

Reader Views

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Saraceno

By Djelloul Marbrook

Open Book Press (2006)

Reviewed by Lynn O'Connell for Reader Views (2/06)

This is a gangster story sans the blood or fast-paced adventure of most books on this subject. Instead, the author takes an introspective look at a Mafia hetman and the family for which he works. Art, literature and religion all figure into this quick, but thought-provoking, 111-page read.

The book opens as Billy Salviati is released from prison. He goes to reside in New York's Hell's Kitchen where he works in a cigar store. There, he meets and forms a deep friendship with Matt who is the grandson of Mafia don John Altobene. The book focuses on this relationship rather than on the particulars of the work that Billy does for the Mafioso. Billy's life changes further when he saves Hettie Warshaw from a pair of Hell's Kitchen muggers. This second relationship blossoms as if the two were mother and son and lasts for five years until Hettie's death.

By chapter 12 of 18 and after about 15 years have passed, Billy writes the letters "O-U-T" and passes the message to Matt. Matt, who has looked at Billy as a best friend and brother, is deeply saddened. At this point, Marbrook also shares the sensitivities of both men – Billy with his rooftop rose garden and Matt with his "magical celestial engine" in his bedroom. The book ends, with both men moving on with their lives, cognizant of how their friendship changed them and helped them grow.

Marbrook's story is set in the 1950s and is based on his own real-life experiences as well as those of his stepfather. Matt's Mafia family is based on friendships that the author's stepfather actually had in Hell's Kitchen. "Billy" comes from the author's own experiences when he was selling newspapers on the corner of 46th Street and Eighth Avenue. Marbrook purposefully chose the title "Saraceno," which is the name that John Altobene gave to Billy. Remember, the original Saracens were the descendants of Hagar – today's Arabs. Like a nomad in the desert, Billy roamed. With an Irish mother, Billy could never be entirely accepted in the Mafia culture.

The primary pleasure of reading this book comes by delving into Billy's relationships with Matt and Hettie. Another pleasure is the author's extensive vocabulary and tendency to use some unusual words to tell this story. Describing the first meeting between Billy and Hettie, Marbrook begins Chapter 5: "Synchronicities, if we know their number, would scare us. As it is, they cloy. For example, just about the moment a caustic August sun slumped like a tired scout in a Parthian saddle over the Palisades Billy Salviati met Hettie Warshaw."

I think the reader's knowledge about Hell's Kitchen and his stepfather's experiences with various Mafia figures is what makes this book special. It is a book for the serious reader interested in a short tale about relationships and change. The pace is going to be too slow for those readers looking for a story with action and adventure.