

## Trigiani is Swang

Dominic Candeloro (April 23, 2009)



Adriana Trigiani is on a book tour to promote her new novel "Very Valentine. In the works are 2 prospective movies, 2 more "Very Valentine" books, and a book series for teenage girls. She stands as our single best hope of balancing the mafia stereotypes that dominate our culture.



When asked how she came to write her first novel, Adriana Trigiani responded, "It was a total surprise because I was writing TV...I wanted to have a baby and when you write comedy for television you work seven days a week. So a friend of mine said 'You should write a book. Then you could have a baby.' And, I swear, that's what happened. I didn't know it would be good or that you would like it. And now suddenly I'm swang."

Big Stone Gap was published in 2001 and her daughter Lucia was born in 2002. Eight books later Adriana Trigiani is on the verge of becoming Queen of the Big Time as THE major player in presenting an authentic image of Italian Americans in the mass media. Her latest novel, *Very Valentine*, premiered 19th on the New York Times Bestsellers list in February 2009. With over 3 million books in print, two promising movies in the works, plans for two more novels and a series of young adult fiction forthcoming, Trigiani stands as our single best hope of balancing the mafia stereotypes that dominate our culture.

Wishful thinking? Maybe, but if the enthusiasm and adulation of the overflow crowd that greeted Trigiani recently at Anderson's Bookstore in Naperville is any indication, she could be the rock star we've all been waiting for.

An Italian from Big Stone Gap, VIRGINIA? Yes, in the early 1900s many Italian immigrants were channeled to the coal mines of Virginia/West Virginia. As Adriana explains, "My family is from northern Italy in the Italian Alps above Bergamo: a town called Schilpario, (mother's family both sides); and my father is half Barese (Foggia) and half Venetian (Godega di Sant Urbano) a farm town above Treviso." A third generation Italian, she grew up in Big Stone Gap in the Appalachians in the southwest part of the state in the 1970s, attended St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, IN, where she majored in Theater. Then it was off to New York where she organized an all-female improv comedy group---The Outcasts. With this background, it's no surprise that her book signing events turn into riotous stand up comedy performances.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s Trigiani worked as a writer/producer for Bill Cosby on both 'The Cosby Show' and "A Different World," (a sitcom about students at a traditionally Black College). When asked how she came to write material for Black teens, she replied, "I just had guts- and knew the college world..." The warm fuzzy humor and the fascination with the dynamics of family life of the Cosby style has carried over into her novels.

Like all good writers, Adriana writes about what she knows. In the four Big Stone Gap books she draws on her family life and events in the history of the town such as when Elizabeth Taylor almost choked to death in Big Stone Gap and the town's outdoor summer pageant. In *Queen of the Big Time* Adriana wrote about her father's hometown, Roseto, PA---made famous by a 1960s medical study that showed that heart disease was almost non-existent in Roseto due to the supportive (stress reducing) Italian village lifestyle and diet of the community. In 1998, before publishing the book, Trigiani wrote and produced a documentary film on Roseto.

Trigiani loves to write about people who make things. For her latest book, *Very Valentine*, she traveled to Capri to do research on the process of crafting hand made shoes. In *Lucia*, Lucia it was high style dressmaking. Blouse makers, interior designers, cooks, pharmacists, farmers---and the in-depth detail of the process of their work and the integrity of the people who actually MAKE things are evident everywhere in her writing. She is fascinated by what some writers have called the "philosophy of work done well."

While some might dismiss Trigiani's work as "Chick Lit," it is so much more than entertainment. While the relationship between the sexes runs through all of her writing, her love stories are plausible. Her protagonists are mostly capable, ambitious, and vulnerable women. As they narrate their stories in the first person, the reader appreciates that finding true love is complicated and difficult. With notable exceptions, the male lead characters are often disappointing or devious. In her Naperville presentation Trigiani joked that while Italian American women make good wives, Italian American men (read "Mammone") make poor husbands because their Italian mothers had spoiled them. She herself is married to Tim Stephenson, an Emmy-winning lighting designer for the David Letterman show.



And while Trigiani hardly ever writes directly about the big events and issues in Italian American history such as the Sacco-Vanzetti Case, injustice in the workplace, prejudice, defamation and discrimination, or World War II internment, she does capture a very important truth about the Italian American Experience: The immigrants and their children were not just some helpless, uprooted, unskilled and illiterate masses who needed to be "Americanized." Trigiani's fiction accurately documents the crafts and skills and the "can do" attitude that the immigrants contributed to the American scene. She details especially the rich family traditions, the genius, and the skills of Italian American women---their cuisine, their household self-sufficiency, and their wisdom in family management.

Place is important to Trigiani. Whether the story is set in Big Stone Gap (where she grew up) or Roseto (home of her father's family), northern New Jersey or Greenwich Village (where she has lived for 20 years) or even in Italy, the reader is made to feel at home in the location.

Adriani Trigiani is accessible. She loves her readers and phones book club audiences several times a week. She organizes luncheons for her New York readers and posts dozens of pictures of her fans, St. Mary's schoolmates, book club groups, and bookstore crowds from all over the nation on her [website](#) [2] . She kisses and hugs and talks at length to every person who lines up for book signing. She involves herself in their lives and in Naperville even publically offered an internship to the daughter of one of her readers.

Trigiani's first person narratives are a breeze to read. Some people even prefer to listen to the audio version of the books. Lucia, Lucia, Queen of the Big Time and Big Stone Gap are done by renowned audio book narrator Cassandra Campbell and Rococo is voiced by Mario Catone, stand-up comedian and actor whose credits include "Sex in the City" and "Caroline's on Broadway." You can find Trigiani's books at any library, any bookstore, or on Amazon.com.

Trigiani's writing style incorporates so much detail that her stories should easily be transferable to the big screen. And that's exactly what's coming soon to a theater near you in the next 2 years. She starts production on location in Big Stone Gap. She wrote the screenplay, did the casting and will direct this film---which has the potential of making a dent in the mafia movie stereotype which Italian Americans have endured these many years. Speriamo!

This article originally appeared in Chicago's Italian American Monthly Fra Noi

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