

Un Momento with John Calabro

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John Calabro's latest novella gives us the stunning story of Laura and her husband, Sal; a couple struggling to make sense of their future, whilst living in a city overflowing with undiscovered history. Calabro has written three wonderful novellas, *Bellecour*, *The Cousin* and *The Imperfect Man*. His work has been acclaimed by the Globe and Mail and shortlisted for the Governor General's Award. Calabro's Toronto launch will take place on Dec 1, 2024, from 4:00PM to 6:00PM, at Supermarket.

Where did the idea for this novel come from?

It started with my witnessing the city of Toronto branding the path of the buried Garrison Creek. I later learned that this creek had its underground beginning a block away from where I live. Crossing its marked path on a daily basis, I developed a curiosity about its history and did some research. The more I researched it, the more I

became fascinated with its history, and I eventually walked its long path starting north of Saint Clair Avenue to where it originally emptied into Lake Ontario. It was quite an interesting walk. I decided to use the concept of a buried creek as a backdrop for a novel that would mix contemporary issues with the past history of this creek. I had an idea for a theme and developed various characters, but no matter how I tried it wasn't working on paper. The story was not coming together. I abandoned the idea. During COVID, I revisited my research and found the history of another buried creek, the Denison Creek, flowing east from Gladstone Avenue to Ossington Avenue, slightly north of Dundas Street. I also learned about the Denison families who lived along that creek, and in particular the Denison family who lived at Dover Court mansion, just above this creek. I walked the path of that buried creek and the neighbourhood around it, suddenly the story came together. Of course, writing it took a couple of years.

This is your fourth novella-length novel. What is it about novellas that you like so much?

I have always liked reading novellas, my favourite authors have written great novellas. I realised that I had an intuitive feel for the novella as a reader and as a writer, as such I went with it. Judith Leibowitz in her book, *Narrative Purpose in the Novella*, said that the primary feature of the novella is "Its unique ability to combine the economy of the short story," which she calls intensity, "...with the openness of the novel" which she calls expansion. When you read a good novella, you know immediately that it is the right length for its content. Something clicks; there is a ha-ha moment when the reader gets that full impact. You know intuitively that if it was shorter, it would not have seemed right, the development would have felt truncated, but you also know that if it had been longer by another 100 pages the impact would

have been diluted. Only the novella gives you that perfect length to develop and tightly intertwine the themes, characters, narrative, plot, and to crank up the tension until it is at its highest so that it can create that sudden reversal of fortune or that great epiphany, all within 100 pages. It is because all those literary ingredients are still fresh in the reader's mind, that when done well, they can blend to perfection by the time you reach that last page.

The opening paragraph of the novella sets up the whole tone of the story so well.

Did it take a long time to decide on how to start?

Interestingly enough, no. I knew from the start that I wanted Laura to come down the stairs, fully alive with passion and excitement as a counter to her husband's blasé and non-committal response to life and to what made his wife happy. I wanted not only to set up the relationship but also the historical context of the neighbourhood and the house they lived in. Laura's stumbling came later in the re-write. I am glad you liked the opening of the story. It is one section that through all my rewrites never changed.

There is such compelling historical narrative within the narrative occurring in the text. How much research did it take for you to write the historic parts?

A lot. I have never done so much research for anything I have written before. I would spend weeks of research, reading books, going to the archives, taking deep dives in the internet just to get accuracy and authenticity on the description of a carriage, a house, a piece of clothing as well as historical facts, dates, timelines and traditions. Sadly, I often discarded much of what I wrote in the revision, at other times I kept a

tiny, but vital, element of that research. It was a mixture of accurate history, real historical characters and fictionalized conversations. That process was new to me and in some ways a lot of fun. Unfortunately, I did so much research and wrote so much history within the first draft that the historical fiction part of the story got in the way. With the help of my editor, Antonio D'Alfonso, I limited how much I included in the final version of the book. I don't regret the time I spent on the research; I learned so much about the history of Toronto. Ironically, one of the outcomes of my research, just as it happened to the main character Laura, is that it gave me a stronger sense of understanding where new roots might be forged or at the very least a kinder understanding of this country and the city I call home. The research was a very demanding but a worthwhile experience.

One of the characters embarks on a return journey to Sicily but the reader never really goes along. Why did you choose to stay in Toronto?

That was done on purpose. I wanted my omniscient narrator to stay close to Laura, and distance the narration from Sal. I wanted that plotline to reflect one of the themes in the novel, and for that I quote Laura who at one point says, "You can't reattach what was severed." I think that most immigrants or children of immigrants who find themselves on that bridge between two countries stay in their host country, no matter how much they might contemplate going back. I wanted to reflect this sentiment, which I admit is a personal one, and I wanted to include it in the narrative.

Your novella really brings to light a very modern Italian immigrant phenomenon, namely the one of returning, buying cheap property, or even applying for citizenship. Was it important for you to share what's been happening?

Yes, in some ways I see that phenomenon as a positive one for these small towns that are dying economically, but I also see it as a false carrot dangled in front of the very same immigrant that was once so abruptly abandoned by its native country. A false carrot because although this type of return is appealing in a nostalgic sense, it can't make up for the emotional, cultural and psychological damage it did to all those economic refugees and their children, especially those who went to the Americas, where distance made a return less appealing. Obviously, this is a highly personal point of view and others may disagree.

What was your biggest challenge writing this novella, and how did you overcome it?

With *Laura's Uncovering*, I desperately wanted to write a long novel. I wanted to expand my writing skills and get out of my comfort zone. To that goal, I wrote way too much, over six hundred pages that I boiled down to three hundred pages and even then, there was too much. The story which I thought was finally finished and perfect was still meandering with dangling themes and too many plot lines. The authentic story was trapped in a maze of words that kept losing their bearing. I didn't see it until I sought the help of my former publisher and editor. I overcame that challenge by trusting a good literary editor. I encourage every writer to never send something for publication or self-publish without first having a trusted editor review your material. A good literary editor will ask the pertinent questions you have not asked yourself or are afraid to confront. You need the editor's objective point of view, no matter how much the comments hurt your writing ego, no matter how much you think your final work is perfect and finished, because often it is neither finished nor perfect.

How do you think your work fits in the literature of other Italian-Canadian writing?

In his latest book *The Italian Canadian Writer*, Antonio D'Alfonso gave us a fascinating history of the Italian Canadian Writer in Canada. I am both saddened and encouraged by that history. Saddened at the state of writing and publishing in this country that in the past (and today to some extent) has limited the "other voice", especially the Italian Canadian voice. I was saddened by the fact that so many great Italian Canadian writers, a lot of them brought to light by the herculean efforts of Guernica Editions, have had limited access to the rest of the literary community in Canada and even less access to the general reading public. I was also encouraged by the account of all these exciting writers. It opened my eyes to how rich this post-war Italian Canadian literary community was with all its litany of excellent poetry, fiction and non-fiction work. These were the hyphen writers, the writers on the bridge but reading them showed me that what these authors wrote transcended those hyphens and those bridges and that the work they published was as good as that of any other Canadian author. I am proud to be part of that history, to be part (if I may quote from my own review of D'Alfonso's book) of, "a complicated literary movement that occurred in a time and place perhaps never to be duplicated again, a movement mostly ignored by the dominant literary community in English Canada, and in Quebec."

What advice do you have to someone who is trying to write a novella?

Let me start with clarifying the often-mistaken impression that a novella is a short or truncated novel. It has a history, a style and a structure all of its own. I gave a lecture on the novella at a literary conference a few years back and if you will allow me, I will repeat some of the points I made then. The modern novella retains what is its

most visible and recognizable feature, as well as its strength, its length. Although widely debated, there is now a general consensus that the lower limits are about 15 000 words and an upper limit of about 50 000 words, and that translates into a book of 60 to 150 pages. Keep that length in mind when editing. You can write a lot more and then chop and chop some more. The use of characters is another feature of the novella. Limiting the number of interesting characters is very important to this genre. A novella needs only one main character, maybe two, and we tend to remember them. In terms of setting, the compactness of the novellas is created by having the story take place in a minimum number of settings or a confined space, and more importantly, within a short time frame. The novella should offer a concentration of plot, with one situation and no subplot. The best novellas have “serious” themes, “heavy” themes that explore the underbelly of society, of humanity, of evil and good in an individual and in society, innocence and experience, madness and sanity. Therefore, you should create a short, concise literary arc that can adequately deal with the visceral. You can use the classic three-act play structure, with introduction and setup, conflict and confrontation ending with a climactic resolution, of course the genius is in how to build that structure with fresh style and ingenious creativity.

What are you working on now?

I have found an affinity with a style of short writing popular in France called the *récit*, and realized that a lot of my writing tended to lean toward the *récit*. It is something that I am exploring these days. I am now working on a *récit* called *I walk*, and a short story called *Dying*.

John Calabro

Laura's Uncovering

