REVIEWS

Review Essay: Eleven Characters in Search of a Director

The Neorealist in Winter by Salvatore Pane. Autumn House Press, 2023. 154 pp.

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With this latest collection of stories, Salvatore Pane, winner of the 2022 Autumn House Fiction Prize, offers readers another impressive display of his literary power, versatility, and technique. The 11 short stories, seven of which were previously published, depict ordinary lives poised between past and present. The first story lends the collection its title, which is particularly apt.

Neorealism was an Italian literary and cinematic movement active in the immediate aftermath of World War II of which Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, and Luchino Visconti are representative figures. As neorealism dealt with social and economic issues often deriving from the war, it also brought to life fictional characters drawn from the lower classes, characters who faced the trials of everyday life. This is Pane's world in his short stories, mostly populated by Italians and Italian Americans who live in Italian neighborhoods in cities like his native Scranton. The title of the collection is a statement about what a reader can find in the book, namely "cinematic characters" that could be found in a neorealist film shot in winter.

One of the central threads of this collection is the Italianness (*italianità*) of the characters, whose stories are narrated in the first or third person, while the recurrent mention of Hollywood and Italian films in these short stories contributes to their background. In some cases, the characters deal with a past that they want to forget or distance themselves from, or they intentionally renounce their roots and origins to realize their American Dream, thereby renegotiating themselves. In "The Neorealist in Winter," the cinematic knowledge of the Italian cinema is reworked to create a world of fiction staged starting in 1973, where real directors and actors are blended with fictional characters, living through their challenges to become renowned Hollywood film directors with ties to Italy. Narrated in the third person, the story reflects on the process of relinquishing one's origin, family, and affections for a career, as a sort of *patto con il diavolo*, as when an Italian producer tells the main character, Jackie, a New Yorker of Sicilian origins, "that

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you would cut ties with every human being you'd ever met to remain there behind the camera, out of view, but in control. Tell me I'm wrong" (18). And he is not, because Jackie "never spoke to his brother again" (19).

In "Her Final Nights," Angie Verrastro, a middle-aged woman, tells how she finds an abandoned VHS tape on her way to a blind date with a young woman in an Italian restaurant. The conversation between them centers on jobs, climate, cuisine, and ends with the two of them watching a tape on a VCR left behind by the young woman's parents. It was a relic from the past clashing with the hyper-technological world in which we live today. In "The Electric City," the story of the lives of three friends—Angelo, Franny, and Frankie—from Scranton, Pennsylvania, is told by an omniscient narrator describing the reunion of Angelo and Frankie who are spending hours together for what will be the last time they see each other. "The Complete Oral History of Monkey High School" presents a series of contributions by people regarding a fictional TV series of which the final three episodes were cancelled for lack of success. Written in the first person, the reflections start with the writer, Gina Sorrentino, originally from Rochester and to which she returns after the failure of the program. Each contribution from the team members involved, and also from fans, makes for a different perspective on the series and often meditates on our conception of failure and how a life should be lived. For instance, in one of them, Gina says, "It was an odd realization, to understand firsthand how selfish you could be, how easily you could leave someone behind you've known your entire life" (45).

In "Do I Amuse You?" we read a story told by an assistant professor in the English department of a college in Pennsylvania. He is obsessed by Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, as he says in the story's final line, "because it fills the shape of my depression" (69). His academic life is intermingled with Scorsese's film, of which the professor offers analyses of certain scenes. The main character describes himself as someone who grew up "Italian in rundown Scranton" and subsequently "escaped my origins to earn a PhD in twentieth century literature despite the fact that neither of my parents even went to college" (63). In "Take It Out of Me," Dr. Rinaldi, an established academic with a PhD in Italian language and literature, recounts her decision to go through a procedure in a "finest class reimaging facility" (71) to have all the bad memories extracted from her body and substituted with new ones. What the readers discover is that she wants to erase all the memories of her working-class upbringing so she can fit better with her scientist husband.

"The Faith Center" is told by the protagonist, Michael, an academic in a study abroad program in Italy, who travels with his wife to live in Rome for a semester. Professors, students, and guests meet in a Faith Center where they reflect on the Christian vocation from their varied perspectives of being married, single, and in

the priesthood. A sense of the protagonist's inadequacy comes to the surface in the final pages, when a truth is revealed after Michael states that "the problem is I'm not supposed to be here . . . I am the one who should've died" (106): we learn that about the death of one of his friends. In another tale, "Zeitgeist Comics, 1946," Christopher, an editor in Manhattan, was asked to fire his entire staff, and those who were not fired left the office, leaving him alone. In reconstructing the events, Christopher admits that he had "a view that for all intents and purposes should not have been afforded to the son of an Italian immigrant, and its existence proved that in America, all things were possible" (113–14). As his colleagues leave him alone in an empty office, they also remind him that he will be remembered for his role in the mass termination. The story ends with the protagonist recalling his dead father of whom he asks for forgiveness (126).

Closing the collection is "The Last Train to Siena," a complex morality tale told in flashback and flashforward, with the dynamic of a neorealist screenplay. It tells the story of Maria and Riccardo who began dating at the end of the war. After the first time they had intercourse, Maria told Riccardo that she was pregnant. He was not the father, and when he questioned who the father was, she said not to ask again. Everyone else in Prati seemed to know about it. When the baby—Aldo (they learn the name upon receiving his letter 30 years later)—was five months old, Maria asked Riccardo to take the baby to Siena and give him up for adoption at a convent. Afterwards they were married and had two children but told them nothing about their half-sibling. When at age 30, Aldo attempted to contact them for the first time; there was a photo attached. But Riccardo hid the letter and photo from Maria: "Aldo Della Scala did not look Italian, and this frightened Riccardo most of all. Blond hair and blue eyes with skin the texture of cream. He looked German, and for the very first time, Riccardo wondered if his wife had the child by a Nazi. It had happened to many, many women" (148). Maria, however, discovered a second letter, and then she and Riccardo decided to inform their own children. They asked their daughter Amalia to come to Rome with her husband, and Riccardo would be at Roma Termini to meet them. Instead, he became drunk and went to Siena for the second time. "He allowed himself to believe that somehow he could avoid the inspector's ticket check, that he would be allowed to ride undisturbed all the way to Siena, that he would get off there and return to the hospital and find Maria's baby exactly as he'd left him, and then at long last everything would be righted and he and his wife would finally know peace" (151).

This breathtaking collection by Salvatore Pane forces us to reflect deeply on the Italian American experience: the struggle of characters from working-class families, the complicated bonds between parents and children, frayed relations, and paternalism, among others. These precise images of everyday life can be read as scenes from a neorealist film spanning the mid-1940s to the present time.