Journey Without A Map: Growing Up Italian: A Memoir
by Donna Caruso

Reviewed by Andrea Belcham

“. . . the past, present, and future, are one in the blood . . .” (115)

Journey Without A Map: Growing Up Italian is Saskatchewan writer Donna Caruso’s heartfelt attempt to define herself in a way that honours her ancestry without compromising her uniqueness. More than the story of her 50 years of life, it is also an exploration of her immigrant grandparents’ lives – how their decision to leave their birth land, Italy, and their ways of coping in urban America helped shape the lives of their children and grandchildren. Like them, Caruso values traditions – many of them food-centric – that unite her family and that established a comforting domestic rhythm to her childhood. Yet how the author translates her life for us is curious; the facts about, for instance, her father’s life being more familiar to readers by the end of the book than her own timeline. We must look at how she sketches the past of those dearest to her, what she values enough to portray, and what emotions permeate her memories, to truly access her life.

Caruso’s memoir begins and ends with the author instructing her son, via a series of letters, on the art of Italian cooking. Her directions offer basic mechanics – how to boil perfect pasta, how to assemble a salad, how to make a nourishing chicken broth – at the same time impressing upon him the significance of food to his heritage. She may do so with subtlety and humour: “In the final seconds of cooking, your pasta can change dramatically, as much as Aunt Josie after a glass of wine” (16). Or she may be direct:

I’ve made Aunt Josie’s lemon chicken lots of times, never as good as Aunt Josie, of course, but some times it’s been better than others, and you know what has made the difference? That leafy piece of celery sitting in the oil. A little seemingly insignificant ingredient, but so powerful. Not just because of its flavour, but because it draws the best out of the cook – love, patience, and care. (218)

In both cases, Caruso is sincere in her wish to teach her son how to show love by feeding the beloved, passing on the same wisdom gifted to her by her parents and grandparents.

Food bookends Caruso’s memoir, and provides much of the meat in between: understandably, as food was such a vital link for her own elders between their new world, New Jersey, and the old, Italy. As a teenager, Caruso’s mother, Mary, emigrated from a rural life in which she had to weave her own clothing using wool gathered from her family’s sheep, to a seductive urban life of ready-made clothes and a job as a hairdresser. Her father, Dominick, was the son of an immigrant shoemaker; born in America, he would become a store-owner and make a home for his family above his store. Caruso’s parents embraced the American Dream, yet upheld certain traditions that defined them as Italian.
For the author, the traditions centred on food are most prominent in her memories of childhood. Almost with reverence she describes Mary’s ritual of stirring macaroni while her five children wait for their father to mount the stairs, to leave work behind and rejoin the family, and Dominick’s backyard fig trees:

Their beauty delighted him in a profound way, as if they connected him to an orchard in Italy, where a man just like him shared his love of the figs, the two united by a rainbow arching clear across the globe. (84)

Caruso remembers summer picnics with her family, grandparents, aunts and uncles, bathed in sunlight that “smelled to us of home, smelled to us of Italy” (144). Elsewhere, it is her grandmother’s crystal wine glass that she focuses on, recalling the wine that accompanied her meals from childhood, now seeing it hold the very blood of her family. The chapter devoted to her father’s funeral communicates love simply by itemizing the bounty of food, Dominick’s favourites, offered to those attending. By centralizing a food motif, Caruso underlines the importance of her heritage to her self-identity. She is the olive tree rooted in the soil of her mother’s homeland – “Dark eyes and hair from this rich earth rise again and again in each generation, olives in the skin tone, oil on the lips to kiss…” (55) – she has to be, or she will be lost in a New World of “Cheezies” (56).

Caruso’s memoir often returns to the subject of food as a means of accessing her past, but it is not her only interest: like the nebulous life she has led in her 50 years, her narrative flows between forms and times. Often a chapter will look at a specific object upon which she engra ves her history. So a clothesline is hung with fabrics – handmade wool cloth, a scarf, a girdle, a tablecloth – that together tell of her maternal grandmother’s first 20 years of marriage, when she remained in Italy while her husband established a career as a stonemason in America, she refusing to give up the life in Italy that she knew and loved; then Michelina’s eventual emigration and the profound sadness that defined the rest of her life in an unfamiliar land; and strung up beside, the stories of the women who succeed her, happy in the “lushness of their womanliness” (27), ever ready to spread a table for their families. Similarly, Mary’s purses, always large, always a mysterious source of whatever her children were in need of, provide a portrait of her benevolence. In other chapters, it is an event, instead, that forges a pathway into the past, as when Caruso watches the slow dismantling of her former Canadian home where she lived with her sons after her divorce, and recalls how her visiting father would do little but loving tasks to help her build a new home. In yet another stylistic flip, she expands on the language of the standard personals ad to define herself and her desires to a potential other.

Readers expecting a chronological and fact-based account of Caruso’s life will need to adjust to the singular patterns of her narrative. Bit by bit, we learn of her early childhood spent with her legs in casts – a time when she bonded with Michelina, despite not speaking her language; of her school years under the watchful eyes of nuns and the standards of saints; of her own emigration, from New Jersey to Canada – a move that confounds her father. We are told about her early diagnosis with breast cancer, of having to adjust to life without breasts at age 30, then of the three strokes that also disconnected her from her body. But there are many gaps in her telling. We are given motives for her grandparents’ departures from Italy, yet we are left to wonder, like her father, about her own reasons for immigrating to the Canadian Prairie. Only through the brief back-page biographical note do we learn that she has had an extensive and award-winning career in the arts. Nothing is mentioned of the father of her children; her sons, her siblings are only fleetingly present, never described, as though Caruso feels able to speak of the dead alone. Conveying those passed has its own problems: as a child she knew that Michelina was trying to communicate her story so as to define herself and not be
forgotten, but Caruso could not understand Italian – now she has to rely on the information provided by others to penetrate her grandmother’s enduring sorrow. Yet she is not oblivious to such fault lines. When an elder herself, she becomes aware of the complexity of others’ hidden worlds, at the same time as needing to rely on the impressions she formed in childhood: “And I need to see,” she remarks at one point, “that my mother may have known uncertainty after all, and been more like me than I have ever imagined” (122). She has a potent resource in emotion, however.

For Journey Without A Map traces a history of emotion: the details don’t matter so much as the connections between herself and her ancestors. We are left with an understanding of that which feeds her – which is also what fed them. “You ask about me,” she says, “I talk about them” (185); later, conclusively: “Their legacy to me is one of passion” (205). It is her carefully spoken imagery that remains imprinted in our minds: a scene of her aunt using her marriage bed to roll out large batches of ravioli for special family meals, a vision of Caruso as an olive tree, firmly planted in fertile ground.

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