

Louise De Salvo's "personal effects"

George De Stefano (December 03, 2014)



A new book appraises the work of a major Italian American woman writer

Louise De Salvo, the subject of a new book of critical essays about her writing, admitted to being overwhelmed by the attention. At a December 1 event at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute in Manhattan to celebrate the release of the book, *Personal Effects: Essays on Memoir, Teaching, and Culture in the Work of Louise DeSalvo*, the author spoke about, among other things, the effect reading the essays had on her.

"When you sit down at the desk and you're a writer of memoir, you have to be very unselfconscious, you have to do what you do and figure it out as you go along," she observed. "One of great fears I had was that I would stop being unselfconscious once I got back to my desk."



I tried to read the book as if it weren't about myself, because it was too overwhelming. I can only read this book as if it really isn't about my work, as if it's about a writer called Louise De Salvo."

The writer called Louise De Salvo heard her work – a diverse and distinctive oeuvre that comprises memoir, essays, fiction, biography, and literary criticism – praised by Edvige Giunta and Nancy Caronia, the co-editors of *Personal Effects*, and by four of its contributors. They hailed De Salvo for what they called her "fearlessness" in tackling issues such as immigration and ethnicity, sexuality and gender, violence and war, physical and mental illness, and trauma, from the perspective of an Italian American woman of working-class origins.

De Salvo, 72, has published sixteen books, the most recent being *The Art of Slow Writing: Reflections on Time, Craft, and Creativity*. Her memoir *Vertigo* won the Gay Talese Award and was a finalist for Italy's Giuseppe Acerbi Literary Prize. Another memoir, *Crazy in the Kitchen: Food, Feuds, and Forgiveness in an Italian American Family*, was selected as a Booksense Book of the Year for 2004.

De Salvo established herself as a Virginia Woolf scholar, having edited a new edition of Woolf's first novel *Melymbrosia*, as well as writing two books on the British author, *Virginia Woolf's First Voyage: A Novel in the Making* (1980) and *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* (1989). The latter book, which argued that Woolf's sexual abuse by her half-brother significantly affected her as a woman and a writer, roiled the field of Woolf scholarship.

At the Calandra event, Edvige Giunta called De Salvo, who is a professor of English at Hunter College, "an exemplary teacher." Two of her books – *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives* and *The Art of Slow Writing* – offer insights and advice, as well as practical strategies.

Contributors to *Personal Effects* include emerging academics and writers, some of them former students of De Salvo, as well as established scholars in Italian American studies. Not all are Italian American; writers of Greek, Puerto Rican, British, and African American backgrounds also have contributed essays, which Giunta said attested to De Salvo's stature as an author "who speaks to and for a multiplicity of constituencies."

The book is a landmark in that it is – amazingly, or perhaps shockingly -- the first critical volume devoted to an Italian American woman writer. Its genesis was a conversation between Giunta and co-editor Caronia during the 2008 conference of the Italian American Studies Association (then called the American Italian Historical Association). Giunta and Caronia noted that although there were many conference panels devoted to male Italian American writers, there were none on Italian American women writers. Moreover, there existed no scholarly books devoted to the work of an Italian American woman.

Caronia, a lecturer at the University of Rhode Island, and Giunta, a professor of English at New Jersey City University, set out to remedy that situation. They aimed to create what Giunta called "a book that was usable, for students and scholars, and for a wide readership." The book is structured along three sections – memoir, teaching, and culture – but, said Giunta, the sections are not intended to be discrete and self-contained. Rather, the essays were meant to be "in conversation with each other."

Fordham University Press has published the book as part of its *Critical Studies in Italian America* series edited by Laura Ruberto and Nancy Carnevale. Fredric Nachbaur, director of the press, spoke briefly at the Calandra event.

At Calandra, the four contributors expressed their appreciation of different aspects of Louise De Salvo's work. The British Virginia Woolf scholar Mark Hussey said that *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* "changed the conversation about Woolf."

Jennifer-Ann Di Gregori-Kightlinger, noting that although "food is central" to De Salvo's work, that focus "serves not to elevate Italian American culture but to reveal our very past." In her writing, food is "less about nourishment and more about loss, and this loss is intimately tied to loss of Italian language, including its regional dialects."



Joshua Fausty located De Salvo's memoir writing in "the tradition that includes Montaigne, Emerson, and Woolf." De Salvo, he said, writes essayistic memoir "to explore all kinds of profound and often unconscious forces to discover something she doesn't know when she starts writing."

Peter Covino praised the "working class rhythms of De Salvo's phrasing" and her unapologetic use of earthy, expressive language. He noted that in writing about her sister's suicide, De Salvo demonstrated how "traditional middle class American values can be unsafe and unsettling."

An obviously moved De Salvo commented, "Hearing people talk about the work you do is one of the greatest honors any writer can have." So many writers, she noted, "work without getting the attention they deserve."

De Salvo read a piece she'd written about how her southern Italian family "stopped being Italian, or stopped showing as far as they can ...that they are Italian." Her parents, the children of immigrants, never raised "the subject of ethnicity." In school, she didn't read about Italian history or culture until she "heard about the Renaissance in college and grad school." But she didn't "identify with them or see their accomplishments as being especially significant to me."

She said she had to "become" Italian American, and writing her memoir, *Crazy in the Kitchen*, was critical to that becoming. In researching her family background, she discovered her grandparents came from Puglia. "Learning where they came from" was "an event of tremendous moment for me, for I never knew we came from the south, that we were pugliesi."

"In trying to unlock my grandparents' past, I read scores of books about the Italian diaspora," she said. From her reading, she learned "what has been denied me, what I don't know about these people who are my forbears." De Salvo learned "what being southern Italian means, more specifically what being poor and a farmworker and pugliesi meant during the beginning of the twentieth century."

"The great loss that underlies my work is this: that everything I learned about my people that I needed to know I learned after they vanished."

"My entire life's work," she said, "has been chasing the ghosts of my forbears."

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