

Photograph by Tom Nutter

Edited by Ben Brooks

FIRST

Lost and Found

Wilmington-born author Chris Castellani returns to Little Italy for the inspiration behind his newest novel. by Matt Amis

It's a miserable, balmy and gray morning in Wilmington's Little Italy. Inside Papa's Pastry Shop on Union Street, the air conditioning provides some respite from the heat, but it's proving to be temporary. The little blue-haired old woman in front of me begins fighting through a thick Italian accent to make a 10-minute long cappuccino order.

This perfectly plaintive scene could have been lifted straight from "The Saint of Lost Things," the latest from author Christopher Castellani, who, of course, just walked through the door.

Wearing a Boston Red Sox cap, the wispy Wilmington native slinks over to our table with a plate of biscotti and begins chatting up his new book, which came out September 30 on Algonquin Books. "The Saint of Lost Things" is the follow-up to his heralded debut novel, "A Kiss from Maddalena," an operatic, World War II-era drama. For a first novel, "Kiss" was also highly successful. It was tabbed for publication in five different countries and was a featured selection of the Readers Club of America. The novel has sold 35,000 copies to date.

"The Saint of Lost Things" picks up more or less where

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“Kiss” left off, with its small-village Italian characters having immigrated straight to Wilmington. The story moves in and around the Little Italy neighborhood and beyond, dealing with interpersonal chaos in turbulent, racist, Post-War America. Its main characters—Antonio; his beautiful, troubled wife, Maddalena; and their despondent, accor-

dion-playing neighbor Guilio—all grapple with personal losses.

Castellani’s storytelling is pensive, deliberate and at times, sad. Likewise, it’s hard to find a book review that doesn’t use the word “melancholy” when describing his work. But that’s the point. Castellani draws inspiration from his parents, Italian immigrants who grew up in a small, war-torn village during the 1940s. When Castellani set out to write

his first novel, he coordinated long telephone conversations with his parents, Vincenzo and Lidia, who retold everything they remember from their Italian home. “A Kiss from Maddalena” and “The Saint of Lost Things” are Castellani’s versions of their stories.

“One of the challenges for me was trying to write about Italians without being too melodramatic,” Castellani says. “But they are, at least by my experience, a very melodramatic culture. Emotions run high all the time. Little things mean everything. There are just these family tensions that can explode at any time and then immediately heal. So I wanted to capture that kind of emotion.”

There are joyful moments in “The Saint of Lost Things,” but most of the book deals with struggle—the struggle to find love, to make ends meet, to maintain a cultural identity and adapt to new ones in America’s melting pot.

The same went for Castellani’s parents upon arriving in America. On his official Web site, he wrote about his parents, “[they] often seemed helpless, childlike, in the face of language and cultural barriers.”

It’s because of this intimate connection that his characters seem so vivid. The people he writes about once traveled 4,000 miles to build better lives for themselves, often to end up with more hardship and feelings of disconnect than before.

“There was so much longing in [the book], and that’s what I was going for, the longing,” Castellani says. “Everybody feels like they can be more than they are and everybody feels like there’s a part of themselves that nobody knows. There is that longing in me, to be known, to do that thing you always wanted to do. And that was true for all three main characters.”

Of course, Castellani’s parents did persevere, as did thousands of other Italian immigrants. Castellani bulldozed his way through the writing through much discipline and catharsis. His first book took four years. The second took a comparatively speedy year and a half.



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"That's why people go to the gym, why people go to therapy. It's the process of letting out these emotions," he says. "That was the cathartic part."

Today Castellani lives in Arlington, Massachusetts, where he helps other writers with their own catharses. As the head instructor of Grub Street, a non-profit writers' workshop organization, he teaches classes on fiction and hires other instructors. The organization, which has gained national recognition in recent years, tries to unite the disparate pockets of literary interest in Boston. "There's lots going on in Boston. There's reading theory, lots of writers at universities and ones living in the area, and a lot of them don't know each other," Castellani says. "What we're trying to do is bring them together."

A graduate of Salesianum, Castellani developed his writing in high school, having been outside the fringes of the popular Sallies "jock" cliques. He and his friends were members of the Peace and Justice Club, the student newspaper or the literary magazine. Life at the Wilmington private school was a good experience. "That's where I, as a writer, was born," he says. "It's where I started to take myself seriously."

Growing up, his headquarters in Little Italy was his aunt's house, where he and his cousins would meet and make the neighborhood their playground. In his eyes, Little Italy hasn't changed much since. But revisiting it years later, Castellani had to research the area, circa the 1950s, at the University of Delaware library.


Many of the places in "The Saint of Lost Things" are fictional, but others, like Saint Anthony's Church (Saint Anthony of Padua is the saint of lost things) are fixtures in Little Italy. Just the same, Castellani began working on the character of Maddalena by using his mother as a model. But, he says, "The more I revised it, the more other characters came into the story and changed her, the more she became her own."

Maddalena will be back for a third novel, which is already in the works. It

will, predictably, tell the stories of Maddalena and Antonio's children. Castellani predicts the third of his trilogy will be more ambitious—longer and more modern.

His writing, it seems, has seized full control of his life. Castellani says he has no immediate plans to start a melodramatic family of his own. But as with all good Italians, things could change at any moment.

"At first, writing these books felt like a culmination of a lifetime of ideas and work, and then after a little while, it felt like the beginning of a whole other part of my life," he says. "I never believed I could make a living as a writer. I thought if I ever published a book, it'd be this crowning achievement. It's just recently occurred to me that I can keep writing books. I've got more than one story to tell." **DT**




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