



The Passage Of The Frog And The Wild Strawberries Of 1942

A novel by Beniamino Petrosino. Book review by Franco Tevere.

The Passage Of The Frog And The Wild Strawberries Of 1942 is a shocking novel.

Reading this book, I marveled at the detail with which the author was able to draw back on his early childhood memories. I was appalled at the way he and his siblings were treated by their father. I felt compassion and sorrow for Petrosino, his mother and his siblings, driven by the stark clarity with which he tells his tale. Reading this book, I found myself making notes in the margins almost involuntarily, reading with amazement at the appalling way of life he and his mother were subjected to.

And yet I loved this book. It's account of small-town Italian life. It's an account of a people Petrosino describes as "illiterate and very poor". People whose lives often filled with despair and when they did, they turned to God and when god failed them and bad luck struck, innocently seeking remedies in ancient superstitions. It's an account of family ties and their manifestations – both good and bad.

Beniamino Petrosino's novel is touted as a tale of the superstitions, beliefs, traditions and beliefs of an illiterate Southern-Italian way of life. Dedicated to his two beloved children, as well as his nieces and nephews so that it "can help them grow free from their roots",

Petrosino's account of his childhood is, if nothing else, extraordinary.

Before Petrosino takes us into his world, the reader is welcomed with a poem – To you with love. The starkest line, describing his motivation for writing his story, is To Rest My Soul. For anyone who has ever used a diary or even a scrap piece of paper to jot down their thoughts to help them let go of recurring thoughts and frustrations, this is truly an incisive comment.

Petrosino is a beautiful writer and throughout the novel there are wonderful phrases. There are stirring passages, which, despite their austerity, renders one with warm affection and empathy. Bitter lines such as "After many kicks in the head the child's spontaneous gaiety vanished, as did his love for life" are contrasted with emotive ones such as "They made love passionately, promising each other it would never happen again".

Throughout the novel, we are given an insight into the life and people of Southern Italy (Potenza). Petrosino begins with details of the 'Count', his great-grandfather, an arrogant womaniser known as the "fattucchiaro" in the town – a witch, a magician, a sorcerer. He was a merciless man, without a thought for the sorrow of others. His great-grandfather's pitiless behaviour permeates throughout the generations with one following the other, terrorising and dominating each other with cruelty.

Through Petrosino's eyes we learn of his wife-beating, gambling and alcoholic father. A man, who spoiled himself, and yet made his children go without shoes, who Petrosino describes as being so naïve as to not understand that the town folk at the bar only befriended him when it was his turn to shout a drink (more than once and with unequalled frequency).

This is a novel about an abusive husband-wife relationship existing in a small-town, trapped by the suffocating mentality. Of a marriage, which despite the treachery inflicted by the husband, the wife cannot leave until driven to the depths of despair for fearing "What would people think?". How much clearer can the author be when describing his parent's relationship and the beatings his mother received than through the passage "In public my father was polite and my mother smiled, but she kept her lips together to hide the broken teeth. Even so, people knew what was still going on, but they were too scared to intervene".

The tale also speaks volumes for a child's love for his family and mother, and of a mother's love for



her children. When one of the children, Petrosino's brother Davino dies in its infancy (two months and twenty-two days), Petrosino writes "The guilt that subsequently pervaded my mother was beyond anyone's imagination and almost drove her to insanity; for months she acted as if nothing mattered anymore".

What I find most remarkable is, how a boy that lived through such atrocities became a man with a beautiful manner of expression, a man capable of building a life of his own, a caring and protection for his children. It is heart-wrenching to read that Petrosino, as a child saw himself and his siblings as having a social status no better than donkeys and he writes "In fact, the donkeys were better groomed".

Despite the sedition illustrated with great detail, this is also a story of tenderness, providing insights into growing up in Southern Italy – playing with cousins, running amok through the streets with other children in the village, cooking up feasts to celebrate the Saints, the discovery of cigarettes, girls, cooking, secrets and solidarity.

This book is engaging and captivating – a discovery into a time and place not so far away and not so unrealistic to think that the same family dynamics, could not be happening in the world right now – your world.

In the introduction Petrosino writes "I only know that, just like the rest of my family, I cannot find peace". By the end one is left pondering if, as he wrote in his dedication "this book is written to my beloved...to help them grow free from their roots" whether he achieves it. The real question for the author, and for the reader, is does anyone of us ever really do so?

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Copies available through the publisher - contact What's New In Italy.

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Beniamino Petrosino was born in Salerno, Italy, in 1955. Trained as a chef at Potenza polytechnic, he worked in Switzerland for three years but on returning to Italy was conscripted into the army. He later traveled to London where he met his future wife, a New Zealander. In 1983 they moved to Christchurch and opened one of the city's first Italian restaurants.

