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Interview with Djelloul Marbrook
Author of Saraceno

Thank you Djelloul for giving us the opportunity to interview you today. I know that our readers will enjoy hearing your version of the Mafia – much different than the popular version. Welcome to Reader Views.

Irene: Tell us the gist of your recent novel, Saraceno (sa-ra-CHAY-no).
Djelloul: It's about nobility of soul in the dark context of the Mafia. It's about the redemptive qualities of friendship, even in the most dangerous circumstances. And, finally, it's about the true meaning of alchemy, which is the transformation of the base to the precious. Historically we think of turning base metals into gold, but that's just a metaphor for the journey of the spirit.

Irene: What inspired you to write this book?
Djelloul: I knew a young man like Billy Salviati in my book. He was eerily handsome and he had a magical gift for friendship. I played a role in his life and he played a role in mine. Everything was crystal-clear to the real Billy, whereas everything was baffling to me. Of course it took me many years to understand that things are always crystal-clear to psychotics. That's why they're so seductive. It's why we'd like to be them, while they're perfectly happy to be themselves. But I had another reason for writing the book. It's my homage to my stepfather, Dominick Guccione, who rescued me from my assigned role as family embarrassment and bastard. You see, I was a bastard, and Dominick gave me a place in the world. His extended Sicilian family embraced me, whereas my mother's family was uncomfortable with me. So I wanted to salute Dominick, and I wanted to say something about the Sicilians who brought such marvelous gifts to North America only to see them overshadowed by the specter of the Mafia.

Irene: Please tell about the title, what it means, and why you chose it.

Djelloul: Dominick used to call me Il Saraceno. It means the Arab in Italian, and in my case it referred to the fact that my father was an Algerian Arab. Dominick used the nickname fondly, and so in fact do the Sicilians when they speak of the Saraceni. That is because of all European people the Sicilians have a unique collective memory of the

Saracens. The Saracens (Arabs) ruled Sicily for more than 200 years. It was a period of unparalleled peace, prosperity and harmony in a very troubled Sicilian history. So the Saraceni are not enemies to the Sicilians. Every Sicilian has enjoyed the puppet shows in which Christian knights do battle with Saracen knights. The Sicilians especially like these traditional shows because in their heart of hearts they're not really sure who the bad guy is. In the book the Mafia don whom Billy Salviati serves calls Billy Il Saraceno. It's a compliment. It means he's a bit foreign (Billy is half Irish) and he's a lot deadly. It also means that as a puppet he does his master's bidding

Irene: Saraceno is a new variety of a gangster tale. What make it different from any other book about gangsters?

Djelloul: The Mafia has been portrayed in many ways in books and movies, and I don't have a quarrel with these portrayals, because the Mafia is a work of many facets. The word in all likelihood comes from the Arabic word ma'afie, which was simply the name of the clan that ruled Palermo during Sicily's Arab period. Many of the customs associated with the Mafia probably have Arab tribal origins, such as the idea of the vendetta or omerta, the rule of silence. But I felt I had something interesting, if not unique, to say about the Mafia because as a boy I had listened not only to Mafiosi in my stepfather's kitchen but to first and second generation Sicilians who understood how and why the Mafia had gotten a foothold in this country. Dominick used to say that the Sicilians had wanted to leave four things in Sicily: a corrupt church, a corrupt government, poverty and the Mafia. Hey, he would say with a wry grin, three outta four ain't bad! I not only heard the Sicilians talk about how the Mafia imbedded itself in their new lives, I actually experienced some of it myself. When I was in college I worked for a guy who had a string of hat-check concessions in nightclubs in Manhattan and Brooklyn. The hat-check girls were also hookers. My boss took a cut of their income and I collected this cut for him. In other words, I was a bagman. I was also a dumb kid who confused an education with being smart. The idea was that the cops wouldn't take a college kid wearing twills, fruit boots and a tweed jacket for a bagman. One night I was working in the Village Barn in Greenwich Village developing photos of party-goers and my boss dashed in and stowed a brown paper bag on a shelf and told me he'd be back. I was street savvy and I poked into the bag and saw it was heroin. I wasn't about to take a fall for this guy, so I ran out into an alley and dumped it all in a grate. When he came back he beat me half to death and told me he'd be back. I wasn't going anywhere, because he'd broken my nose, my cheek and three ribs. But I made it to a telephone and called Vito Genovese who was at that time the most famous of New York's mafia bosses. He was also a childhood friend of my stepfather. Vito sent two guys to the Village Barn. They told me to sit on the floor and wait for my boss. When he returned they worked him over pretty good. But then they wanted to know all about his operations. So I spent three weeks after I got out of the hospital showing these two goombahs how the hat-check scam worked. And of course my boss lost his empire to the Mafia. Being dumb, I was happy. He kept me working for him, because he figured it would ingratiate him with the wise guys. He was dumb, too. So that's a little sample of how the mob gets into things. But the story the Sicilians had to tell is really the never-ending story of the American struggle with racism. When the Sicilians arrived and found the Irish in control of city government up and down the East Coast, they thought, they hoped that fellow Catholics would be kind towards them. But the Irish perceived them as a threat to their own wellbeing, and there was no little bigotry involved. Of course the Irish themselves had recently suffered bigotry at the hands of the landed WASPs. The Mafia was often the only protection the Sicilians had from the injustices that were inflicted on them. This came home to me vividly when I introduced my first wife to Dominick. What a pretty girl

you are, he said, you're not Irish, are you? This is an aspect of the Mafia story not often told. In other words, racism and discrimination played a role in the Mafia's climb to power in the United States.

Irene: Parts of the book draw from the life of your stepfather, Dominick J. Guccione, a childhood friend of notorious Charles Lucana (Lucky Luciano.) Tell us about your experience living within the realm of Mafia.
Djelloul: Dominick was not himself a mafioso. He was a self-made businessman and a great success. He was a taxidermist by trade, but his wealth came mostly from his successes in real estate. Salvatore Charles Lucana (Lucky Luciano) had been his friend down on Elizabeth Street. Dominick was one of those men who made lasting friendships. But his success, a great story by itself, came originally from his beautiful singing voice. He used to sell newspapers outside Luchow's on Fourteenth Street in Manhattan and he would sing opera to keep warm. People would gather and call him the street Caruso. One of his admirers was the famous architect Stanford White, and White befriended Dominick and introduced him to important people—Dominick called them swells. And these swells helped Dominick, not only because his beautiful voice thrilled them at their parties, but because they found him a man of rock-solid integrity, a man who would rather die than betray a trust. Such men were useful to the ruling class.

Irene: The book also draws some parts of your own personal life. Tell us how you were able to weave it into the book?
Djelloul: Well, when I decided late in my life—I'm 71 now—that I wanted to write fiction because I could say more than I ever had been able to say as a newspaperman, I remembered the real Billy and how much I had liked him and how he had worked so hard to befriend me. I had long since lost touch with him, but I knew he had become a wise guy—the book describes how—and I decided that I would imagine the rest of Billy's life for him and make it turn out the way I would have liked it to turn out. I also wanted to pay tribute to some people who had a profound impact on me. In the book Hettie Warshaw, Auschwitz survivor and magus, is one such person.

Irene: How much influence did Billy have on you? On how you act/react now?
Djelloul: I wouldn't have anticipated that question in a million years, but I like it. I think Billy taught me to take things head-on, to call things by their real name, to trust my antennae. I think my encounter with him took up a perch in my mind. After I met him I was less inclined to let anybody run numbers on me, and you'll see that in the book where he has an intriguing encounter with the young Marlon Brando.

Irene: If you could come face to face with the real Billy now, what would you say to him?
Djelloul: Exactly what I just said.

Irene: How different is your recount of the Mafia than what is portrayed by movies and television programs?
Djelloul: Dominick was one of those men who made lasting friendships. But his success, a great story by itself, came originally from his beautiful singing voice. He used to sell newspapers outside Luchow's on Fourteenth Street in Manhattan and he would sing opera to keep warm. People would gather and call him the street Caruso. One of his admirers was the famous architect Stanford White, and White befriended Dominick and introduced him to important people—Dominick called them swells. And these swells helped Dominick, not only because his beautiful voice thrilled them at their parties, but

because they found him a man of rock-solid integrity, a man who would rather die than betray a trust. Such men were useful to the ruling class.

Irene: You mentioned earlier that you were an embarrassment to your mother's family. Seventy-one years ago, and in most European based cultures, having an illegitimate child was frowned upon. How did you cope with being ostracized?
Djelloul: Poorly. For a long time I didn't even know I was illegitimate -- my mother told me she had married my father and he had died in a hunting accident when I was an infant. I later learned they had not married. He had fought against the French, had three children (with whom I now correspond), and lived until 1978. Until I was five I lived with my mother's younger sister Dorothy and my grandmother, who told me before she died that my mother had received letters from my father for some years after bringing me to New York. When I was five my mother's sister Dorothy got breast cancer and I was sent to a Christian Scientist boarding school where many of the kids were English evacuees from the Nazi bombing of their country. I got a good education there, but I missed Dorothy and my grandmother. I was not told Dorothy had died for quite a while. I suffered a lot of bullying and some sexual abuse and it compounded my identity problem. I could see that my mother's family was embarrassed by what they considered her indiscretion. Her brother called me "son of the sheik." She was a free-spirited artist, a very good one, but not suited to bringing up a child. Let me put it this way: by the time I joined the Navy and went to boot camp I thought the military life was a cakewalk compared to what I'd been through. Abused children cover the abuse, so in that way they become co-conspirators with their abusers. Some people come out of the military suffering post-traumatic stress disorder; I entered the military suffering it. The Navy was the best and safest home I ever had, until later in life when I met my wife Marilyn. I always knew what the name of the game was in the Navy, and that was wonderful to me, so I did well. I even began to know who I was—I was an American, a patriot, a young man who loved his country. That was incredibly important to me. I used to think that if I had looked like an English choir boy—I certainly went to school with many kids who looked like that—then my mother's family would be more accepting. But after years of therapy I realized that they wouldn't have been any more accepting, no matter what. My own uncle never learned how to pronounce or spell my first name, but one day I woke up and remembered that my officers in the Navy always learned how to spell and pronounce it, and that's why I realized that my stepfather Dominick and the U.S. Navy were my family. Dominick fell ill just as I graduated from high school and he died the year I left the Navy. So my day-to-day contact with him lasted only four years, enriched by occasional interaction, but Dominick and the Sicilian-American culture to which he belonged gave me a chance to survive my feelings of un-belonging. I returned to this subject of un-belonging and to my relationship with my mother in a subsequent novel, which has not yet been published. Our entire society today is engaged with the issues of belonging and un-belonging. At the same time that immigration is strong there has been a rise, a dramatic rise, in the number of hate organizations. So this issue belongs to us as a nation of immigrants. We have to own it and engage it, again and again.

Irene: You were a newspaper reporter on the streets of Manhattan. How much exposure did you have with the Mafia?
Djelloul: I never had the pleasure of newspapering in New York City. I served in the Navy and when I was discharged I went to work for *The Providence Journal,* but I wasn't

one of the reporters who wrote about the Mafia there. I later worked for Gannett in Elmira, New York, for *The Baltimore Sun,* for the *Winston-Salem Journal,* for *The Washington Star,* and for Media News newspapers, but I never wrote about the Mafia. It remained back in my boyhood. I certainly wrote about corruption, enough to know most of the corruptors never get caught and much of our society—such as paving the country in concrete—is shaped by the corruptors.

Irene: What would you say is the most corrupt aspect of our society now?
Djelloul: Ah, an easy question! Greed. Did we triumph over communism only to give free rein to unbridled piracy? What is a decent, moral profit margin? Why is it that we never engage that question? Is it because we have already acquiesced to the answer that a moral profit margin is anything you get and then some? Or, when we speak of American capitalism, do we mean jobs for our people, medical care for all of us, decent wages and decent retirements? Or do we mean everything for the shareholders and the CEOs and to hell with everybody else? Why is it that the moralistic religionists never raise this issue of what is a decent and moral profit? Is it because they're on the side of opportunistic greed? Why are the pulpits that are so noisy about abortion silent about the plague of greed that is destroying our lives, dismantling the middle class, exporting jobs and futures, and throwing us medical peanuts instead of proper care? Where is their morality when it comes to that?

Irene: When readers delve into "Saraceno" they come out with a deeper message than they expected. What do you want the readers to "get"?
Djelloul: I want them to get that our lives, all our lives, are great and marvelous dramas. We don't need Hollywood to tell us where the action is. I want them to begin to understand that we don't know anyone, we just pretend we do for our own convenience. Everyone is capable of surprising us, and we are capable of surprising ourselves in ways far more dramatic than 24 on Fox Television. I want them to be thrilled by the idea that each of us is capable of running into high adventure on every street corner and in every friendship. Billy Salviati and Matthew Pieto and Hettie Warshaw are us. We have to start respecting ourselves so much that we get our kicks from our own lives and not from cooked-up stories on a screen. I often read critics talking about page-turners. By that they mean plot-driven drama where the characters are like the Saracen and Christian puppets. That's not life. We're not puppets. We don't need anybody to pull our strings. We may change our lives forever by the simple act of taking a walk and meeting somebody like Hettie Warshaw. Or Billy Salviati. We are living lives of great tragedy and comedy, but we're letting the tastemakers talk us out of it. We're letting them turn us into puppets.

Irene: I get that you are referring that our society is very confused right now. Yet, there seems to be a need to connect with reality. Do you believe that the reality shows on TV are filling that need? If so, why? If not, what is?
Djelloul: No, I believe they are a retreat from reality. Reality would be holding our leaders' feet to the fire, insisting on a just and compassionate society. I believe that our corporate bosses are entertaining us to death. I believe that we are losing a free and independent press to a corporate slave-press that feeds us infotainment instead of the reality and truth we need to make proper decisions. I believe that under the circumstances we are in danger of losing our blessed and glorious republic. I believe we need to wake up and shake the crooks out of the trees.

Irene: Thank you so much for taking the time for this interview. I know that readers found our interview very interesting and will want to read your book, "Saraceno." Is there anything else you would like our readers to know about you or your book?
Djelloul: My web site—djelloulmarbrook.com—will give you some insights into the influences behind "Saraceno" and it will keep up to date about my other writings. There you will see Dominick himself in his workshop. You can also correspond with me through my blog At Amazon Connect.