

Better to sit here. Just me and you.
To set on our table olives and wine,
to savor the taste of sweet grapes and brine,
to raise our glasses and toast the poor dead,
to mend the world and break our bread.

The family meal, it goes without saying, is the single strongest representation of divine immanentism in the world of the southern Italians.

The sonic heft and thrum of these splendid poems—the transformative love that beats so passionately in a seemingly shrunken world—ring like Sanctus bells long after the volume concludes.

The Transaction by Guglielmo D’Izzia. Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2020. 236 pp.

Review by Martina Mastandrea
Independent scholar

Ancestral cradle and crossroads of civilizations, Sicily is an island of serene quietude and rough violence, of courage and connivance, of tradition and nonconformity, of immigration and emigration, of welcome and mistrust. In *The Transaction*, Guglielmo D’Izzia captures the island’s self-contradictions and ambiguities as only an expatriate Sicilian can do. The novel traces the external and internal journey of an impenetrable and unsympathetic northern Italian who, in order to finance a property deal, travels from Milan to Sicily’s hinterland with a luggage of antisouthern prejudice. This physically brave but morally weak protagonist, identified only by the last name of De Angelis, turns from businessman to occasional detective but, as in Leonardo Sciascia, it is the investigator who ends up being suspected rather than the murderer.

D’Izzia sets his remarkable debut novel in the fictional town of Figallia, an archetype of the dark side of southern Italian small-town life where not even the Sicilian sunlight can penetrate the darkness and dispel the effects of provincialism, corruption, and brazen disregard of laws. A torrid sun plays its own merciless role in the protagonist’s nightmarish journey, tormenting De Angelis from the moment he sets foot in Sicily to complete the titular transaction, through the destabilizing set of events leading up to the climactic episode. Here he experiences an outburst of an anguished inner world in a cathartic moment of self-discovery.

While the author chose to set the story in an anonymous Sicilian village, he anchors the symbolic location in a specifically dated setting, the early summer of

1987, the year in which the most significant trial ever against the Sicilian Mafia, the so-called “Maxi-processo,” ended with the conviction of 338 mafiosi. Written in hindsight, *The Transaction* bears witness both to the tragic end of Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, the public prosecutors who gave their lives to the fight against Cosa Nostra, and to the dissipation of the general sense of hope of defeating the Mafia in Italy.

With his accessible prose and detached sarcasm, as well as his view of Sicily as an inexhaustible mine of metaphor for Italy’s seemingly invincible ills, D’Izzia follows on the footsteps of literary giants of the likes of Pirandello, Sciascia, and Andrea Camilleri. One of the book’s closing sentences, uttered by an overcaricatured train-station employee, “mutu, orbu, e surdu sugnu!” (“I am dumb, blind, and deaf;” that is, *omertà*) (226) encapsulates both the essence of D’Izzia’s Hemingwayan elliptical style and his condemnation of the Italian penchant for the comforting complicity of silence.

Called Back: My Reply to Cancer, My Return to Life by Mary Cappello. Second Edition, with a new Afterword. 2009; New York: Fordham University Press, 2021. 220 pp.

Review by Michael J. LaRosa
Rhodes College

In 2009, Mary Cappello published a memoir that bravely, and intimately, focused on her cancer diagnosis, treatment, and “cure.” This prize-winning book has now been rereleased with an afterword by the author. The text is timely, given our national and world focus on health, disease, death, and immortality, sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Susan Sontag and Elaine Scarry laid out the theoretical underpinnings for Cappello in the late 1970s and 1980s, and physician/writers have long animated American readers, particularly Abraham Verghese and Oliver Sacks. Cappello’s book is neither theoretical nor “medical”: she is a forceful writer of nonfiction; she is an extraordinarily insightful reader of literature; she is deeply in love with her partner—she is in love with everything, especially the life that took on renewed meaning after her cancer diagnosis.

So this is really a book about love. And gratitude. The author reminds us constantly of her privileged position on the battlefield of cancer—as a professional woman with health insurance, a woman with a supportive family and many friends; and she dedicates the book to the ordinary people who helped her heal: