

dining & entertainment

'An Italian American Story' Is Daughter's Tribute To Dad

An Italian American Story A Memoir
 By Susan D'Angelo Mannino
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BY LINDA J. WILSON

During World War II, Bernardo and Orazio, two soldiers in the Italian Army, were roommates in a military hospital. A few years after the war, Orazio's widow, Giuseppa, her parents and her younger children found themselves living next door to Bernardo and his family. Bernardo's older son, Giovan Battista D'Angelo, Battista to his extended family and many friends, would later marry Orazio's youngest daughter, Silvana. Their youngest child, American-born Susan D'Angelo Mannino, in *An Italian American Story*, her memoir of growing up in Glendale in the 1970s, '80s and '90s, now tells their story and hers, moving backward and forward in time.

Mannino, a poet, author, and educator who has spent more than a decade in special education helping learning-disabled children, in 2007 was recognized by the United Federation of Teachers for her outstanding achievement and dedication in the

classroom. Her poetry has been published in various anthologies; *An Italian American Story*, an autobiographical memoir, is her first full-length book. At its heart is Mannino's account of the last year of Giovan Battista D'Angelo's life.

Mannino intersperses a relatively straightforward account of Battista's battle with an ultimately fatal brain tumor with reminiscences of growing up as the youngest daughter in an Italian-American family in Queens. A strict traditionalist, especially where his daughters were concerned, Battista worked on the housekeeping staff at a hospital and brought home many an account of how some of his young colleagues were kicking over the traces. "Apparently he was very modern outside of his own family," Mannino comments. Her recounting of the strictures applied to young women of good Italian families will be familiar to readers raised by first- and second generation European-American parents; apparently the same mindset prevailed, whatever the ethnicity.

As Mannino tells it, while her father's comments have been the guiding force in her life ("You know, if you were able to get a ninety-eight percent, then you could have gotten one hundred percent," he told her after one exam, leading her to demand nothing less than perfection from herself as

a mother, an educator and a writer), sometimes his eyes said it all. "For us, Dad's eyes were, in a sense, his voice. The moment you asked for something, or to go somewhere, you had your answer. No words necessary."

In the manner of all memoirs, *An Italian American Story* is intensely personal. Mannino's experiences are unique to her and her extended family, as is her guilt at staying home to rest at her mother's insistence and so missing her father's last moments. It is also universal in that it is the story of the love between parents and children, the bonds shared by all the members of a closely knit extended family and the realization that as long as we remember

our loved dead, they live on in our hearts.

An Italian American Story is a difficult book to review when considered from a strictly chronological standpoint. Keeping track of the five children sired by each of Mannino's two grandfathers, their spouses and children, could also prove onerous. However, *An Italian American Story* is not meant to be read as a biography. It is sad,

funny, passionate, intense and ultimately a daughter's loving tribute to the man who gave her life and made that life meaningful, even after his own was ended. Giovan Battista D'Angelo lives on in this book. The reader who spends an hour or two making his acquaintance and that of his family will find the time well spent.



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