

WRITING CANADIAN NARRATIVES WITH ITALIAN ACCENTS: *THE PINK HOUSE AND OTHER STORIES* (2018)

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The essay discusses the importance of (shifts in) setting and language in short stories set in Montreal featuring Canadian characters who are of Italian heritage. I will discuss the writing process (and self-translation choices) in my collections *The Pink House and Other Stories* (2018) and *Almond Wine and Fertility* (2008; second edition 2018).

Scrivere storie canadesi con un accento italiano: The Pink House and Other Stories (2018)
Il saggio considera l'importanza dell'ambientazione e del linguaggio (con particolare attenzione all'autotraduzione) nei racconti brevi raccolti in *The Pink House and Other Stories* (2018) e *Almond Wine and Fertility* (2008, seconda edizione 2018) che mettono in scena personaggi canadesi di origine italiana nella città di Montreal.

The importance of setting and language

Literary critic Joseph Pivato has written that the return journey is «an obsession in the Italian-Canadian imagination» (170). As a Canadian writer born in Italy, I can certainly identify with the need to look to the past, at my roots, in an attempt to better understand the present. As an English-language writer in Montreal, *the* Canadian city where Europe meets North America, I am particularly interested in the settings and languages which have informed my childhood and adolescence, and influenced my life choices. This essay discusses the importance of setting and language in my short stories, featuring characters of Italian heritage. I have published two collections, *The Pink House and Other Stories* (2018) and *Almond Wine and Fertility* (2008; second edition 2018). Some of the stories are set on the island of Montreal (Montreal North and St. Leonard), where Italian Canadians reside.

I was four when my parents uprooted me from cozy Cavarzere, under the Venetian sun, and took me to a cold basement apartment in Montreal North.

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I was unprepared for the abrupt uprooting and the contrast in settings. Family members say that I was a very happy and talkative child in Italy. In Canada, I became introverted. I didn't speak much, even after learning English and French. I was a top student throughout my school years, but I was extremely shy. I only spoke when spoken to. I did not volunteer to answer questions in class, and oral presentations were a source of anxiety. It was only in my twenties, in graduate school, that I began to find my voice. When I began to write and publish stories, I began to feel more at ease. I am still nervous about giving presentations but, after the first minute at the microphone, I am able to enjoy speaking in public.

Except for periods where I went abroad to study or to vacation, I lived in Montreal North for close to 25 years. In 1993 I married a Calabrian-Canadian from St. Leonard, and that's where we set up house and raised three children. My more than 50 years in Canada have been equally divided between two municipalities: Montreal North and St. Leonard. In my parents' home in Montreal North, we only spoke the dialect of our hometown. (Even today, I speak dialect with my parents who are now in their eighties.) And once my husband and I had children, we only spoke Italian to them. According to the last Canadian census, St. Leonard is the place where more people still speak Italian than any other district in Canada. My husband and I chose to raise our children in Italian, in a francophone province, in a primarily English-speaking country. Living in between languages and cultures is enriching.

I have spent five decades returning to Italy, imagining and writing about what my life would have been if I had not emigrated. I spent summers in Italy because my parents wanted their children to know their grandparents. I have a deep connection to my Italian roots, *and* I am Canadian. As I said in a 2011 interview with Laura Sanchini, Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21: «I *need* to go back. I need to see the Adige... I need to see the old homestead, even though there's nobody there». I do not know what kind of person I would have been if I had stayed in Italy. Would I have gone to university? Would I have chosen a career in the arts? I do know, however, that I am the person that I am today because I was raised in Canada, and because I am attached to Italy. My roots are in Italy and that necessarily informs my personal and professional life choices.

Given my personal and family history, it should come as no surprise that I write about people who are of Italian heritage and that many of my stories are set in Italy and Canada. In fact, some of the stories shift between one country and the other (such as "Refuge in the Vineyard"), just as Italian or dialect words might surface in the English-language text – what Francesco Loriggio has called «the device of the stone» (39). The Italian word within the English

text is like a stone or a stumbling block. The interference of language is part of my daily reality in Montreal. The presence of dialect or Italian or French within my stories illustrates the negotiation at work in my trilingual and tricultural identity. Ideally, it would encourage readers to actively participate in the reading process by looking up words they don't understand.

The Pink House and Other Stories

In a recent interview, Emanuela Legnosecco asked me if the book is titled *The Pink House* because of my focus on women. I may feel more comfortable creating female characters because I am a woman and because of my preoccupation with women's issues. But that wasn't my intention. One could argue that pink is a woman's colour, but I've never liked pink. (However, I really like the cover of the book, and I love the title). I grew up in a pink house in Canada, which is not a common colour for a house in Montreal. In fact, in the story, the husband says to his wife (who has fallen in love with the house): «Pink is not the colour of a real house» (29). I was reminded, after having toured *The Pink House and Other Stories* in Italy, in April 2018, that pink houses are more common in Europe.

I have been asked why the story "The Pink House" gives the title to the book. One could argue that the title story "houses" all of the other stories. In fact, any of the characters in the other stories could be characters that the reader was originally introduced to in "The Pink House". The title story is the fourth story in the book of fifteen stories, but one could say that everything began in the pink house. The pink house actually still exists in Montreal North. It's the house that my parents live in, the house that my sister and I grew up in. The story of Aldo and Nancy, who buy the pink house and raise a family there, is the story of my parents' generation (though not my parents specifically). It's the story of a young couple who, despite their differences, grew old together. They raised their children in the pink house and now, in their senior years, they wait for their grandchildren to visit. "The Pink House", is about working together to reach a common goal. It's about love of family and cultural heritage and new possibilities. It's about our seniors who have done what they came to this country to do, and now look back on their lives. Ideally, they are fulfilled by their accomplishments, and they smile as they reflect on their experiences in Canada, after having left their homeland and headed towards the unknown.

I have thought long and hard about the order in which the stories appear in the book. In some ways, the first ("Watching Them Laugh") and last story ("The Motorcycle") act as bookends. "The Motorcycle" is about an eighty-

year-old immigrant who insists on renewing his motorcycle licence so that he will «be ready to drive anything, anytime, anywhere». “Watching Them Laugh” is about the special bond between an Italian-Canadian grandmother and her young granddaughter. These two stories, and the title story, are my expression of gratitude to first-generation immigrants, for we reap the benefits of their migration. Their hardships and determination have made it easier for my generation and my children’s. First generation immigrants left their homeland and travelled towards uncertainty and hardship, not knowing if they would find what they were looking for (if they even knew what that was). Some of them, like the father in “Refuge in the Vineyard”, went back to Italy when they retired.

Of the fifteen narratives in *The Pink House and Other Stories*, “Refuge in the Vineyard” is the best example of the narration shifting between settings, Canada and Italy. It’s a story about love and frustration. It explores intergenerational relationships and difficult family dynamics. “Refuge in the Vineyard” is primarily set in northern Italy, with shifts to the narrator’s suburban Montreal home. The middle-aged narrator, a mother of four, is visiting her father who has moved back to his hometown after decades in Canada. The narrator seeks refuge among the vines after she has words with ‘the patriarch’. She repeatedly asks herself why she came back to visit her father with her husband and their children. We understand that the vineyard has always been the narrator’s refuge, but now we sense her frustration. No matter how hard she tries, she is unable to meet her father’s expectations... because he is unhappy and bitter in Italy. Just like she is torn between Italy and Canada, she is conflicted by her sense of duty as a daughter, and exhausted by her responsibilities as a mother of four young children. Because of her father, her visits to Italy are draining and unpleasant.

The dinner scene in Montreal also illustrates the narrator’s fatigue. After having cleaned up the spilled wine «she blurts out unexpectedly: ‘Can I ever have a peaceful dinner!’» (43). Her husband responds: «‘You wanted four kids... Now we have four kids’» (43). We are told that it’s «his way of lightening the mood» (43). But the narrator doesn’t laugh because «She is pooped. She is looking forward to her pillow. But it’s only 7:00 p.m. and they haven’t finished dinner yet. Then the kitchen, the lunches. The last minute homework to check, the backpacks to verify. The notes the teachers sent... someone has to read those. Four kids all in elementary school. The oldest in sixth grade, the youngest in first» (43). The narrator must realize that she cannot please everyone.

The story shifts between the vineyard in Northern Italy and the narrator’s home in Montreal. At this time in her life, both settings appear to be a source of stress for the narrator. She finds solace, however, in ‘the soothing silence’ and in the love and support of her youngest son:

she looks up to see her youngest child reaching across the table from her. His little hand is stretched to its maximum. He waits. He smiles. She puts down her fork and reaches her hand to his. The tips of their fingers touch. *Zip. Zip.* He makes the sound of instant energy and he smiles his shy smile.

The shape of his smile says it all: "I am giving you all of my energy. Don't give up, I am here. I've got your back. Keep on going. It'll be okay because I love you and you love me".

She smiles at him. The others have accepted that this is their code. None of the others ever reaches over to give her energy (43-44).

The story closes with the son joining her in the vineyard, where she has sought refuge from her father's harsh criticism:

Running away has crossed her mind. Many times.

She will not run away. This little boy gives her all she needs to stay.

She may not be the most beautiful woman in the world, she may not be the smartest. But she is the most loved. By this little boy.

He holds her hand. They sit in silence, unaware they are being watched (44).

Whether the action takes place in Italy or in Canada, the narrative and the dialogue includes words in Italian (even whole sentences) that are not always translated. For instance, when the narrator's six-year-old son asks his mother if she is sad, she responds in Italian: «*No, non sono triste, amoretto mio*» (44).

Later on in the story, the son concludes: «*Tu sei qui perché nonno ha parlato troppo*'. She stares at him. He is the only one who understands. He is the only one who dares speak it. Yes, his grandfather had certainly said too much. 'Nonno is mean. *È cattivo...*'» (44). The story begins with the narrator

on the grass, grapevines on either side of her. Eyes closed she listens to the silence. *Silenzio*. Soothing. Soothing silence. Ah, if it were only possible to come back to the vineyard and the silence every time she needed to. Only the vineyard. Only the silence. As a child she had played in the vineyard. She had roamed about freely. She knew every vine. The vines were her friends. *I suoi amici*. She spoke to them. Told them her secrets" (39).

Also, the dialogue during the dinner scene in Montreal is interspersed with Italian words which adds to the sense of urgency and confusion, as does the fact that we are not told who is speaking:

"Can you get the water please?"

"L'acqua, l'acqua, manca l'acqua".

"Did anyone grate the cheese? Where's the cheese?"

"Il formaggio. Dov'è il formaggio".

“We don’t have anymore cheese”.
 “What no cheese? It isn’t pasta without cheese”.
 “*Mangia la pasta che è calda*” (42).

The reality of bilingual or multilingual individuals

The narrator’s father’s words are also rendered in Italian. “Refuge in the Vineyard” was self-translated into Italian and published as “Rifugio nel vigneto” (*Paesaggi del vino*, 2018). The Italian version includes words in English that are not translated.

Arun Mukherjee writes that «[e]thnic minority texts inform their readers, through the presence of other languages... about the multicultural and multilingual nature of Canadian society» (46). By using the ‘device of the stone’, stories like “Refuge in the Vineyard” and “In the Stacks” illustrate the reality of bilingual or multilingual individuals, particularly Montrealers. The story “In the Stacks” further explores the device of non-English words within the English story and the constant shifting and negotiation that goes on in conversations between anglophone and francophone (Italian) Montrealers. “In the Stacks” is about two graduate students of Italian heritage – one francophone (Massimiliano), the other anglophone (Rita) – who meet in the Université de Montréal library. They both want to take out the same books on Italian immigration to Canada. Although the dialogue is in English, with the occasional French word invading the English text, it should be clear to the reader that the conversation between Massimiliano and Rita takes place in French:

“We can speak English. That way you can tell me if I have an accent”, Rita suggested.
 “But I said I don’t speak English”.
 “You must speak a little”, she was surprised.
 “I understand, but I don’t speak”.
 “Why not?”
 “I don’t like the language”, he said bluntly.
 “You’re serious?”
 “Yes. And I went to French school, raised in a French neighborhood, work in a French office. No need to speak English. We’re in Québec, remember?” He smiled again (59-60).

In the sequel story, titled “Massimiliano and Rita”, there are a greater number of French words within the English text. Words spoken by Massimiliano include “Ben voyons donc”, “Un femme exemplaire, eh?” and “C’est intéressant ça” to mention a few instances.

Rebecca Morris has written that, in *The Pink House and Other Stories*, «generations of Italian-Canadians negotiate old-fashioned gender roles in a new country, sliding fluidly between different languages and cultures» (n.p.). The stories convey «deep emotions and complex family dynamics through the memories, ambition, tenderness, and regrets hidden under the quiet surfaces» (n.p.) of the characters. My personal story is similar to that of many children of immigrants: a loved one left his or her birthplace decades ago, so that we could have a better home, a better education, a better future... We have benefitted from their migration and continue to do so. Through my stories, I acknowledge their hardships and the ease that ensued from their work and determination. I feel privileged to have been raised by parents who left the Veneto region in the 1960s; I am indebted to my parents-in-law who left Calabria in the 1950s. And I can only hope that my children and their generation learn as much from my generation as we did from our parents, those who initiated the immigration journey. And I hope that the first-generation immigrants are proud of us, their progeny.

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