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Mark Rotella. *Stolen Figs and Other Adventures in Calabria.* New York: North Point Press, 2003. viii + 310 pp. $15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86547-696-7; $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86547-627-1.

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When I heard that there was yet another memoir of a person's stay in Italy, I rolled my eyes in anticipation: surely this was another in that genre of books by Americans, English, or northern Europeans who flee their inhospitable climes for the warmer shores of Italy. Once there–usually Tuscany or Umbria–they would flower and open up to the sensuousness of landscape, food, and beautiful people. Now this genre has produced some masterpieces such as Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* or E. M. Forster's *Room with a View*, but lately the genre has seemed tired and full of cliches. Thankfully, Mark Rotella's *Stolen Figs* is a different animal altogether: a clear-eyed study of southern Italy and its hopelessly fascinating and frustrating combination of amore/amare.

What shall we call this longing felt by children of immigrants to return to Italy? Nostalgia would not be correct, since they have no earlier memories of the *bel paese*. In fact, the image of Italy in the minds of the children of immigrants is often more beautiful than the memories that their parents or grandparents possess. Contrary to the usual stereotype of the immigrant pining for the lost homeland, it was not unusual for a day laborer, a *bracciante*, a *morte di fame*, or a *scugnizzo* to look back in scorn at a country that had rejected millions of its own sons and daughters. My maternal grandparents were landless day laborers who proceeded to have four daughters. This was nothing less than an economic catastrophe as daughters in Calabria, as late as the 1950s, still needed a dowry of land and animals to marry–hence their flight to the United States in 1954. My mother, who spent the first two years of her life living in a cave, seeking shelter from the aerial bombardments of World War II, still looks back in fear of the snakes that occasionally dropped from the olive trees during harvest time. My father left Rome, where he played trumpet with the famous Bersaglieri band, and did not return to his hometown in the province of Avellino until twenty years later. These were not atypical sentiments.

Mark Rotella's father also displays a certain reluctance when his son suggests–*all'improvviso*–a quick visit to Gimigliano in Calabria, the father's ancestral hometown. "Why go back to the past?" the elder Rotella asks. Located almost midway between the Tyrrhenian and Ionian seas on the instep of the boot of Italy that is Calabria, Gimigliano is not a town visited by tourists. Rotella, an editor at *Publishers Weekly*, is not a tourist but a traveler, which is a different thing altogether. He is willing to point out Calabria's faults, beginning with its name: "it sounds like a curse." Nor is the weather what travel agents might suggest: the summer is lacerated by the sirocco wind from north Africa and the winter soaked by freezing rains that have carried off millions of tons of fertile topsoil, leaving a landscape in many places that is best suited only for goats. And there is the shadowy presence of the "Ndrangheta," Calabria's version of the Sicilian Mafia or the Neapolitan Camorra. Less dramatic than the Sicilians to the south or the Neapolitans to the north, the Calabresi have acquired a well-deserved reputation of *testa dura*.

For all its admitted problems, Rotella still loves Calabria. That love is expressed through family ties, friendships forged, and food shared. As with any journey, there are moments of epiphany: as when, at a roadside shrine to the Virgin Mary, Rotella recognizes in the face of the Madonna the weather-beaten faces of the local population. Here there are no saccharine Madonnas in the tradition of Raphael or the northern Renaissance. Instead there is an abundance of churches dedicated to the Madonna Addolorata.

Despite his annual visits, Rotella, even though he has begun the process to obtain dual citizenship, realizes that for all his longing, he can never really be Calabresi or Italian. Commenting on the difference between the gifts he would bring to relatives with those reciprocated, he writes: "I brought my relatives what I thought they needed; they gave gifts that they couldn't live without" (p. 107). For those of us like Rotella–born in the United States to Italian parents–we will perhaps always

feel more Italian in America and more American while in Italy.

Rotella's Virgil is Giuseppe Chiarella, a man who makes a modest living by photographing Calabria for tourist postcards. The business of visiting tourist-stand owners to distribute the photographs and collect his profits are an excellent excuse for Rotella to tag along and explore the entire region, from the shores of Tropea and Scilla to the plains of Spezzano Albanese to the peaks of the Aspromonte. Chiarella is furbo and full of peasant wisdom. When they stop by the roadside to feast on some figs and Rotella asks who owns the fruit, Chiarella laconically replies that "there's nothing tastier than stolen figs." (Having stolen a few figs myself in Calabria, I can confirm this culinary truth.)

Supplemented by black and white photographs of Calabria by Chiarella and a useful map by Steven Arcella, *Stolen Figs* is a rare delight: a true picture of southern Italy, with defects and virtues lovingly rendered.

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