

Beyond Ethnicity: An Interview with Theresa Maggio.

By Elisabetta Marino

Theresa Maggio is probably one of the most interesting American writers of modern times. Besides pursuing a career as a journalist, she is the author of two travelogues in which her personal experience of places and people plays a vital role: *Mattanza: Life and Death in the Sea of Sicily* (2000) and *The Stone Boudoir: Travels through the Hidden Villages of Sicily* (2002). The first volume is focused on the ancient ritual of blue-fin tuna fishing carried out in the Sicilian island of Favignana, where, every year, around May or June, the tuna fish gather in order to spawn. The second volume is a quest for the remotest and still unspoiled villages of mountainous Sicily, starting from the place where her family came from: Santa Margherita Belice. In these two books Theresa Maggio explores her Sicilian roots but she somehow overcomes the boundaries of ethnicity since she seems to plunge deep into the very core of humankind, by unearthing ancient traditions whose secrets are orally transmitted from generations to generations.

I had the pleasure of reviewing and writing on Theresa Maggio's volumes as a part of my research project on Italian American literature. The wide acknowledgement of the originality of Theresa's perspective, together with my personal appreciation of her writings, prompted me to ask her whether she would be willing to be interviewed. She kindly accepted, showing the same enthusiasm, interest and vitality that the reader can gather from her books. We leisurely started exchanging thoughts through the internet, the globe-straddling network of communication, and we carried out the following conversation between continents, from Italy to the USA, for several months, up until July 2005.

E.M. Theresa, how did you decide to devote your life to writing? Did the discovery of "writing" come along with the discovery of your "Italian side"?

T.M. You are making me think about my life ... The seeds of a writer were in me but they took a long time to flower. The Benedictine nuns who taught at St. Joseph's elementary school turned every subject into a writing class. Spelling, grammar and good sentence structure counted in written assignments from religion to art. Clarity of

expression is what they were after, I now realize. Good thing I loved words. I won the spelling bees, diagrammed the "Our Father" on the chalkboard during recess, and I played Scrabble instead of with dolls. I was an introspective nerd and had no social life. As a depressed teenager, I wrote heartfelt, execrable poems late at night on the kitchen table listening to the Moody Blues Knights in White Satin on the radio. (I wish I could find them now!) When I was 13 and 14 I wrote long letters to an older friend, and she encouraged me to write for a living. But I wanted to grow up and raise horses. I never thought of writing as a career because when I walked into our small town library and looked up the stacks – yards and yards of words between covers -- I thought that everything that could be said must have already been said by someone.

There were no books in the house where I grew up. Poetry was superfluous. I never could invent a plot. I never considered writing as a career option. My mother died when I was ten. When my father came home from work (he pumped gas and fixed cars at his own gas station) he turned on the CBS nightly news, sat in his recliner and fixed his attention on Walter Cronkite, then America's most famous anchor man. I sat between my father and the television to make him look at me, to try to get his attention, but he always asked me to move aside. Twenty years later I was accepted into Columbia Journalism School. Before classes began, the university chartered a Manhattan tour boat and gave a party aboard for us new students. The guest of honor turned out to be Walter Cronkite. (See why I like non-fiction?) I specialized in science writing because I had always liked reading about the cosmos and astrophysics in popular magazines, and I thought it was useful writing. I got a job as a science writer for the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, where I had previously worked as a technician, making laser optics. Then I went on a long vacation in Sicily with my father, met Piero, the fisherman of Mondello, and the rest is history. Yes, you are right, my mature writing was born alongside my re-discovery of Sicily. My impetus to write was to share what I was seeing, what I was living, in this beautiful, strange, sub-tropical, pathos-filled island. Both my books sprang from that era, in 1986, when I was 33 and in love, first with a Sicilian, then with Sicily.

E.M. That's an amazing story! You somehow broke my expectations: I was convinced you would talk to me about you being "an Italian American" but instead you do not seem to perceive the same *dilemma* expressed by so many other Italian American writers. How do you view yourself in that context? How

do you compare yourself with very important writers such as Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Rachel Guido DeVries, and Diane Di Prima?

T.M. I am embarrassed to tell you I do not know the work of the writers you mentioned. I did find one in a recent anthology of Italian-American writing, and admired DeVries's short poem about her father's losing his grocery store in a fire.

I never thought of myself as an Italian American writer while I was writing. That happened after the books were published and the Italian American community became the largest part of my readership, judging from the comments I receive on my web page, and the invitations I have received to speak at Italian American events.

So I am sorry but I can't tell you how I fit into the Italian American writers scheme. I am certainly not considered famous or important. I am one of many others like me. But I am glad YOU singled me out.

E.M. Who are the writers that influenced you the most, then?

T.M. Let's see who's on my favourite shelf. Lots of Hemingway. I read almost everything of his the winter I was writing *Mattanza*. They said in journalism school that what you read the night before seeps into your writing the next morning. I think it did. I also liked his advice to write just "one true sentence." That's how it got written, one true sentence at a time. I like Hemingway for his directness and for using just the right fifty-cent word. John Hersey (*Hiroshima, Bell for Adano*), for his reporting and clear declarative sentences; Norman Lewis, especially *Naples '44*, for his sentences hard as diamonds; Matilde Serao for writing so passionately about a place; Robert Frost for seeing the macrocosm in the microcosm, and for the music of his verse, and because of our common involvement with Vermont; Danilo Dolci for turning over rocks and examining the underside; Rosario La Duca for being madly in love with one's city and knowing every little thing about it.

It looks like I don't read anybody who wrote much past the 1950's, and I have been faulted for this. But you don't have enough time in your life to read ALL the books, so why not stick to the classics of every genre? But as I said, if someone I trust sticks a book under my nose and says, "You must read this," I will. That is how I managed to read Ann Proulx's *The Shipping News*, and I am grateful to have read it.

E.M. I'm sure some readers will recognize some echoes of these works in your two volumes, *Mattanza* and *The Stone Boudoir*. How much did your readings influence you and how much did the places themselves and the contact with people inspire you? Can you tell us more about your writing technique?

T.M. Everything in *Mattanza* and *Stone Boudoir* really happened -- no invented quotes, scenes, people, or situations. When I gave up on writing poetry, in my teens, I thought to myself I could at least make evocative declarative sentences. So that's what I tried to do.

I am telling true stories, with me in the picture. I included myself because I am sure my presence affected what happened, in some way. You can't really be a fly on the wall, observing but unobserved. I was part of the scene. I worked with the facts. I call it *narrative journalism*. I did include my various emotional reactions: rapture, horror, feeling like an outsider, feeling like an insider, you name it -- because I wanted to give the experience of being there. My eyes were the readers' eyes.

To answer your second question: the people and places my subject matter influenced me more than other writers did. My goal was to mirror reality. That's what helped me pick my words. The influence of other authors is in the courage they give you to write your own way. And of course when I read something written wonderfully, it makes me strive for artistic mastery of my own tale.

E.M. I can see your deep involvement in your writings ... In your books you also express a serious concern about the damages that we are causing to our environment and about the loss of one's tradition and cultural heritage. Could you tell us more about it?

T.M. All I can think of is my friend Cristina on Favignana, whose house faces the sea and the tuna trap. She said that once, when she had serious surgery, and was being put under, and she wasn't sure she would wake up again, the image that passed before her eyes was of the tuna boats being towed in a line to the trap so the men could count the tuna in it.

While I was reporting for *Mattanza*, the fishermen and the islanders in general were in the denial phase of grief, if you ask me. I haven't been back there during the spring

for several years, but I have heard reports from eyewitnesses that one year they took one tuna, and another year, none.

The old timers were retiring, the new men just wanted a job for three months, or to be part of something their grandfathers did. Hunters lose interest when the prey is gone. I felt like the island was losing its life blood.

One year after the book came out I did go back in the spring. The tuna catch had dwindled over the years. I found Rais Gioacchino Cataldo in a boathouse. He'd invented what he said was an improvement to the trap. It was an eighth room, which he named GG, because he'd designed it with former Rais Gioacchino Ernandes. I wondered why he'd gone to all the trouble of building a new net chamber, when the tuna were so diminished. I didn't insist on a logical answer; I understood he was heartbroken, grasping at straws now, and that he just wanted to leave his mark on Favignana's tonnara.

There were no more blue-fin in their trap because of industrial fishing. If mankind can do a thing, mankind will do it, regardless of the consequences. A steam engine, an atomic bomb, a trip to the moon, purse seine nets. Another reason is because there are too many of us, and we are all consumers.

I recently read an article in the New Yorker magazine (May 9, 2005) about global warming due to man's actions, and its disastrous effects. Reporter Elizabeth Kolbert talked to Marty Hoffert, a professor of physics at New York University, who was as pessimistic, and realistic, about global warming as I am about over-fishing and its effects on culture.

He said, "...you know, somebody will visit (earth) in a few hundred million years and find there were some intelligent beings who lived here for a while, but they just couldn't handle the transition from being hunter-gatherers to high technology."

E.M. From what you have said so far I gather that orality, the experience orally passed from one person to the other, plays an important role in your writing. Could you expand on that? Do you think it could also be somehow connected

with your Italian origin, with the importance we attach to story-telling in the family?

T.M. I have to say, there wasn't much storytelling in my family. Everything was a secret, usually a discussion of some bitter vendetta or remembered slight. Whatever stories were passed at the dinner table Sundays at my grandmother's house were passed in Sicilian, the older generation's secret language, and kept from us kids.

But in the end, maybe you are right. I went to Sicily in the first place in spite of my grandmother's caustic admonishment that "there is nothing there", to find out what WAS there, and what were all the secrets about.

Why am I so interested in oral tradition? Human behavior is the most interesting thing on earth. For some reason, I am fascinated by human rituals and dying traditions. I'm a journalist, trained to seek out my sources and write down what they say, simple as that. I get people to tell their stories, when I am lucky, or when I do my job right, or both. Then I write them down. It helps me and my readers to see the world from my subject's point of view. To recreate a foreign world, a distant culture.

Mattanza was full of oral tradition—the *cialome* (songs the fishermen sing), the prayer of the rais, the shout of the *tonnaroti* the day before the first *Mattanza* (*Sempre sia laudato il nome di Gesu!*), the soaring seabirds that signal the arrival of migrating blue-fin tuna, the short ritual and prayer a fisherman learns to stop a sea tornado, washing one's face with water sprinkled with flowers on May First. The women had their own traditions: my landlady's mumbled invocation to relieve her son-in-law of the curse of the Evil Eye, Rosa of the Cemetery's semi-pagan prayers to Saint Anthony to get one's boyfriend back.

Stone Boudoir was full of oral tradition, too. For example, the methods nuns used to name the infant orphans placed in their care, or the traditional family protocol for naming legitimate children, or what the screaming devotees of Saint Agatha are actually saying during her mind-boggling feast in Catania.

It was a pleasure to learn from a distant cousin that the women of Santa Margherita Belice who cleaned the Leopard's palace took "an hour-and-a-half just to open all the

windows, and an hour-and-a-half to close them." That's the kind of telling, human detail journalists, or any writers, really, appreciate and give to their readers.

The lovely thing about Sicily is that it is FULL of such oral tradition and is such a treasure chest of material for me. I am full of gratitude to Professor Michele LoMonaco for teaching me Italian for the price of a sack of mackerel. Without a knowledge of Italian, Sicily would have been an opaque mystery to me.

E.M. From the US to Italy to the US and back again, time after time ... The last question I would like to ask you concerns your idea of belonging and "home." Where do you really feel at home, Theresa?

T.M. Home is right here in the West River Valley of Vermont. I have often felt lucky about knowing exactly where my home is. I don't own a house, but I do have a home. I have an intimate relationship with the hills and folds of this little valley, and the good people in it.

I was not born here but often wished I was. I first came here when I was nine, on a weekend trip with a friend of my father's who was a New York lawyer who owned a horse and stabled it up here. He flew up here weekends with his wife to ride and enjoy the country. When we arrived at the airport in Massachusetts we took his old car to Brookline, Vermont. I remember getting out of the car, walking over to the white paddock fence, seeing horses grazing in a pasture, heads down, tails swishing, and beyond them, soft rounded green hills, and beyond them a dark summer storm coming our way and saying to myself, "I am going to live here." I knew it, literally, the moment I set foot in Vermont. There is no other place I call home.

At the time, I still had to live in New Jersey with my parents. But when I was 13 the family friends bought the inn and stable they had used for years, and asked me to work at the inn during summers. I worked there every summer from eighth grade through college except for the summer I worked in Paris, made friends with real Vermonters, set down roots. When I was 17 I became an "emancipated minor" (legal term meaning I was legally on my own and responsible for my own debts, though underage) and took the Freeman's Oath, which is a promise every voter in Vermont makes, a promise to always vote for what would be best for Vermont. Later on, in my thirties, I became the West River Valley reporter for the *Brattleboro Reformer*, a

feisty little daily newspaper. I wrote lots of features about ordinary people that I saw as extraordinary. Especially the older people. I loved their stories and their ways of expressing themselves. It was a privilege to meet them and write about them, and take their pictures. My articles were pasted on refrigerators up and down the valley. It was a job I loved, but I left it to write *Mattanza*, then *Stone Boudoir*.

When I quit my *Reformer* job at the end of 1991, I didn't have enough money to rent an apartment or house, so the older people in the valley took me in. For a few years I lived in a turret room in an old Victorian house in Townshend that belonged to a 90-year-old widower. After he died, his daughters asked me stay on until they sold the house. Then I was invited to live here, in this simple room in an old farmhouse on Newfane Hill. The kind lady who owns the house and lives downstairs teaches art to children. She let me choose my own rent, and said if I couldn't pay it I could stay on anyway. I have been here 15 years, and wrote both my books at this Vermont maple table which I got for \$19 at auction. I love every stream, pond, river, tree and hill that surrounds us.

E.M. At home in Vermont and at ease in the world. Thank you very much, Theresa!