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DAD'S MURDER INSPIRES NOVEL

Posted on: 04/10/08
 Written by: ,
 email:

Former Syracusan Rita Schiano fictionalizes 1976 slaying:

Here's what really happened:

Rita Schiano's dad, Al Schiano, was shot to death in December 1976. Dripping blood from six bullet holes, his body was found on a rural road just north of the Onondaga County line. He was 55.

Rita, then 21, was attending Wells College in Aurora. She knew that her dad, a North Side produce dealer and professional gambler, had enemies. But that didn't make his violent death any less horrific.

Cousin married lawyer

Fast forward to the 1980s:
 Rita's cousin, Terri DelGiorno (TV's Mrs. Fixit) married prominent local defense attorney Jim McGraw, the lawyer who had represented accused killer Vincent Calogero.

Although Calogero, who also lived in Syracuse, was never convicted of the Schiano hit, Rita and many others firmly believe he committed the crime. Calogero died in 2004.

In 2006, after years of anger and apprehension, Rita, who now lives in Massachusetts, finally spoke with her cousin's husband about the case.

That familial friction became one of the many sub-plots of Rita's new novel, "Painting the Invisible Man," based on her father's death.

Boasting a conversational prose style spiced with 1970s' allusions (Jethro Tull, Muhammad Ali, "The Man from U.N.C.L.E."), Schiano's story flows smoothly even as she swings rhythmically from present-day action to flashback. The use of italics to denote either flashbacks or inner thought is especially effective in keeping readers on track.

Coming-of-age story

While the gangland rub-out drives the book, it's less a mystery and more a coming-of-age story, Rita's own. She's represented here as the novel's narrator, Anna Matteo. We get to know the youthful Anna, a wisecracker who talks back to her teachers, carries a pellet gun in a shoulder holster under her school jacket and reads books like "Compulsion." And we get to know the 21st century Anna who, due to a computer-era twist of fate, finds herself reliving the whys and wherefores of her dad's untimely death two decades past.

Along the way, Anna recalls her relationships with her family members and even her father's mistress. She struggles with her cousin's decision to wed the attorney who, in essence, got her dad's killer off the hook. She goes undercover to meet with a mobster who may have pushed the button on her father. She falls in love with a research librarian.

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Yes, there's a touch of romance in "Painting the Invisible Man," and -- despite its dark premise -- more than a hint of humor. Upon first meeting that attractive librarian, for instance, Anna quotes Groucho Marx: "Anything further, father? That can't be right. Isn't it anything farther further?" And the librarian recognizes the line from "Horsefeathers," hinting to Anna that she has found a soul mate.

North Side sites

Though the novel is set in Providence, Rhode Island, local readers will easily identify North Side parochial schools, half-price bookstores, Italian meat markets and coffee shops as familiar Syracuse sites.

While the author focuses on her father's murder, the novel's strongest character besides Anna herself is Anna's mother, Theresa, modeled after the author's real-life mother, Jane Notarthomas Schiano, who led the choir at St. John the Baptist Church, though the Schiano family attended Our Lady of Pompei. Theresa is a fully-realized, even flawed, character, a charming music teacher by day prone to jealous ravings at night.

Some of the book's most harrowing scenes are those in which Anna and her green-eyed ma stake out the residence of her father's girlfriend. Some of the novel's most satisfying scenes involve food, notably the Christmas Eve seafood feasts served annually by her mother. Later, an intimate restaurant dinner of ossu buca, braised veal shanks accompanied by Chianti Classico-Riserva, crystallizes a budding relationship.

Book-signings Sat.-Sun.

Not only are the leading roles well defined, but the novel's minor characters are also finely drawn. There's grade-school pantywaist Peter Veneziano. There's Father Ricciardi, a self-righteous cleric who insists that Anna's father repent his evil ways. There's pastry shop owner Gino Palermo, Sister Mary Bridget who scolds with a brogue, the suave gangster Joey Casella and Anna's best friend, Lisa Paradides, who harbors some secrets about her own mom and dad.

Novelist Rita Schiano will discuss "Painting the Invisible Man" from 1 to 4 p.m. Saturday April 12, at the Lavender Inkwell Bookstore, 304 N. McBride St. The talk and book-signing event is from 1 to 4 p.m.;

She'll also appear at the Author Extravaganza along with about 20 other writers from noon to 4 p.m. Sunday April 13, at Liverpool Public Library, 310 Tulip St., Liverpool; 457-0310.

You can contact with any questions. Also, feel free to post comments below.

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