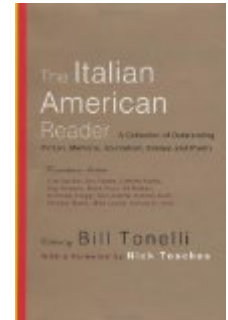


Bill Tonelli, ed.. *The Italian American Reader: A Collection of Outstanding Fiction, Memoirs, Journalism, Essays, and Poetry.* New York: HarperCollins, 2003. 547 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-06-000666-2.



Reviewed by Stanislaw G. Pugliese

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The Italian American Reader begins with an uncharacteristically subdued Nick Tosches illuminating a genealogy of Italian American writers from Lorenzo Da Ponte (born as the Jew Emanuele Conegliano) to Mario Puzo. The reader is then overwhelmed by the energy and enthusiasm of editor Bill Tonelli who starts with a paean to Italian American contributions to music and movies (unmatched by any other ethnic group). But then we have the confession long expected: "Writing? Okay, this is the problem. This is the thing. Because in this particular branch of the expressive arts ... it has never quite come together as it did in music and the movies. It has failed to attain that moment of coalescence" (p. xvi). In fact, it was a decade ago that Gay Talese famously asked on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*, "Where are the Italian American writers?" That query acted as a catalyst, for we now have several excellent anthologies (including at least two anthologies devoted to Italian American women, innumerable books on the Sopranos, and others referring to the *Godfather* and this

post-*Godfather* moment in Italian American culture).

What Talese did not ask--but others have--is, where are the Italian American readers? For, as Tonelli points out in his introduction, writers cannot exist without readers. But how can they write for a reader who sees reading and writing as lonely, anti-social acts? "Early on, in the dark river of my youth, I wanted to become a writer. It seemed a most unlikely thing. In my neighborhood, there were few books, many bookies. I was discouraged from reading, on the grounds that it would 'put ideas in your head,'" writes Tosches in his foreword, a sentiment echoed by Fred Gardaph in his "Breaking and Entering." The Italian Americans have not produced many writers who psychologically plumb the dark depths of our psyche. And no wonder, because as Tonelli so charmingly indicates, such a writer's grandmother "would have chopped him up and buried the pieces under her tomato plants." The southern Italian tradition of *omert* demands no less. But is it true that the very process of writing--and therefore putting us under observation--changes us just as atoms are

changed when under observation in Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle?

Curiously, in the nearly seventy pieces included in the anthology, there is a notable absence: Italy. Italian Americans were understandably ambivalent toward *la patria*; it was, after all, a country that rejected them economically and culturally. Italians, for their part, have looked down on their uncouth cousins, while Italian scholars--until recently--have scorned Italian-American history, culture, and literature. I would argue that the divorce between Italian and Italian-American culture has worked to impoverish both cultures.

Tonelli began with a clear premise: no work would be included that he simply did not love. There are more famous essays and chapters that have been dropped but, on the whole, this criteria works well. Tonelli decided to arrange the pieces according to broad themes: Home; Mom; Sex, Love, and Good Looks; Food; Pop; Death; Work; God; Each Other; Everybody Else. Come to think of it--what else is left? At a recent presentation of the book at Hofstra University, a member of the audience asked why there was no section devoted to crime, inadvertently revealing the common stereotype, perhaps the irreducible stigmata of a people. Mario Puzo is here, but represented by an excerpt from his critically acclaimed but dismally selling masterpiece, *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, under the category of "Mom." (But the shadow of the *Godfather* is never far off: late in life, Puzo confessed that Vito Corleone was based on his mother). Tonelli has assembled more than the usual suspects here. There are the classic writers of the proletarian 1930s like Pietro Di Donato and John Fante; newcomers like Theresa Maggio and Maria Laurino; academics like Jay Parini and Frank Lentricchia; epic writers like Gay Talese and pointillists like the comedian Ray Romano; there are the outrageous (Camille Paglia and Nick Tosches) and the humble (John Ciardi and Dana Gioia); trashy writers (Victoria Gotti) and sports-writers (Mike Lupica); there are those who are

more Italian (Felix Stefanile), those who are not very Italian in their writing (Don DeLillo), and those--the majority--in between.

This is a book that is best not read at one sitting but perused over several weeks, a reading strategy that allows for the pieces to ferment in the mind. The next time someone asks, "where are the Italian American writers?" we can brandish this book and say: what other ethnic group can match *this*?

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