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June 11, 2007

Writing the family mystery

Author finds her father's death was gangland killing

by SEAN REID

NEWS STAFF WRITER

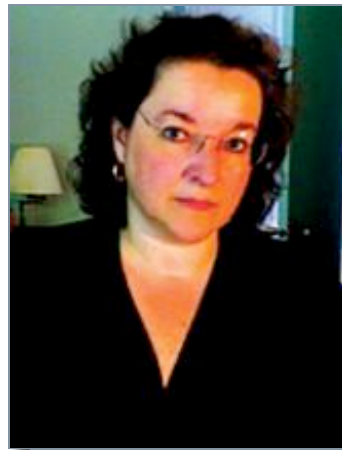
STURBRIDGE — Rita Schiano, like much of the country, watched the series finale of "The Sopranos" on HBO last night.

But unlike most of the country, Schiano probably had a better idea of what was going to happen.

That's because she's lived it.

Late last month, Schiano, a Sturbridge resident and writer, saw her memories put to paper in the fictional novel, "Painting the Invisible Man."

Set in Providence, R.I., the story is told first person through the main character, Anna Matteo. While she was researching the online archives of The Providence Journal, Anna makes a keying error that reveals the world of her father, Paulie Matteo, killed gangland-style more than two decades before.



Courtesy photo Rita Schiano, above, found her novel in family history. (click for larger version)



Courtesy photo The cover of Rita Schiano's new book. (click for larger version)

"The way it begins for Anna is how it began for me," Schiano said. "A simple keying error."

The story eerily reflects the 1976 unsolved murder of her father, Alfred Schiano.

In 2001, Schiano was researching the archives of the Syracuse Post-Standard for a client. She accidentally charged 10 articles instead of the one she needed to her credit card. After retrieving her client's news article, Schiano began typing in names of people she knew into a search engine.

"I typed in some names of friends and family, but why I typed my father's name, I'll never know," she said. "Maybe it was to write this book."

There were 37 articles from the 1990s that referenced her father.

The headline that caught her attention mentioned FBI tapes where the

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man under surveillance "bragged" about getting away with murder. The man on the tape had been acquitted in 1979 of the murder of Schiano's father.

"At that moment I knew I had to explore this story," Schiano said. "Every time I backed away from writing this story, something would push me forward."

After she made the discovery, Schiano met with her cousin and told her what she found online.

"We talked and the next night I decided to do the story," Schiano said. "It became one heck of a journey. There was a lot of research and conversation that was not always easy. Luckily, I was able to write the book as fiction."

She didn't "Grow up Gotti" or live the life of Meadow Soprano, but Schiano, a native of Syracuse, N.Y., recalls growing up in a different kind of "Family."

"I was a philosophy major in college, so my philosophical training came in handy when writing this book," she said with a laugh. "I knew my father was different from other Catholic school kids' parents. This was the 1960s. There was no 'Godfather.' My parents were separated at the time. He had a Goomah, he had large wads of money that was not from working in produce and his friends had these nicknames, but to me that was all normal."

Schiano, now 52, was 21 when her father died.

Difficult headlines

"When that happened, it was very tough," she said. "When you're 21 years old and facing these headlines every day, it was difficult."

She did say writing the book was tremendously therapeutic.

"I had to confront truths about my father I had chosen to ignore for most of my life," she said. "Anna's self-exploration was intensely personal."

Despite the personal element of the story, Schiano believes the lesson is universal.

"Anna's life experience, in and of itself, is unique to her," she said. "Yet the exploration one's personal history is what reader will relate to. As an aside, everyone has something in their family the need to explore."

Schiano moved to Sturbridge in 1988. She owned The Casual Café at 538 Main St., where the Copper Stallion is now located. She sold it in 2000, which was when she officially began to pursue writing.

"When I came home from the restaurant, I was wired," she said. "So I'd sit down and write. I started submitting journals and they were picked up. I've always loved writing, but once I sold the restaurant I knew I was going to pursue writing as my career."

Schiano's first novel, "Sweet Bitter Love, was published in 1997. Since then, she has contributed several short stories to journals and anthologies and has teamed with Paul Gemme of Auburn to develop a one-hour television drama, "T.I.M.E. Share, Inc.," that is currently making the L.A. rounds.

Schiano said anyone who has a love for mob movies or television shows

will enjoy her novel.

"It's an inside look at this glamorization of what it's like to grow up in The Family," she said. "When you look at your family history and have to look back at all the different dynamics, you really begin to understand things in a whole new way."

"Painting the Invisible Man" is available via The Reed Edwards Company, the book publisher's Web site, www.reededwards.com. Copies are also on sale at Garieri Jewelers at 139 Main St., (Bedrock Plaza) in Sturbridge.

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