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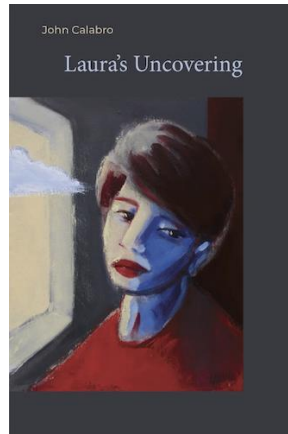
Published: February 11, 2025 Author [Caroline Morgan Di Giovanni](#)



John Calabro

In *Laura's Uncovering* (Ekstasis 2024), Toronto author John Calabro has crafted a historical romance set in two different eras, with two main characters developing two parallel storylines two centuries apart. The stories are set in a single Toronto neighbourhood, but the lives of the characters reference the multicultural population of the city since its founding.

In the opening pages, Laura Biagio, the title character, decides to take a deep dive into the history of her house on Dovercourt Road, and the long-buried freshwater creek that runs underneath it. Doing research into the original mansion, torn down when the current houses were built in the 1930s, Laura finds the name of Susan Macklem, bride of the wealthy family who built an estate on the land and named it Dover Court. In her imagination, Laura creates a narrative around the family names and relationships recorded in the City of Toronto archives.



Cover painting: Alice a la fenêtre by Laurent Lavaill

Calabro weaves together the stories of the two women through their mutual interest in preserving the creek on the property. Susan, in the nineteenth century, advocates for measures at City Hall to fight pollution. Laura, in the twenty-first century, “uncover” the records of development in the area which resulted in burying the freshwater creek, using the route for the sewer system. Adding to this geographic connection are two romantic plots. Susan had married her first love John when she was only 16, but he died within a few years in the Irish cholera epidemic. The Susan Macklem of Dover Court was wealthy in her second marriage, but always grieved the passing of her beloved.

Laura Biagio is married to Sal when their story begins. Both are from Italian immigrant families, arriving in Toronto after World War II. Laura has grown quite attached to the Canadian experience, but Sal looks back with nostalgia on his boyhood in Sicily. He decides to go back and buy a property, which he will develop as their retirement home. Laura rejects this idea. Instead, she devotes her time and energy to the project of exploring the underground waterways near her home and Trinity Bellwoods Park. As Laura and Sal’s separate preoccupations pull them apart, their long-distance calls become less frequent.

There is a handsome environmentalist who shares Laura’s obsession with underground waterways. Together, they create an action plan with a group of other community members. Calabro goes into detail describing an elaborate event that ends with a reprimand from City Hall. In the story of two centuries before, Susan’s objections to garbage being dropped into the creek are ignored by her ambitious husband. He did not want his wife to speak out in public. Laura invents the story of Susan Macklem and incorporates the challenges that faced women in her time. The social status of both women adds another dimension to this complex novel.

John Calabro’s historical references demonstrate how much research went into the writing of this work of fiction. Some parts are perhaps less essential to the plot – for example, an encounter between a Black house servant and a Confederate Officer who was a guest of the adjacent neighbour, though this provides a snapshot

of the politics of the times. That said, *Laura's Uncovering* makes for a dynamic and interesting read that is hard to put down as the dual narratives unfold. The concentration on one specific half-acre within the city invites the reader to rethink the background of every house, every park, and every underground stream they know.

The mixture of Toronto's multicultural population starts with the character of Susan Macklem. Her wealthy in-laws show disdain for their son's beautiful bride because they trace their heritage back to the United Empire Loyalists who settled in Canada after the American Revolution and she does not. Susan befriends their two Black servants who had escaped slavery in the Southern United States. Meanwhile, the story of Laura and Sal is rooted in the Italian post-war immigration wave, and their West-End neighbourhood is close to Little Italy. The student activists Laura befriends for the underground project meet at a community lecture; their mentor, Tim Clarke, becomes Laura's companion. Another friend, Florence, is from Paris. The trio meet regularly for coffee at a Portuguese café. All this paints a picture of diversity within Toronto's population after 1800. Exploring the waterways offers some recognition of the original inhabitants prior to the "settlers."

The underground passages the title character explores are a metaphor for the unexpected turns in the lives of both nineteenth-century Susan and twenty-first-century Laura, and the action flows at a pace that keeps the pages turning. The author manages the alternations with great skill, like driving a carriage drawn by four horses at full speed. This is a book for all lovers of historical fiction as well as the environmentally conscious.

John Calabro was born in Sicily and lived in France as a youth before moving to Canada. His first book Bellecour (2005) was named one of the top First Works of Fiction by the Globe and Mail. Le Cousin (2012), the French translation of John's second work, The Cousin (2009), was shortlisted for a Governor General's Award. www.johncalabro.ca

[Caroline Morgan Di Giovanni](#) is the author of four books of poetry, including the bilingual Italian-English collection, Poems for Two Worlds / Poesie per due mondi (2022), translated by Giulia De Gasperi. She is also the editor of three anthologies of Italian-Canadian poetry and prose. She has been active in the Italian-Canadian community for more than 50 years. She lives in Toronto with her husband Alberto.