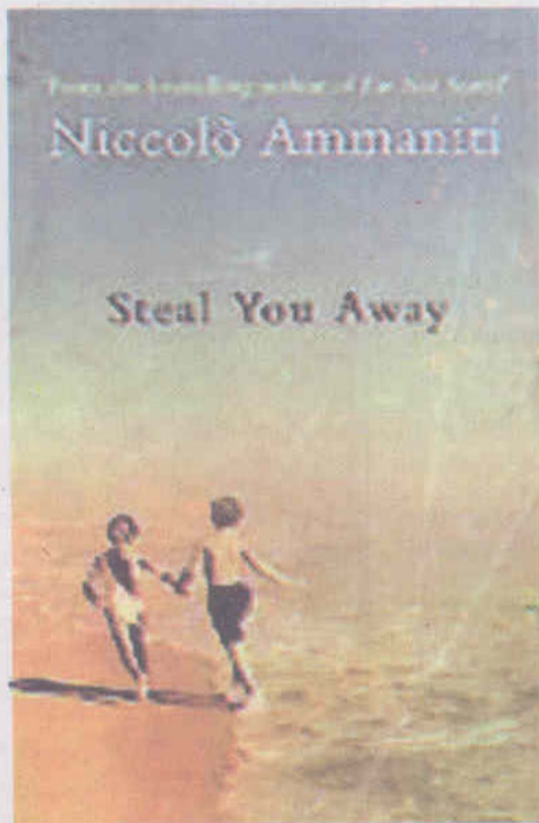


## At least dropping the dead donkey raises a laugh

KILLIAN FOX



*Steal You Away*  
Niccolò Ammaniti

**B**lind rage. The phrase is notable in Niccolò Ammaniti's fourth novel due to the frequency with which it appears and the number of people who experience it over the course of the story. For the inhabitants of Ischiano Scalo, the backwater village where most of the action of *Steal You Away* takes place, blindness and rage are practically default settings.

Ammaniti has put small-town life under the microscope before, in his last novel, the acclaimed *Io Non Ho Paura* (*I'm Not Scared*). In it, a nine-year-old boy unearthed various brutal truths about his community, truths that spoke of a depressed Italian countryside and the utter desperation of its poor inhabitants.

The scenario is largely unchanged in *Steal You Away*, set two decades later in the 1990s. Pietro Moroni is 12 years old, a witness to the violence and sadness in which his home town is steeped. The extra three years offer an uneasy vantage, as Pietro has entered the vicious slipstreams of adolescence and is better equipped to understand what is going on around him.

Already, his diminutive frame is starting to buckle under the weights of adult responsibility, unloaded on to him by a feckless, alcoholic father and a mother pummelled into passivity. The school bullies compound the burden by beating him up. Childish mischief has hardened into delinquency and one night Pietro is drawn against his will into an act of vandalism that will eventually bring all the weights of responsibility crashing down upon him.

Pietro's ultimate goal is to escape Ischiano Scalo, to step outside the narrowing spirals of hopelessness that mark out life in the village. The novel's parallel narrative

charts the return of one who did manage to get away. At 44, Graziano Biglia is a fading Lothario, a flamenco guitarist whose greatest claim is to have bedded 303 women in order to win the 'Casanova Cup' at a tawdry beach resort. The paper-thin facade of glamour and worldly achievement that Biglia displays to his childhood cronies, and the desperation with which he seeks their approval, could be read as downbeat estimations of Pietro's chances. Is it possible to leave behind Ischiano Scalo, and all that it entails, for good?

The narrative, a tidal wave bearing the two hapless characters from one disastrous event to the next, is quickened by Ammaniti's prose, which churns out punchy sentences, snappy paragraphs and chapters that can fit three to the page. The sentences expand on occasion into long, exuberant metaphors, often drawn from natural history. Pietro's headmaster is compared to a prehistoric rodent, and it is not the flabby school caretaker lying semi-naked on a hospital bed after a serious bruising, but a 'manatee'.

Sexual frustration, hatred, blind stupidity and rage cloud the swampy Ischiano Scalo atmosphere, and Ammaniti crams his narrative full of audacious episodes involving Nigerian

prostitutes, date-rape drugs and, hilariously, a dead donkey and a catapult. Most of the energy, however, has gone into sustaining the burlesque at the expense of the acute social observation and delicate characterisation that distinguished *I'm Not Scared*. One cannot help thinking that if he had reined himself in a little, Ammaniti would have produced a superior novel.