



‘Lost’ and found; Castellani’s latest plumbs depths of the American Dream

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"The Saint of Lost Things," Christopher Castellani, (\$23.95, Algonquin). Available Sept. 30.

Sometimes it's hard to see what you have - or could have - when all you can see is what you've lost.

In "The Saint of Lost Things," Grub Street head instructor Christopher Castellani follows up his debut novel, "A Kiss From Maddalena," with a mesmerizing portrait of life in a 1950s Italian immigrant community.

At her parents' behest, Maddalena had reluctantly left her beloved Vito and their Italian village of Santa Cecilia to marry Antonio and move to America. In "The Saint of Lost Things," set seven years later in Wilmington, Del. (where the author grew up before moving to the Boston area), Maddalena finally might find happiness: She thinks she is pregnant.

But after seven years of waiting for a child, Antonio has started to let other dreams take hold. Frustrated, he spends time with bachelor restaurateur Renato and their friend Buzzy, and lonely Maddalena befriends a shy, equally lonely musician named Giulio/ Julian - her first real friend in this "country of strangers."

As in the first novel, Castellani was inspired by the experiences of his parents. The characters are much more fleshed out here, and Castellani gracefully addresses the bad with the good.

The community harbors racism and hatred, and even Julian, the only person to show sympathy for a black family that has moved into the neighborhood, won't defend or interact with them publicly.

In glimpses of the dark side of the American Dream, Castellani subtly but effectively reveals capitalism's toll on immigrants and how they manage to survive and sometimes triumph. Renato and Buzzy stock their "Insurance Closet" with stolen jewelry that friends can take as gifts for girlfriends and wives. At the factory where the women work, Maddalena helps her slower sister-in-law by working faster so both can keep their jobs.

Despite the vivid characters, the fact that Maddalena could feel fulfilled by childbearing is as cringe-worthy today as the way the neighbors talk openly of their racism.

Still, this novel contains themes that readers without maternal instincts can relate to. For anyone who's ever lost something or someone they loved, it's hard not to feel for Maddalena and Julian as they try to learn to live with their memories rather than in them.

The difference in time, place and characters make this novel enjoyable even if you haven't read Castellani's first. But chances are, you'll be so engrossed by "The Saint of Lost Things" that you'll want to pick up "A Kiss From Maddalena," too.

And there's more to look forward to: Castellani is working on a third and final installment that will delve into the lives of first-generation Italian-Americans.

Castellani will read from his new novel Sept. 28 at Porter Square Books (7 p.m., 25 White St., Cambridge, 617-491-2220, www.portersquarebooks.com); Oct. 26 at Newtonville Books (7:30 p.m., 107 R Union St., Newton Centre, www.newtonvillebooks.com); and Nov. 8 at Harvard Bookstore (6:30 p.m., 1256 Massachusetts Ave., 617-547-7405, www.harvard.com). For more information, go to www.chriscastellani.com or www.algonquin.com