

read, and taste this wheat.” As the speaker of one of the poems of *Human Directional* might say, this is a very punny, yet deadly serious, and well-crafted book, warthogs and all.

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Olivia Kate Cerrone. *The Hunger Saint*. New York: Bordighera Press, 2017.

Olivia Kate Cerrone’s prose takes a decidedly backseat to the riveting story she tells in *The Hunger Saint*, focused on the controversial sulfur mining industry in Sicily in 1948. For the uninitiated, this chapter of Italian history may shock and may be hard to read, as Cerrone does not give us a break — we are witnesses to the sulfur-laden air, we are trapped not only in the mine but in a life few could negotiate, yet the story is so compelling that one can read it in a single day.

Officially categorized as fiction, this novella is based on facts that reflect the horrifying story of how grinding poverty and unenforced labor laws led countless Sicilian families to put their children (some as young as six years old) to work in the mines, where they not only experienced inhumane working conditions, but rampant sexual exploitation.

Cerrone’s prose is deliberate, clear, and pitch perfect to accomplish her goal: to tell the story of these youngsters called *carusi* who rose each morning in near total darkness only to spend their days in the same darkness.

In the mines, they are threatened by landslides and human error, working with explosives and abusive superiors, risking their lives for a pittance, or to pay off the family’s *soccorso morto*, or “dead loan,” which the *carusi* essentially would be handed over for.

Cerrone is virtually invisible throughout the novella, making the writing, underscored by her profound research, all the more powerful. Instead, the protagonist, Ntoni, one of the *carusi*, takes center stage. Ntoni is an anti-hero: neither brave, nor handsome or brilliant, yet he should not be underestimated. Exposed at a young age to the vicissitudes of disaster, he has undying faith in Saint Calogero, the hunger saint, who he feels certain will protect him. After all, he cannot trust the adults around him.

Just seeing his name, readers will intuit that he lives in a village, his name diminished from a full name, maybe in dialect, so we have a sense of his true character, and in the space of this tiny novella, we come to know just about everything about him. After spending her last compensation from her husband’s death in the mines, Ntoni’s mother is left with three children and no source of income, so she scours the market trash for bruised fruits and vegetables for sustenance. But she elicits contempt, rather than sympathy, as the villagers cry: *cattiva madre*, *brutta madre*, and she makes more deals with the local priest who dons a “regal silk cassock” while parishioners place offerings of bread and oranges at the feet of the Madonna in the clean, well-lit church.

Ntoni is crushed under the weight of the basket, filled to the brim with 50 pounds of earth and rocks, that he carries daily on his neck and shoulders. “There was an order to things, an adherence to rules that he couldn’t face,” and to even question that order represented an act of defiance that could not and would not be tolerated. He edges close to what he thinks could be a relief to work in the mines in France. By this time, the reader wonders what the point of exchanging one mine for another would be, but Ntoni is enraptured with the notion. He gifts his mother with pomegranates, a luxury she savors alone with him.

Once he begins to suggest that even his father has considered such a move, his mother turns on him in an emotional tsunami of terror. Fueled with the possible betrayal of her spouse, who had never disclosed his plan to leave for France, she gives in to her own deep fears of abandonment and starvation.

Cerrone laces the entire book with details and carefully chosen adjectives that tighten the tension she describes: “His mother finished the pomegranate and set the ravaged peels aside.” As Ntoni ekes out a word or two, Cerrone gets closer in to the mother’s rage: “She curled her hand around the barren pomegranate skins. . . . Her fist became white, bloodless, as if she might just mash the tough skins into pulp.” Moments later, when he least expects it, she smacks the broom handle to the side of his face to end his fantasy. The reader senses the lack of air, the terror of crawling in the tunnels, the sudden slap, the bullying, and shares Ntoni’s pain, humiliations, defeats, and despair while rejoicing at his aptitude, his grace, and his courage.

It is difficult not to be outraged by his mother’s own method of survival that includes surrendering not just Ntoni to the mines, but also his younger brother. Ntoni tries to intervene, but he is powerless in all realms — in his public life as well as his private life. He tries to protect his younger brother Lido, who is an altogether different child — cocky, yet clueless — who, at the same time, tries to distance himself from Ntoni’s lack of status in the world.

The Hunger Saint refutes the romantic notions of poverty, the beauty of hard labor, highlighting the lack of human nobility in mere survival. As W. Somerset Maugham wrote: “It is not true that suffering ennobles the character; happiness does that sometimes, but suffering for the most part, makes men petty and vindictive.”

Writers will find this book a study in flawless research that has been expertly written in the most human of terms — both memorable and insightful.

Maria Lisella

Patrizia Famà Stahle. *The Italian Emigration of Modern Times: Relations Between Italy and the United States Concerning Emigration Policy, Diplomacy and Anti-Immigrant Sentiment 1870–1927*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016.

Lawrence di Stasi, noted Italian-American historian and writer, typically refers to the relation of contemporary Italian Americans to their ancestors’ histories as being characterized as “Italian Americans don’t know that they don’t know.” For this purpose alone, Patrizia Famà Stahle’s *The Italian Emigration of Modern Times* is a book that needs to be read by all Italian Americans; it might make many think twice before they praise the way today’s government approaches similar issues that our country had dealt with during the immigration of southern European groups to the US.

Playing on the title of Robert F. Foerster’s 1919 *The Italian Emigration of Our Times*, Patrizia Famà Stahle, Associate Professor of History at the College of Coastal Georgia, fashions an overview of Italian emigration to the United States based on what she has discovered in the usual texts and archives. For those scholars already familiar with the general history of Italian emigration, *The Italian Emigration of Modern Times* provides a deeper look into old knowledge. For those unfamiliar with all this, she provides an interesting and accessible account of a past that most Italian Americans who lived through it wanted to forget.