

*The Italian Americans: A History.*

By Maria Laurino.

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320 pages.

In Maria Laurino's book of popular history *The Italian Americans*, she claims that "myths about Italian American culture run deep into the fabric of American life" and that she wants "to tease myth from reality and uncover a more complicated story and deeper truths" (1). Most of the chapters in this companion volume to the four-hour PBS documentary series of the same name (John Maggio, 2013) use an individual or individuals—some relatively obscure, like Leonard Covello, and others well-known, like Joe Di Maggio—to represent a specific theme in the history of Italian American life, such as prejudice during World War II or education. The individuals' stories structure a narrative that is, by its very nature and like the TV series itself, episodic. *The Italian Americans* succeeds admirably in delivering interesting cameos and portraits, not all of them familiar—for example, about family and community in Roseto, Pennsylvania, union organizing in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and settlement near the port of New Orleans. But as its four parts move from 1860 to the present, the book increasingly falls back into myths and tends to scant "deeper truths." Ultimately, Laurino evades the opportunity to think more critically about what it means to be an Italian American in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Laurino begins where most tales of Italian Americans do: with the conditions that led vast numbers of mostly Southern Italians to leave their homeland between the 1870s and 1920s in order to escape "the untenable conditions" of life in the Mezzogiorno (as is often the case, migrants from the Italian north receive less attention in this book). As Laurino sees it, immigration embodied not so much an act of courage as "heroism born of desperation" (3). By including sections titled "Our Ancestors" and "I nostri paesani," Laurino skirts the fact that many Italian Americans cannot trace their ancestry further back than the first immigrant generation and as a result seems to suggest that Italian Americans form one big family that includes such illustrious ancestors as Giuseppe Garibaldi, Rudolph Valentino, and Arturo Toscanini. The device suits the conventional story *The Italian Americans* tells about immigrants cultivating the value of family and community as they paved the way for children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren to lead lives much less marked by physical labor and much richer in the arts and public life. This conventional story indeed remains by and large true.

And yet Laurino's book appeared around the time the world was confronting unprecedented migrations of refugees from the Middle East

escaping the ravages of war and poverty. And while it remains distasteful to think of immigrant groups as competing with one another, the book's hymn to Italian American "heroism born of desperation" inevitably effaces other stories of migration—including those of other American ethnic and racial groups. *The Italian Americans* tells a general story that is certainly accurate, but it still leaves untold enough history that it perpetuates a narrative now one hundred years old. In her Preface, Laurino notes that "hyphenated Americans tend to romanticize the immigrant journey and present these tales through a lens of heroism in the face of hardship, leading ultimately to success" (2). Despite her stated intent to unsettle some of these commonplaces, she ends up reasserting that pattern with regard to Italian American assimilation and achievement, emphasizing the positive and displaying nostalgia for a past that remains always less unified than a book like *The Italian Americans* can ever convey.

Perhaps the best sections in *The Italian Americans* are in part 3, 1930–1945, a period that forms a major and dynamic pivot in the history of Italians in the United States—the kind of turning point Laurino's narrative of progress tends to ignore or efface. If America at large could idolize Mussolini, as Laurino says, so could most Italian Americans, at least until the Italian invasion of Ethiopia made many look more closely at the man who made Italian trains run on time. Returning America's gaze in 1925, Mussolini made Columbus Day an Italian national holiday, followed by Franklin Roosevelt in 1934, so that, as the world slunk toward war, celebrations became a test case for Italian American loyalty (159). After Mussolini declared war against the United States in 1941 Italian Americans endured prejudices similar to those experienced by Japanese Americans, though relatively few experienced displacement and long-term involuntary internment.

By 1942, according to some sources, 500,000 Italian American men, from a group of five million, were serving in the military (173). The Italian American soldier, usually one from Brooklyn, became a stock character in World War II novels and films. After the war, the GI Bill enabled higher education, first for men and then for women. Wider acceptance in U.S. society at large, socioeconomic mobility, suburbanization, and intermarriage helped change the world of Italian America. Laurino's book changes as well, becoming both more familiar and more reticent about lingering stereotypes like "the mob" and missing larger pivots in Italian American life.

Like its companion PBS TV series, Laurino's coverage of the era after 1945 focuses on prominent individuals and celebrities: first of all, Frank Sinatra and the other Italian American crooners he influenced (197). Sinatra's voice and, above all, his gifted vocal phrasing made women squeal and enchanted audiences (197). His famous Oscar-winning turn as Private Angelo Maggio in director Fred Zinnemann's *From Here to Eternity* (1953) also became the stuff

of legend—and speculation. Did Sinatra's second wife, Ava Gardner, influence his casting, as Laurino suggests? Or, as rumor always had it, did the mob?

The mob. The Mafia. Cosa Nostra. One needs to say the words out loud and with some emphasis since Laurino seems uncomfortable with the subject of organized crime. In fact, like the PBS series, the book seems to want “to topple the Mafia stereotype” (Anagnostou 2015, 153), the myth among myths that haunts *The Italian Americans*. Laurino does recount the fascinating tale of Frank Costello, a gangster who testified, at first willingly and then with reluctance, before congressional hearings in the 1950s. Broadcast over radio and television, the hearings captivated the United States. Later, during Robert F. Kennedy's tenure as attorney general, Joseph Valachi's confessions proved even more influential, adding “the five families,” “the Cosa Nostra,” and “*omertà*” to America's vernacular. Was Valachi a plant that allowed the government to reveal what it already knew, as Laurino suggests (229)? Perhaps. Whatever the truth of Valachi's testimony, it inspired Mario Puzo's transition from writing what he considered “literature” that made little money (*The Dark Arena*, *The Fortunate Pilgrim*) to creating a potboiler lined with gold called *The Godfather*.

As a best-selling novel and acclaimed trilogy of films directed by Francis Ford Coppola, *The Godfather* proved an authentic American phenomenon that inspired, among other important narratives, Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990) and David Chase's *The Sopranos* (1999–2007). Laurino includes an interview with Chase (who collaborated with her on one chapter of this book) but moves quickly past Coppola and barely mentions Scorsese—surprising omissions.

Her reticence here misses an opportunity to advance the conversation about Italian Americans. For example, Laurino might ask at more length why Mafia narratives appeal to so many Americans, including those of Italian ancestry, many of whom often create them. David Chase suggests that the appeal is “tribal,” a peculiar word to use (242). Laurino points instead to the differing reactions of older Italian Americans, who are more likely than younger Italian Americans to have experienced “the stigma of the Mafia” (238). Have Italian Americans moved beyond defensiveness or denial? Today, when discrimination against Italian Americans as *mafiosi* has all but vanished or been tempered by, among other things, the wide presence of Italian Americans in government and on the United States Supreme Court, is it time to receive work like *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas*, and *The Sopranos* simply as instances of Italian American creative achievement?

At many points in the book, particularly in part 4, Laurino exalts Italian Americans by tending to exaggerate their contributions. We hear a lot about poet Gregory Corso and activist Mario Savio as “cultural outlaws”—so much so that the term seems excessive. Laurino's praise for Italian Americans in the visual arts (she mentions Massimiliano Gioni, Marino Auriti, and Ralph

Fasanella) seems misplaced, too. What, one asks, of far more celebrated figures like Frank Stella? The book's capriciousness of attention in the patchwork of part 4 makes *The Italian Americans* seem as much puff piece as history.

The Italian Americans featured on the PBS series were, overwhelmingly, celebrities and male. To her credit, in the book Laurino pays more attention to women than the series did. She includes Madonna and Lady Gaga and well-known political figures like Nancy Pelosi. In the early sections of the book, she scrupulously includes letters and references to more obscure women, like Angela Bambace, a pioneering union organizer. Still, large, overwhelming questions loom over a book like *The Italian Americans*: Who are the Italian Americans today, and do they represent, if they ever did, a "pure product" (Clifford 1988, 1)?

An influential *New York Times Magazine* piece (Hall 1983) featuring prominent Italian Americans never mentions something that remains evident in the PBS series and, despite valiant gestures, in Laurino's book: an affinity for famous men that mirrors both the culture's own long-time preference and the tendency of Italian American women to disappear under Irish, Jewish, or other ethnic names through intermarriage. In fact, "strict endogamy [Italian Americans marrying Italian Americans] falls off with each new cohort," so that, by 1979, two-thirds to three-quarters of Italian Americans married outside their ethnic group—a percent one can assume has grown (Alba 2000, 58). Certain traditions persist, of course, food and family chief among them, entities that unify most ethnicities. Increasingly, however, the Italian American story meshes with others, so that we might ask ourselves who counts as Italian American today: those, increasingly rare, of 100 percent Italian ancestry? Half? One-quarter? By instinct, one desires not to specify percentages, even though the vague criterion of "feeling Italian" (Ferraro 2005) also seems unsatisfactory.

Perhaps to preempt the question, Laurino turns at the end of her book to America's recent love affair with Italy itself, a return to the putative "pure product." She praises the homeland's food, its strong biological families, its attachment to "the community over individual, beauty over mass production, time over profit"—in short, a counterpoise to "the void left by mechanized productivity" in modern life (264). She embraces what has become the all-American urge to "feel Italian." Laurino also notes, again correctly, that Italians by and large—though she does not add the qualifier—"do not like to tamper with the essential nature of things" (264). The positive feelings about the Italy of our imaginations and of our travels now touch Italian Americans too. Yet, for Laurino's project to maintain integrity, Italians and Italian Americans need to remain two separate entities: Her book might have considered some differences between them.

Laurino's book, like the PBS series, carefully chronicles the history of discrimination against Italian Americans, from the New Orleans lynchings and the Sacco and Vanzetti cases to internment during World War II and lingering prejudices afterward. She also recounts the ways in which most Italian Americans overcame such obstacles to achieve success. However, notorious instances of violent prejudice against others are also part of Italian American history. The PBS series visits, albeit briefly, the infamous murder of Yusef Hawkins in 1989 in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, and the notoriously racist demonstrations by Italian Americans who expressed outrage that local Italian American youths were being tried for killing a young black man who attempted to date a local woman or, as actually proved to be the case, was casually walking through their neighborhood to look at a used car. Why does the book fail to note the incident, which reveals less attractive sides of "Italian American" values of family and community (Torgovnick 1993)? In the same way, one would not know from this book that Columbus Day, mentioned in the context of Mussolini, today gets both celebrated as a marker of Italian American identity and protested as a symbol of racism and genocide against Native peoples.

In the end, *The Italian Americans: A History*, while admirable, remains partial and trapped within its push-and-pull attraction to and repulsion from the very myths it seeks to probe. It prefers straightforward narratives and mostly affirmative facts, scanting parallel stories, and troubling countercurrents. It delivers selected case histories, documents, and interviews as complete and finished answers and, at almost every point, avoids interrogating facts and asking questions.

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