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2019

### Italian-American Literature: Respected?

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#### Recommended Citation

Donna Jo Napoli. (2019). "Italian-American Literature: Respected?". *Altre Modernità*. Issue 22. 182-190.

DOI: 10.13130/2035-7680/12472

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## *Italian-American Literature: Respected?*

by Donna Jo Napoli

**ABSTRACT:** Italian-American literature is among the various disrespected literatures in the United States. That point is easily made here, via a brief overview of how relevant publications have been received. What is more difficult to understand is why. I offer a personal account of my own upbringing in the Jim Crow south, as well as a chapter from my young adult novel that is set a half century before I was born and that gives a sense of the prejudice that forms the underpinnings of this disrespect.

**KEY WORDS:** Italian-American experience; Jim Crow south; linguistic prejudice; racism

I'm Italian-American. So what am I doing in this particular issue of *Altre Modernità*? Feeling my way *a tastoni*—with the grope of someone in a fog. I'll try to explain.

Accompanying this essay is Chapter Three of my young adult novel *Alligator Bayou*, reprinted with the kind permission of Penguin Random House. The novel is based on true events that led up to the lynching of five Italians and Italian-Americans in the American city of Tallulah, Louisiana, in 1899. The main character is a fourteen-year-old Sicilian boy, who constituted a fictional sixth person in the group of Italians



living there at that time. This was a situation in which plantation owners kept former slaves and children of former slaves on as employees who worked the land. Those employees bought their foods and other necessities from stores owned by the plantation owners, which meant they were either in debt or barely meeting their expenses, so they weren't free to leave their jobs. The Italians grew vegetables on their own land and entered into a barter situation with many of the plantation workers (vegetables in exchange for alligator meat or other foods the plantation workers hunted). That situation engendered friendship and discussions of social justice among the Italians and the Blacks. All of this alarmed and angered the plantation owners, hence the murders.

Are you, my dear reader, surprised to know that there were lynchings of Italians and Italian-Americans in the United States in that period? I was surprised when I found out.

My parents grew up in New York and New Jersey. When my oldest sister was one year old, she almost died of pneumonia. The doctor told my parents she would probably not make it through another New York winter. So they moved to Miami—as far south as they could go within the country.

They hated it there. There were few Italians, and those that there were had lopped off the end of their name and no longer claimed that ethnic background, so who could find them? My parents had no friends. So after two years, they returned to New York. My brother was born there. Then my sister got sick again, so they moved back to Miami. And hated it anew. My father had trouble finding work. My mother was lonely and afraid. After two years, they returned to New York. My other sister was born there. Then my oldest sister got sick again, so they moved back to Miami.

And they stayed. That's where I was born, their last child. And they finally found some friends—an old Sicilian man who lived about an hour drive to the southwest, and an old Neapolitan man who lived about an hour drive to the northeast.

They sent their children to parochial school. Even though the school was cheap, it was amazing that they opted for it, since they were not religious people and money was always a major problem.

When it came time for me to go to school, my father decided to send all of us together to the public school. I didn't understand why. I thought the nuns, in their black habits, were lovely. My closest sister told me I was lucky—because the nuns were, in her word, witches. She showed me bruises on her hands and arms.

Somewhere in the time before I went to school, my maternal grandmother moved down from New York to Miami. She spoke only Italian and used to sit in a chair all day, crocheting. She made my dolly clothes and she told me stories in Italian and sent me to fetch her *ditale* ('thimble') whenever it would roll off under furniture. When we went anywhere with her, she was told to hush and I was told not to say anything to her at all; my mother or an older sister did all the talking.

We moved a lot. We were constantly getting evicted. Usually it was because my father couldn't pay the bills. But sometimes we wound up getting kicked out for a reason my father wouldn't accept. He'd argue with someone for a long time before he gave up and we moved again.

Moving meant I had no neighborhood friends. Well, actually, I might not have had neighborhood friends if we had stayed in one place, since I was no fun to play with. I couldn't even catch a ball.



Whatever, I wanted very much to join something—anything. I hoped that way people might be forced to play with me. I remember desperately wanting to join the Brownies, but my mother wouldn't go to the meeting of mothers to sign the permission slip. When I asked why, my sister told me she was afraid. I was so angry at my mother for letting her stupid fears stop me from having any fun. I was often angry at my mother for refusing to go somewhere the other mothers went.

Then my father got arrested and was sent to prison. The *Miami Herald* had big headlines about the evils of Italians and my father's photo was huge on the front page. The mother of the girl who lived in the house behind ours at the time told me I couldn't come near her daughter anymore. I was too dangerous.

And, still, I didn't put it together.

Partly, that's not my fault. I was a bumbly child. I fell often and my mother used to say I had permanent scabs on my knees. I also was totally out of it; I never understood what was going on. It seemed the world was full of magic that everyone else commanded, but that I was simply too stupid to get. I was late to learn to read. I was late to learn most things. When I was in fourth grade, a teacher wrote a math test on the blackboard rather than handing it out on mimeographed sheets. I couldn't read it at that distance. I asked the student in front of me what the questions were. And the teacher pounced; she said I was a cheater and she made me stand in the hall for the rest of the day, telling everyone who passed that I was a cheater. I went home with a note to my mother saying I was a cheater. My father borrowed money from my grandfather so my mother could take me to the doctor. Turned out I was legally blind. The doctor said that if I'd gone on much longer without glasses, my weaker eye would have turned off entirely. So I was lucky. I got big, thick glasses. The teacher never apologized... something that ate away at my mother. Maybe at me, too, since I still remember that. The important thing, though, was that the world changed for me—sight was glorious.

But I think by that time, I was already such an inward child that I didn't attempt to understand the world around me. I glanced at the world—but I lived inside my books. I became a great student, graduated from high school as valedictorian, got a full scholarship to Harvard University, and my life flipped, like a pancake—totally new.

It wasn't until I did the research for *Alligator Bayou* that I learned that Italians were classified as "colored" in the Jim Crow south. In fact, "colored" where I lived included African-Americans, Mexicans, Jews, Italians, and Seminoles. The parochial school my older siblings went to was racially, ethnically, and religiously mixed. "Colored" people sent their children there because that school had the funding for the minimal requisites: textbooks, paper, pencils. The public school they could have attended had none of those things. Plus the public school had broken windows, broken stairs, broken spirits.

The laws changed. So people like my father could finally get a lease, a job. Children like my siblings could go to a public school that had at least minimally sufficient funding. But, while laws changed, attitudes persisted. Looking back, I doubt that someone whose last name ended in a vowel could have joined the Brownie troop at the elementary school I attended. The Girl Scouts were still segregated in Miami then.



Learning the facts of the south and reconsidering my personal experiences from this new perspective made me feel at once both ashamed and curious. I was ashamed I'd been so ignorant all my life, ashamed I'd moved to the north and suddenly enjoyed a new social identity without even examining it, ashamed I'd never understood what my parents were dealing with nor had any empathy for them. They didn't fit in with any group—racially or linguistically—they were isolated and miserable. I was also curious—about the extent of prejudice against Italians.

With respect to literatures, it is, indeed, true that Italian-American literature has been largely disrespected until recent times and some would say that marginality continues (Gardaphé; Marazzi; De Marco), laying part of the blame on the strength of the oral tradition within Italian American culture (Gardaphé; Del Giudice). Even the famous filmmaker Frank Capra had to focus on white Americans for a very long time, only daring to insert a marginal reference to Italian immigrants in his famous 1946 film *It's a Wonderful Life*, via including the Martini family. While interest in all things Italian from after the American Revolution to the mid-1800s was relatively high (Kvidera), the influx of immigrants after that point engendered a prejudice toward Italians that led to lynchings in the late 1800s (mostly in the south, but elsewhere, as well: Wasserman; DeLucia; Puleo), the US quota restriction on immigration in 1924, and the execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in 1927. The rise of fascism in Italy created a hot spot for Italians in America. Those who supported Mussolini were the enemy; but those who were against Mussolini were labeled communists (which many were) and considered the enemy of both America and Italy. Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee targeted Italian-Americans. Novels and short stories written by Italian-Americans in the middle period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century received little attention until Giose Rimaneli, an Italian, had his first novel translated into English (as *The Day of the Lion*, 1954) and it became a best-seller. *Italianità* started becoming respectable. John Ciardi, a poet and critic, was hailed widely for more than 40 books. But then the tide turned again. Estes Kefauver led government investigations into organized crime, and suddenly the representation of Italians and Italian-Americans in literature by authors of many ethnicities was tainted; every Italian was a potential mafioso. While other Italian-American writers have graced the scene since then, two images of Italian-Americans seem to persist in the American mentality: the criminals, and the noisy, happy family eating pasta. Despite being dirty and noisy, Italians were “colorful” (Gabaccia 36). Because this mentality is so pervasive, publishers look for that kind of book—that is the kind of book that has a ready-made audience. About ten years ago I wrote a draft of a story about growing up Italian-American in the south on the urging of a brilliant and humane editor who has published many of my other stories. She read it, thought a while, then said she'd take it on if I inserted the Mafia into it. I went to another editor, who said she would do it—she has a remarkable moral spine—but somehow it just languished. The manuscript now lives in a file in the cloud, and I have no sense of whether it will ever live elsewhere. America seems to know what it wants—publishers seem to think it's a good idea to supply what the market wants—and writers foresee they will have success only if they supply what the publishers want. So the real Italian-American experience is still largely whispered about to the few ears that listen—mostly Italian-American ears, but sometimes more—sometimes there's a fine book that is heard by many, like Chuck Wachtel's *Joe*



*the Engineer* (1983). Sometimes there's a set of essays like Helen Barolini's *ChiaroScurò* (1999). Sometimes I believe we are experiencing a real renaissance of Italian-American literature—then, smack, we're into another cult: *The Godfather... The Sopranos...* what's next? I certainly do not blame those Italian-American authors who do not insert their ethnicity into their writing—I hope they have every success in writing about whatever moves them. But I do look forward to the time when American universities might include Italian-American stories in their American literature courses (and see Viscusi and De Marco).

As a writer, I aim to give children as much of the world as I can. For this reason (among others), I write stories set in different times and different locales. Many, however, are set in Italy. And some are set in America, with Italian protagonists (*The King of Mulberry Street*, 2005; *Alligator Bayou*, 2009). But I choose the stories I write based on my personal needs: What demons am I compelled to fight? What dark corners do I want to sweep clean? So, in a way, my worldview—which is most definitely influenced by my *italianità*—is present in everything I write.

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## APPENDIX

DONNA JO NAPOLI, *ALLIGATOR BAYOU*, WENDY LAMB BOOKS, 2009, PP. 18-24.

### *Three*

The day is passing too slowly. But quietly, thank heavens. It's been nothing but a steady stream of customers. Rosario and I keep selling lettuce and peas and spinach out here at the stand on the edge of town.

For sure, Francesco and Willy Rogers are both still alive. Frank Raymond came through for us. Carlo was smart to think of asking him.

And Rosario wasn't annoyed at my being late to work. He's been telling jokes all day, like always.

I'm starting to feel normal again. Well, no—not normal. Actually, I'm starting to feel jittery all over again. But good jittery this time.

Church school let out half an hour ago. The closing bell rang just minutes after the public-school bell sounded off from the other direction. But I'm almost sure Patricia's still in there. It's Wednesday; she stays after for piano lessons.

The piano is on the ground floor of a two-story house. A family lives on the upper floor. The ground floor is the Baptist church. And the basement is the school. Unless it rains hard. Then the basement floods and school is held in the church.

It makes sense Patricia plays piano. She's always singing something under her breath. Her shoulders sway, her lips move. I saw the music in her before I ever knew anything else about her except that she liked the sound of Sicilian.

She'll pass by on the way home if I'm lucky. I'm squinting through the afternoon sun up Stage Road, watching the church door. The windows are open, but it's too far to hear that piano.

"Calo, come," Rosario calls in English. In front of customers we're supposed to smile and repeat English after them and not worry about anything except counting cents.



If we're paid in cents, that is. Mostly, at Rosario's stand we barter. It's at Francesco's grocery store in the center of town, that I have to be careful of the money. At least, when the ladies and gentlemen shop. They're the ones who use coins.

I used to work at Francesco's store every day, but lately he's wanted Cirone there so that Cirone can learn to handle money. I don't care. Out here I get to watch for Patricia.

"Calo! You hurry."

Two more English words. Rosario's near his limit. He understands what the customers say. It's speaking he won't do. Town people make fun of broken English.

Nothing bothers me, though. I practice English all I can. I started back in Cefalù with Gian Pietro. He had spent a decade in America. When my father left, Mamma asked him to teach me so that I'd be ready when Papà sent for me. Only Papà never did. Anyway, I could already say lots by the time I got here. And Frank Raymond taught me more. So while Rosario's in charge, it's me who deals directly with the customers.

"Afternoon," I call, rushing to help.

A white lady comes up to the stand with a Negro woman walking two steps behind. Why on earth is a lady shopping out here? The servant wears a kerchief covering her hair and tied under her chin, like the women who work in the cotton fields. The lady wears a fine dress and a wide, white shade hat with a rolled brim. She lifts her chin. Oh no: it's Willy Rogers' mother.

I glance at Rosario. He's not nervous. But he didn't see the gun this morning.

I feel like I've swallowed sand.

"Good afternoon." Mrs. Rogers smiles. I can't tell if it's real. Tallulah ladies smile even when they're ordering you to get off their property. But at least it's clear nothing bad has happened between Willy Rogers and Francesco. Yet.

I take off my hat. "What can I get for you, ma'am?"

"Them beans—the ones over there." She points.

Rosario throws a giant handful on a sheet of newsprint. He lifts his eyebrows at Mrs. Rogers, asking if it's enough.

She doesn't look at him.

"Is that enough, ma'am?" I ask.

"Double that. And okra. The smallest ones."

Rosario is already filling the order.

Mrs. Rogers watches with sharp eyes as the okra pods pile up.

"Good choice." I nod. "Tender. And the first zucchini of the season are in."

"Zucchini?" Mrs. Rogers wrinkles her nose at the word. I hold one up. "Green squash," she says. "Newfangled things." I don't know what that means, but I can see her eyes change. "Oh, all right. Give me some of them, too."

"And lettuce?"

"Rabbit food." Mrs. Rogers laughs. "Them bananas there." She looks at the fruit table. "How is it y'all got pineapples and grapes?"

"They come from South America, ma'am. Right through the port of New Orleans." I reach and pull out a spiky leaf from the top of a pineapple. "This one's perfectly ripe. Would you like it, ma'am?"



"Perfectly ripe," she mimics me. "How come you talk so fancy?"

"I take lessons, ma'am."

"From that white Northern teacher in the colored school? The uppity one?"

"No, ma'am."

She pulls back in shock. "Y'all ain't in the white school, surely?"

"I don't go to school, ma'am."

"Well." She fiddles with the gathers on her bodice. "Whoever teaches you sure don't sound like the good folk around here."

"No, ma'am."

She narrows her eyes, as if she suspects I'm poking fun at her. But I keep an open face. "So, ripe pineapples. But they ain't bruised up. And they came all the way from South America. How do y'all get them in such good shape?"

"We know who to order from, ma'am." I hold up a pineapple.

"I bet you do." Her voice is harsh again. She glares. "Them bananas is all I need."

Rosario tucks the newsprint packages of vegetables and bananas into the servant's basket. She smiles small at him, and then at me. I've never heard her name.

Mrs. Rogers drops coins into Rosario's hand, careful not to touch him. At least a penny short. Rosario puts a finger on each coin in turn, then looks pointedly at her.

She adds another penny. And, finally, another.

I work to hold in a smile; Rosario doesn't need words to run this stand.

The women turn to go.

"Thank you, Mrs. Rogers," I call. "Good day, ma'am."

Mrs. Rogers looks over her shoulder and blinks. "Y'all know me?"

Everybody knows Mrs. Rogers. And she knows that, of course. I bob my head. "Your husband is an important gentleman."

The corners of her mouth twitch. "Ah, you're the boy used to work in that other grocery." She half-whispers the word *other*, as though she's talking about something bad. "You did good to change bosses." Mrs. Rogers nods. "You got sense. Next time I'll send Lila alone. You take good care of her now, grocer boy, you hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Off she goes, Lila following.

I slap my hat back on my head.

"Yes, ma'am," comes a taunting whisper from behind.

I turn. And she's there, hair drawn into two braids that glisten in the sun. I grin.

"You ain't got to kiss her feet, you know." Patricia takes off her shoes and slips them into her cloth bag. She walks past me on wide brown feet rimmed with pink. "She got nowhere else to buy such nice vegetables and fruits now that her son Willy had that fight with your crazy uncle."

So that's why Mrs. Rogers came here rather than the "other" grocery—Francesco's store. And everyone's heard about the fight, and probably knows I visited Frank Raymond this morning, too. Everyone in Tallulah knows everything that happens in Tallulah.

As she leaves, Patricia looks over her shoulder at me in a way that makes my skin wake up.



"I'll be back." I run to catch up with Patricia.  
"Hey!" Rosario calls.  
I keep going.

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