

Marisa Labozzetta. *A Day in June*. Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2019.

How does a young woman react when she wins a wedding contest she entered even though her fiancé had long left her to become a priest? What happens when her wildest dream comes true and the assumed love of her life comes back to marry her as she had so intensely wished? These questions may initially seem central in revealing the plot of Marisa Labozzetta's latest novel entitled *A Day in June*. Not quite, as Labozzetta's latest venture, American Fiction Book Award Winner for Religious Fiction in 2019, is much more than a contemporary romance and a *Bildungsroman*. A vivid canvas for the depiction of diverse controversial issues, ranging from the key topic of faith and female self-ascription to intramarital relations in diverse ages, sexuality, and mixed cultural backgrounds, Labozzetta's work is a special mixture of freshness, bitter humor, and acumen as to the future of *italianamericanità*.

The highly energetic and prolific Labozzetta certainly does not need introductions in the Italian-American circles. Like with her previous work *Thieves Never Steal in the Rain* (2016) the author ably reproduces the female stories she has a keen ear for skillfully weaving them together. For this purpose, Labozzetta sketches her main character, Ryan Toscano, a confused and artistic young woman of mixed Italian-Catholic and Russian-Jewish origin at a critical turn in her life. Heartbroken and bewildered as to where life is taking her, Ryan writes a letter to a wedding contest pretending she is still together with Hason McDermott who left her almost two years earlier for the seminary. When, to her surprise, she wins the contest she has to visit the small town of Brackton in Vermont to claim her prize, an all expense paid wedding. Accompanied by her homosexual and affluent housemate Tiffany, Ryan meets in Brackton the photographer Eric who enters her thoughts just when her ex-fiancé reenters her life to tie the knot. As the couple plans their June wedding, Labozzetta takes the opportunity to employ a rather banal topic, wedding preparations, for an unconventional purpose: to play with preconceptions and stereotypes of identities, be they ethnic, religious, class, or sexual.

While the taboo issue of intermarriage serves as her springboard, the author foregrounds essential concepts of Italian-American identity to test their endurance and vitality in the twenty-first century and cross-cultural context. To begin with, the basic concept of *la famiglia* and its surrounding "sacredness" seems dented in the Toscano family based on Ryan's parents' problematic marriage; theirs is a union that created quite an upheaval in both their families from the start and flared up concern about their offspring's identity, "the identity Ryan's grandparents used to tell her parents Ryan would never have" (198). Whereas mothers are usually the carriers of tradition, Ryan's Italianness comes from her father, a busy accountant who introduces his daughter to ethnic cooking but lets his artistic wife show their daughter around the major Italian sites. In this unconventional family, Labozzetta also dares to toy with the omnipotent figure of *la Nonna* and produces the eccentric and hilarious Faye, the most influential presence in Ryan's life, who is an exuberant octogenarian craving to love and live. Through her actions and words Faye struggles to instill in her granddaughter her own Jewish female fierceness and

determination advising her: "Trust me, Ryan, you can do anything you want. But it's all about knowing what you want" (43). It is exactly this quest for self-ascription that comes to shatter the important Italian concept of losing face, "*fare la brutta figura*," once Ryan decides to call off the wedding and announce it to the whole town hosting it. And whereas Ryan and Jason's love affair subsides in the background, Labozzetta poses through their story haunting questions as regards religion and Catholicism in particular; utilizing Jason's spiritual wanderings and Ryan's bewilderment as the vehicle for her thoughts, the author seems skeptical about the role of the new Pope, Catholic priesthood, women as priests, celibacy, sexual identity, and religion.

All in all, humorously though not superficially, Labozzetta's latest novel embraces a wide array of significant issues troubling ethnic women, especially those of a mixed cultural heritage. Perhaps the main heroine could be less ethereal and conventional in her choices and the ending less predictable; yet, Labozzetta's story has insightful turnings and her characters are well developed and interesting rendering her novel a noteworthy addition in Italian-American novel writing that brings to the fore diverse shades of *italianamericanità*.

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