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[See table of contents](#)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Battigelli, Rosanna Micelotta. *Pigeon Soup & Other Stories*. Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education Inc., 2021. Pp. 80. ISBN 978-1-7713-3793-9 (softcover) \$22.95.

Pigeon Soup and Other Stories is quintessentially Italian-Canadian – calling to mind the rallying cry “We, The North,” but here the context might be high-school basketball, the setting a small northern Ontario town, with the identities of the characters unmistakably and recognizably Italian-Canadian.

Rosanna Micelotta Battigelli turns a spotlight into some very dark corners – high-school bullying, sexual abuse, and childhood trauma. Perhaps the darkest of these occurs in the short story “This Too Shall Pass.” It begins innocently enough, with Angelo Leone pulling into his parents’ driveway, returned to his northern Ontario hometown of Copper Cliff after months away at the University of Toronto, the snow coming down thick and wet. He showers quickly and then is invited into the living room to say hello to a visitor. Angelo complies reluctantly, mentally setting a two-minute timer to do his “filial duty and preserve the family’s *bella figura*” (22). The guest is none other than Father Joel – the man Angelo most despises in the world, “sitting in his father’s favourite chair, meeting Angelo’s eyes unblinkingly, as if he had every right to be there,” the open bottle of Vecchia Romagna on the coffee table with several glasses, the Italian hospitality (22).

What follows is a story of grooming, humiliation, and shame that takes place against the backdrop of unquestioning Italian respect for the institution of the Catholic Church and obedience to its priests. Although Rosanna Micelotta Battigelli is a woman writer and cannot have lived this scene, she understands how predator priests can happen, how a Father Joel could reduce the toughest jock to holy ashes:

“Take your right hand and stick it into your jockstrap.” ...
Father Joel closed the distance between them, his thick brows furrowing. “Are you trying to be a smartass, Leone? Didn’t your good Italian parents teach you to do as you’re told?” He grabbed Angelo’s hand and covered it with his own before sliding it down Angelo’s shorts to his crotch. “Now leave this hand here and

dribble with your other hand.” Letting go of Angelo’s hand, he gave Angelo’s testicles a squeeze before pulling his own hand out.

Steely grey eyes riveted back to Angelo. “Did you get all of that, or do I have to show you again?” (25)

On his next return visit to the home town, Angelo is compelled to accompany his Nonna to the funeral home. He goes through the motions of kneeling before Father Joel’s casket, the seething resentment and anger brewing inside of him like bitter coffee. Another wrinkled priest from St. Domenic High School thinks he recognizes him, but can’t place his name. Angelo self-identifies – “One of Jolly’s boys.” “This Too Shall Pass” is a short story that haunts well after the reading is accomplished. How does this abuse happen and remain hidden? And yet it is packaged in a way that makes it comprehensible – the grooming in the context of loving, reverent, respectful Italian immigrant families, the inability of their sons to accuse the perpetrators (*Who will believe you?*), the continuing silence, the living with a lifetime of bottled trauma and shame.

Another story that occupies a dark corner is “Alligator Shoes.” A boy’s relentless bullying damages the newly arrived Sina during her first year in high school, and his crude actions affect the adolescent more deeply than anyone anticipates. Kevin is a classic bully – a “creep” as Sina’s friend calls him, trying to console Sina. “His moon-shaped face, with its dark craters for eyes and bumpy complexion [...] even with all his aesthetic shortcomings, *he* was the first to zone in on any weakness in another student, physical or otherwise” (9–10). Battigelli has the perceptive command of her craft to follow visual descriptions with astute insights.

“The Hawk” is a fable-like story – the kind that have children running home in the dark before the porchlights come on. The story simultaneously entertains and terrorizes with lessons that aren’t entirely clear but that come to life in the form of The Hawk – giving presence to nameless anxieties that persist after psychological trauma. What it is doing in an adult contemporary collection is the same question that might be asked of the supposed children’s stories in a Brothers Grimm collection.

“Veiled Intentions” is a story about abuse, witnessed through the eyes of a teenage girl who is disturbed as much by the actions of a neighbour toward his wife and child as by the neighbour’s pretence of piety at Sunday Mass. Battigelli has a psychologist’s understanding of the way generational trauma and abuse replicates itself, the early warning signs:

One morning, Laura saw him tear off the legs of a grasshopper slowly, entranced at the spasmodic movements of the insect, before tossing the limbless body down and then squishing it under his shoe. He was in his good clothes, his Sunday best. His brown pants and plaid shirt had been pressed, his brown shoes polished, and his wavy hair slicked down. All set for eleven o'clock Mass. (40)

In "Francesca's Ways," an adult daughter is subjected to the annual sausage-making traditions of her mother, clash of values and tyranny of memories. The author is masterful at dialogue that not only moves the story forward but defines the characters' values with light brushstrokes:

"Where are the kids? Francesca asked suddenly, startling Angie.

"With their father."

"*Vigliacco!*"

"Ma, I told you, there's no need for you to insult him. We settled our differences long ago."

"You broke up the family." The words still held bitterness. (15)

The title story of the collection, "Pigeon Soup" demonstrates the author's expert knowledge of how to build suspense, for example:

[H]e couldn't help feeling nervous around Santo. In fact he regretted having agreed to stop at his house for something to eat. He should have followed his first instincts. After all, what did they really know about this guy? (6)

And during the introductions of the cab driver and his passengers, when learning the coincidence of names:

"Now *there's* destiny playing its hand: me a saint and you an angel, travelling together. Must be an omen," he said more seriously. "Either something good is about to happen or something bad will befall one of us. Or both." (3)

Without giving away the “something bad” I was expecting to happen, this was a promise on which the story didn’t quite deliver; when the story took an innocent turn after a circuitous detour toward the good, nothing bad actually happened. But as with all of Battigelli’s stories, she was able to sustain the haunting underlay of suspense throughout the whole piece. She does this again in “Black as Tar,” which had me in suspense from the beginning, with the sound of a tar truck in the neighbourhood and a kid who has gone missing in neighbourhood play over a hill – a forbidden distance. This story demonstrates Battigelli’s mastery of description, which evokes an entire neighbourhood, replete with back lanes and Tarini’s Confectionary.

Rosanna Micelotta Battigelli is a very accomplished writer. A former teacher and an alumna of the Humber School for Writers, she has been published in over nineteen anthologies. *La Brigantessa*, a romantic work of historical fiction published in 2018, won a Gold Medal for Historical Fiction in the 2019 Independent Publisher (IPPY) Book Awards and was also a finalist for the 2019 Canadian Authors Association Fred Kerner Book Award and the 2019 Northern Lit Award. Her children’s book, *Pumpkin Orange, Pumpkin Round*, was published in the fall of 2019. She has published several novels with Harlequin UK, and is under contract for more. She has completed a fourth draft of a sequel to *La Brigantessa*. It is just a matter of time and attention before this author breaks onto the international scene and has her dramatic work developed for film.

Pigeon Soup and Other Stories is the first time Rosanna has given us a contemporary, realistic, and adult collection of short stories – stories she felt would have some kind of emotional impact with the reader—of Italian descent or otherwise— and that contain kernels of truth and themes that most people can relate to or empathize with. I had the privilege of interviewing Rosanna recently and asked her about the short story form – why the short story? What she told me was: “I like the fact that a short story can be created and be a distillation of something that could be developed into something bigger, and yet is distilled into such a pure state that it can exist on its own.”

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