond offering a means of mental escape for children cooped up inside, is there a moral or deeper meaning to the story?

Without giving too much away, Melanie is reading a book that then leads to a fantastic quest to save her world from destruction. The story reflects what children in the real world can do about things they feel strongly about. I'm talking about active participation; how they can stand up for what they believe in and how they can empower themselves to act on issues which affect them.

How was the Maltese version of the book received?

Given that my website crashed from the number of visits,



The wizard explained how two worlds can share the same time and space. Right: Melanie is shocked to wake up and find the character she had been reading about in her book right there next to her.



I'm guessing that a lot of people must have read it. And not just children. Teachers have been putting the link up on their Facebook pages and schools did the same on their official websites.

Lots of parents wrote to me. One mother told me her daughter usually never reads books but she devoured this one... and asked me for more. That was typical of the many mails I got. I was asked by school administrators for video and written messages for their pages.

The launch was extensively covered in the online and printed press, on television and... well, everywhere. I think I can honestly say it went viral. So people appreciated my effort and it seems the story was liked and spread far and wide.

The release of an English language version means that the story might ultimately attract an international audience. Do you have plans for the book outside of Malta?

There was quite a large demand for an English version. I love Maltese and the original version of the book had to be in that language. But I also love English and if some children prefer to read in English, that's fine.

For me the important thing is that they read and enjoy reading. The book is set in Malta... and in a sense the location is the context in which the story develops. So I'm not sure the book will have a lot of international appeal.

But apparently it is being picked up by librarians' and teachers' suggested reading lists all over the place. Just yesterday, for example, I was sent a link by a colleague to a list of coronavirus-inspired children's books compiled by the New York School Library System. And there was *Melanie and Karl's Enchanted Adventure*. So even without trying, it seems to be spreading around a lot of unlikely places. And I couldn't be happier.

You moved very quickly to create this book during a difficult time, clearly you felt it was important. What were the original aims of the project and what would give you a sense of accomplishing them?

I must admit that creative production can ease a sense of deep sadness compounded by confinement. I'm sure that is why most artists are creating so profusely right now. So creating the book also helped me. But I knew from the start that what I wanted was to give children out there a good read. A story they could own and share with friends and talk about with parents and siblings. I now know from ample feedback that this has actually happened, and if the English version continues that trend, then I have definitely achieved my ultimate aims for the book.

Melanie and Karl's Enchanted Adventure can be downloaded for free from gorgmallia.com/adventure.html.