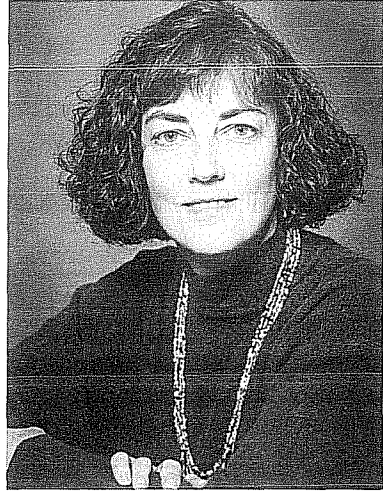


Profile of Sharon Gibson Palermo

Anna Chiota

Résumé: Peu de récits historiques canadiens ont évoqué l'immigration italienne. La romancière Sharon Gibson Palermo en a fait le sujet de son oeuvre, qui s'attache aux particularités socioculturelles et aux problèmes politiques qui ont marqué le milieu italo-canadien.



Summary: The Italian immigrant experience is rarely explored in Canadian historical fiction for children. Sharon Gibson Palermo ventures into this territory and creates some well-drawn characters who embody that experience without recourse to superficial and stereotypical devices. Their ethnicity puts a social and cultural stamp on their development while political issues of the past also play a role. Palermo's added success and durability as a writer stems from her ability to have her characters transcend time and place.

The theme of displacement is not new to Canadian children's literature; Jean Little, Barbara Smucker, and Kit Pearson are some of the authors who have written of immigrant children. The historical reality and plight of displaced Jews, Mennonites, Blacks and British war orphans have been the backdrop for their novels. For reasons of economics, war and persecution, these children arrive in Canada, alone or with family, and are thrust into a new environment at a time when they are just beginning to discover themselves. Inevitable conflicts arise, which, in the hands of a good writer, can result in excellent literature that has broad appeal and tells a good story. However, few novels dealing with the immigrant experience specifically cover it from the Italian perspective. Ian Wallace's *The Sandwich* trains its view on cultural differences as defined by food, but there is little Canadian material that delves deeper into the historical and social reality; the work of Sharon Gibson Palermo steps into that void.

A resident of Halifax since 1984, Palermo was born in Philadelphia and educated in Boston. Her Canadian travels have also placed her in Calgary and Toronto. In 1992 she won a short story competition with "I am Hilda Burrows," a piece about a young girl's immediate reaction as she wanders the harbour area just after the Halifax explosion of 1917. A mere fifteen pages in length and short on historical data, the author admits that this work "doesn't give as many specific historic details as many other stories about the explosion, but that was not my

purpose. I was trying to get right inside the character's experiences and feelings at the actual time and during the immediate aftermath ... since it was such a catastrophic and real event, it seemed like something worth other people feeling, too. The story has a time period of only about an hour and a half and it is quite intense." With an economy of words and action, Palermo draws us into not only the chaotic physical world but also Hilda's dazed mind as she makes her way through chaos in search of meaning, memory and family. Justifiably proud of this piece, Palermo says it is "the best thing, in terms of technical perfection (if there is such a thing), that I have written. It is the only work that I never want to change a single word of when I reread it."

It is in her subsequent novels that Palermo begins to explore the experiences of Italian immigrant children while also beginning to write for a younger audience (her short story being more appropriate for the older reader). When asked why she writes for children, Palermo comments that it feels "natural ... it is the voice that comes to me ... I have a great deal of empathy for kids and I am at my best, my most relaxed and most humorous when I am with kids, so that helps me get to know them." As for the Italian focus, her experience with that culture, its people and history comes through her husband, his family, and her own research. As a non-Italian, she tries to capture the nuances of traditional Italian family life and values in both *Chestnuts for the Brave* (1991) and *The Lie That Had To Be* (1995) which feature multi-dimensional Italian characters. Especially strong are the female protagonists who are challenged to make sense of their world while dealing with disruptive forces in their lives, some of which arise from their ethnic status.

Chestnuts for the Brave opens in 1962 as an Italian family arrives in Halifax. In subsequent months, Gabriella, as the oldest female child, must assume seemingly harsh obligations which grate with her growing self-awareness and which contrast sharply with the greater freedom and leisure time enjoyed by her new friends and her male cousin. Never a rebel, Gabriella is accepting of her role yet cannot help questioning the apparent injustice; her inner turmoil is usually sorted out alone in the confines of her bedroom or in conversations with the elderly Maria who serves as a strong role model. Palermo deftly portrays the added burden placed on Italian females, adult and child, to provide for the needs and comfort of its family members. Yet she also succeeds in capturing the love and support which underlines the Italian tendency to place family above all, even when any one individual member suffers for it. The author sets Gabriella on a course of discovery — a discovery of courage and self-esteem founded on her emotional and intellectual development. The line, "Loving does have a lot to do with knowing" (26), underscores the author's belief in and respect for the natural intellectual capabilities of children. In the end, Gabriella and her family work toward balancing the needs of the family unit and those within it so that they are less inclined to yearn for an idealized life back in Italy and are ready to adapt to their new home and country.

The Lie That Had To Be, on the other hand, is a novel much more rooted in time and tied to a definite historical event. The year is 1940 and the date is June 10th: Kenneth Bagnell in *Canadese: A Portrait of the Italian Canadians* notes that “in the forty-eight hours that began shortly after noon [on June 10, 1940] ... the RCMP, joined by provincial and local forces, rounded up about five hundred Italian-born men, mostly in Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia [who were] active in one or all of three Italian community organizations: the Sons of Italy, a lodge and mutual benefit society; the Dopolavoro (meaning ‘after work’), a club for recreation and study; or the Fascio, a political party which gave those who saw in Mussolini a unifier and reformer of their homeland a chance to express their support of him” (77). In this novel, Rennie’s father becomes one of about seven hundred men detained and sent away to camps in the hopes of protecting Canada against the enemy aliens within, as Italians were classified until February 10, 1947 (Bagnell 105). The Canadian public sensed danger, a mood which brought acceptance of these drastic measures and which fed hatred and intolerance. When Palermo has a character shout, “You’re a rotten Italian and we all hate you!” (42) we hear an echo of the past. But fear was an emotion felt by all, including the Italians. As targets of unexpected distrust and hatred from the people in their communities, many were stunned and afraid; Bagnell describes Camella Scattalon who, in the mining town of Dominion, Nova Scotia “looked out the window of her house ... [and for] the first time in her life ... felt the terrible fear of impending violence. The sidewalks seemed to stream with hundreds of people, mostly local miners swearing vengeance against Italy and against Italians, including the two hundred living in their town” (76). As men in their communities were taken away, families, unsure of their crimes, were left to wonder and worry; as it turned out, internment was their fate. Bagnell writes of “strange surroundings and new anxieties for the men who had been picked up. They were given only vague explanations — they were being held for questioning, they would be detained for a few weeks, they were being sent to a training centre. Those who were living in Quebec and Nova Scotia made their way to Ontario by train ... loaded onto trucks ... [and finally] arrived at their lonely destiny, a compound of a dozen huts and a few other buildings, surrounded by two high barbed-wire fences. This was Camp Petawawa” (81-2). In the coming weeks and months, Bagnell notes that the men were put to work clearing brush and roads and generally maintaining the camp for twenty cents a day while their families were given a few dollars a month (84-5).

In Palermo’s *The Lie That Had To Be*, the father meets this fate and so the female protagonist, Rennie, endures a summer of confusion and uncertainty as fears for her father’s safety and the welfare of the family consume her. The family attempts to keep the bakery running, with Rennie doing her part by making breadsticks, but many in town refuse to buy; at the same time, Rennie’s family tries to comfort their father with letters and packages. Rennie’s emotional turmoil also revolves around a friendship lost and a deception allowed to go too

far. At the centre is a bracelet which becomes first a symbol of retribution for wrongs done to her because of her ethnic status, then an ugly burden to be hidden, and finally a lie that shakes her to the core. The conflict between Rennie and Julie mirrors the global situation and strips the concept of war to its essence; toward the end of the novel, Rennie admits that she "shouldn't have been mean just because [Julie] was. That's what makes wars!" (96). Despite the political and social issues, Rennie is still just a young girl who craves friendship and who wants to make her parents proud. She wants to show her father on his return that she is "braver and smarter and kinder than she had been in June" (92). At the end of summer when her father returns as abruptly as when he was taken away, Rennie is still a child with a child's view of the world despite the historical tragedy that has touched her life.

In both novels, the various conflicts and struggles have physical manifestations that satisfy plot development, yet their resolutions are mostly played out on an intellectual and internal plane. The author insists that her stories "get inside a character's most meaningful reactions and deepest impressions ... [and] down to the part of a character that is actually being changed by whatever is happening around her and within her." She further asserts that "this is what speaks to the human experience, and this is what literature is about." Her characters practise critical thinking, but at an age-appropriate level. Palermo asserts that "You can have all the most horrible things happening around a character, but if we don't feel and see how that character is being affected, then it is useless. This is what speaks to the human experience, and this is what literature is about." This approach is also what allows her work to transcend ethnic lines.

An additional strength of Palermo's work lies in her vivid characterization of personalities and situations, primarily through the use of recurring images and symbols. Food is a constant presence and usually a source of comfort: for instance, the kindly Zia Maria hands out candies; Rennie makes bread to feel closer to her father; doughnuts are given as a peace offering; dinners are big family affairs. Images of nature, particularly gardens, plants, and trees, also recur: Gabriella yearns for the shelter of the chestnut trees back home; Rennie takes over tending the garden in her father's absence and its weeding echoes the fighting in a far distant land as she works out her anger and seeks refuge when fear overwhelms her. It is probably more than coincidental that the images of food and backyard gardens are stereotypically associated with Italians but in Palermo's hands they are so deftly handled that they manage to convey the essence of home life and nostalgia for Italian immigrant families while at the same time serving as vehicles for plot development and conflict resolutions. Underlining all this symbolism is the theme of nurturing: the author believes that "anything that we nurture ... is filled with things we give it ... but it is more than we as individuals are ... anything natural is a connection to something bigger than ourselves." It is not surprising, then, that both of Palermo's Italian heroines turn to nature in times of fear, anger, nostalgia, and, finally, understanding.

Palermo's objective is to have readers "love my main characters and to feel that they have had a full and satisfying experience" after reading her literature. Developing her stories within a clearly historical and ethnic context does not detract from that objective, for they form, in the author's words, "a basis of comparison and something to discuss in terms of human, social and political experience ... [keeping] us open-minded and attuned to others."

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Anna Chiota is Branch Librarian with the St. Catharines Public Library and has worked in children's services for many years. She holds a Masters in history as well as in Library Science. As a product of an environment similar to that of the fictional characters (although a decidedly less dramatic one!), she is impressed with the true-to-life flavour of Palermo's work.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Lucy Maud Montgomery and Canadian Culture

The influence of L.M. Montgomery on the many aspects of Canadian culture is most recently documented through popular television shows such as *The Road to Avonlea* and the forthcoming *Emily* series. Similarly, the scholarly interest in L.M. Montgomery's writing has increased dramatically in recent years paralleling the growing interest in feminist and cultural studies. The spirit of this new interest was recently captured at the International Conference on L.M. Montgomery hosted by the L.M. Montgomery Research Institute at the University of Prince Edward Island.

With the conference serving as an intellectual springboard, we are calling for papers for a proposed collection on *L.M. Montgomery and Canadian Culture*. We are interested in papers covering a wide range of topics, including but not limited to the following: • girls' culture • women's culture • fashion • influence of automobiles • animal rights • sports • copyright issues • gardening • funerals • medical issues • church life. We are also interested in critical analyses of the popularization of Montgomery's work through film. Additional topics are welcome. Essays should be informed by insights into the Canadian context, Canadian studies, or cultural studies.

For queries, one-page abstracts (1 March) and 15- to 20-page papers (1 June), please contact the editors: Dr. Irene Gammel or Dr. Elizabeth Epperly, University of Prince Edward Island, 550 University Avenue, Charlottetown, PEI, C1A 4P3.
E-mail: igammel@upei.ca; tel: (902) 566-0509; fax: (902) 566-0363.

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