

Civello seeking pseudocontrition in a church in opening scenes from *Mean Streets*, of Henry Hill and wife-to-be Karen after her initiation into ritualized Mafia violence, or of a tortured Jake La Motta in the empty, amorphous boxing ring that opens *Raging Bull* evoke a central trope running through Scorsese's body of work: Religion might for some be considered a prophylactic against gangsterism and mob thinking, but in the end, it is as flawed as those who practice it, or like to think that they do.

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Mafia and Outlaw Stories from Italian Life and Literature.

Translations and Introduction by Robin Pickering-Iazzi.

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180 pages.

While *La Cosa Nostra* has come to be known in the United States through the words and images of Mario Puzo, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese, the English-speaking audience has long wanted for an interpretative key to comprehend the Mafia's cultural and political presence in Sicily and the Italian peninsula. What sets Robin Pickering-Iazzi's fascinating collection of literature and testimonials apart from other texts about the Mafia is that the reader enters in *medias res* an ongoing conversation among Italian authors and witnesses about Mafia mythology and reality. Even a cursory review of the myriad texts contained within *Mafia and Outlaw Stories from Italian Life and Literature* testifies to the vast difference between the American and Italian perceptions of the secret society famously encoded by an ideology of honor, *omertà*, and individual autonomy.

Pickering-Iazzi's comprehensive introduction profiles each author or witness represented in the collection and chronicles important moments in Mafia history, noting that contemporary scholars generally locate the Mafia's beginning in the founding of the modern Italian nation in 1860 and the development of agrarian capitalism (5). The earliest recorded references to the Mafia as a criminal association appear simultaneously in state documents (Prefect Marchese Filippo Gualtiero's alert in 1865 to the Italian government about the dangerous conditions in Sicily brought about by Mafia activity) and in literary works (Gaspere Mosca's two-act comedy *I mafiusi di la Vicaria* first staged in 1862 in Palermo). Seemingly inspired by these first two written references to the Mafia, Pickering-Iazzi selected both works of fiction and nonfiction that span over a century of Italian history.

Two-thirds of the included texts are short stories from such renowned Italian authors as Giovanni Verga ("The Golden Key," 1884), Grazia Deledda ("The Hired Killer," 1928), and Anna Maria Ortese ("Montelepre," 1955), and excerpts from autobiographies such as Livia De Stefani's *The Mafia at My Back* (1991). Verga's suspenseful short story, while not explicitly about the Mafia, clearly paints the armed field guard Surfareddu as a hired protector of wealthy estates who strong-arms anyone who dares

to cross him. When Surfareddu murders a peasant who stole some olives from the parish priest's olive grove, the town judge "arrived with the lawmen and was bent on taking it out on the parish priest and tying him up like a scoundrel" (23). With a well-turned bribe, however, the parish priest and the judge return to their comfortable lives after only a day, the olive thief buried in the orchard, under the old tree where cabbages grow "as big as the heads of babes" (24). Verga's tale forces us to consider both the malleable definition of justice in pre- and post-Unification Italy and the "collusive relations of power between landowners, representatives of the Catholic Church, and agents of the law" (6).

Carolina Invernizio's "An Episode of Brigandage" (1885) employs a story within a story from the perspective of a Northern Italian woman author to consider Mafia mythology and the "images of the Mafia in the social and cultural imagination" (7). Because brigandage, a term the Italian state applied to peasant rebellions against oppressive landlords in Naples and Sicily, conjures images of "rebels defending the weak against a cruel, unjust society," the Mafia appropriated the more legendary aspects of the brigands for their own less noble purposes. Pickering-Iazzi suggests that the tale, published just one year after Verga's, enables readers to scrutinize the guiding principles and actions of, for instance, Surfareddu in "The Golden Key."

Three selections by noted women authors propel us forward in history to Italian Fascism and its anti-Mafia campaign under Benito Mussolini: Grazia Deledda's "The Hired Killer" (1928), Maria Occhipinti's "The Carob Tree" (1993), and a selection from Livia De Stefani's autobiography *The Mafia at My Back* (1991). Deledda's tale covers only five pages but paints a vivid picture of an outlaw who delivers his own form of justice by judging and murdering oppressors. When the hired killer is ultimately punished for "the only crime he had not committed," the reader ponders the relationship between justice and law in a civil society. Guiding her audience's critical analysis, Pickering-Iazzi references similar themes in two other selections in her collection: Luigi Natoli's serialized novel *The Blessed Paulists* (1909-1910) and Giuseppe Ernesto Nuccio's "Testagrossa Agrees" (1911). Pickering-Iazzi's introduction provides a noteworthy comparison between De Stefani's aristocratic, estate-owner's perspective on the *mafiosi* in *The Mafia at My Back* and Occhipinti's peasant point of view in "The Carob Tree." Both writers position the women and peasants who populate the two narratives as vulnerable in the "power relations shaping their lives and livelihoods" (10). "It must be kept in mind that I was a woman," writes De Stefani some forty years after her battle with the Mafia, "and therefore, in their mind's eye, a creature that was below the goat and the chicken" (123). De Stefani's powerful description of the *mafiosi* who hunted her and her estate Virzì like wild beasts will echo in one's mind weeks after the first reading: "I could see the fire burning in their eyes, like ravenous wolves, fixed on Virzì and just waiting to attack at the first sign of me giving in, and to devour it in one gulp, paying next to nothing" (122).

As the final narrative selection in Pickering-Iazzi's collection, the excerpt from *The Mafia at My Back* serves as a transitional piece that lays the groundwork for the second part of *Mafia and Outlaw Stories*, which contains testimonies of citizens who bear witness to the violence and horror that inevitably accompany the Mafia. All four accounts come from women (Maria Saladino, Felicia Impastato, Letizia Battaglia, and Rita Atria) and range from the 1950s to the 1990s. Though diverse in their specific

“antimafia intervention,” the tales all reveal strong women and their commitment to change (14). From Saladino’s poignant recounting of the day she found out that her father was a *mafioso* (“I was twenty-five [. . .] And my world caved in on me [. . .] I was a mafioso’s daughter”) to Impastato’s memory of her son’s murder (“It was raining the day they killed my son. [. . .] When I found out what had happened to Peppino, I felt my house cave in on me”), the harrowing accounts all start from a place of utter destruction (138, 143). Tellingly, only Saladino’s ends by striking a chord of hope (“I always dream. I’m a dreamer. I dream of really beautiful things. Children freed from hunger and violence, truer social justice, a society that’s not dominated by tyrants, free of the Mafia”) (142).

The translations in *Mafia and Outlaw Stories from Italian Life and Literature* are artfully rendered and the selections thoughtful, providing many opportunities for intertextual analysis particularly appropriate for courses in Italian History and Culture, Italian Literature, Criminology, and Justice and Legal Studies.

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