



The Bestseller “Quiet Chaos” Presented at the Italian Cultural Institute

Antonella Iovino (April 29, 2011)



A conversation with author Sandro Veronesi led to a deeper insight in the images that inspired him for this novel and their symbolic values

Last Thursday, at the [Italian Cultural Institute of New York](#) [2], Italian writer Sandro Veronesi presented his international bestseller ‘Quiet Chaos’, in conversation with Giancarlo Lombardi, professor at the [College of Staten Island](#) [3] & [Graduate Center of CUNY](#) [4].

The conference was introduced by Giovanni De Sanctis, Attaché for Cultural Affairs - Language and Literature- for the Italian Cultural Institute. He presented Sandro Veronesi as the most important living Italian writer. A very prolific author, he is a novelist, essayist, and journalist. He has published seven novels, a collection of poetry, and five non-fiction books. He can surely be considered one of the best representatives of Italian intellectuals today.

His book “The Force of the Past” won the Viareggio-Repaci Prize and the Campiello Prize and was a Zerilli-Marimò finalist. In 2005, he won the Strega Prize for ‘Quiet Chaos’, translated from the Italian by Michael F. Moore, co-chair of the PEN American Center Translation Committee.



The novel deals with an overwhelmed daily routine, turning everything upside-down. The title itself remarks the contradiction of the protagonist's life: a quiet chaos is such an oxymoron. The main character is Pietro Palatini who, on a beach of the Mediterranean, after spending an afternoon surfing, struggles to save two drowning swimmers. Instead of coming home to a hero's welcome, he is greeted by the flashing lights of an ambulance. His partner has unexpectedly died. Suddenly a chaos breaks in the calm of everyday life. Pietro abandons work, spending his days loafing in a small park near his daughter's school. As the days stretch into weeks, he becomes something of a neighborhood character, a benign, eccentric presence whose watchful, diffident manner arouses sympathy and mild curiosity from other habitués of the area. It is a portrayal of a life set adrift by death, with a profound sense of insight and emotional resonance.

With an unconventional approach for a book review, Giancarlo Lombardi starts from the end of the book, from the acknowledgments where Veronesi wrote “When one writes, one feels alone”. A sentence, according to Lombardi, that really speaks back to the novel. When Pietro loses his partner everybody comes to visit him to share his sorrow, but Pietro knows that the burden-sharing will end soon. What best describes that mourning, Lombardi says, is the term “trauma”: an unexperienced event, something that happens too soon, too fast, so that you can feel it over and over again.

“ This is not a novel of action, it is a novel of repetition of events. A very clear sentence that explains this trauma is when Pietro says in front of the school: it is the wall of tears without the wall” Lombardi concludes.

Veronesi adds: “We are not alone, we are just lonely”. My protagonist goes to live his loneliness in front of his daughter's school. It is the first time I was asked to explain the very symbolic meaning of that image. Although this was a very lucky book, nobody seemed to care why I chose the school. After this death, Pietro has to renew his life and he does so in front of a place where people go to learn, a school”.

Some real facts inspired Veronesi for this book. He says: “I was told a story of a man who lost his wife and remained alone with his daughter: since then it was as if he stops every day in front of his daughter's school”. For the opening image Veronesi uses a real fact that happened to himself: a kind of personal trauma when he was sunbathing and tried to save a woman who was drowning. As happens to Pietro in the book, he was drowning alongside the woman and he thought to hit her and save himself. So, a relationship among the author and the character occurs: the whole novel is not just a story of sorrow and loneliness but ethic issues emerge too. Pietro and Veronesi know how easy it is to go beyond ethnic borders and this story shows the attempt to recover a life accordingly.

i-Italy had the chance of interviewing Veronesi.

What do you think of the current interest of the American readers for contemporary Italian literature?

I am actually here to join the [New York PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature](#) [5], which includes more than 100 writers from 40 different nations. This festival reveals the renovated interest of the United States for foreign cultures, after a period of cultural isolationism following 9/11. After the terrorist attacks it was as if the US wanted to live in a kind of autarchy, protecting itself from any type of intromission. But it is not so, anymore.

What do you think can be misunderstood from the American audience about the book due to a cultural gap?

Of course some things differ. I wondered whether the American audience would understand the image of a father spending a whole day in front of his daughter's school, which is the main image the entire novel is constructed on. In the U.S. you see school buses but not fathers bringing their kids to school. So, maybe it is kept as an exotic framework, but this does not prevent to catch the real sense of the story.



And what about the quiet chaos seen by a New Yorker? The entire novel has a very slow rhythm, the plot seems to be drawn to deliver a physical representation of a sense of slowness and immobility. Is a frenetic New Yorker really able to understand the idea of a quiet chaos?

Yes, I am quite confident he or she is. The more neurosis people have, the more willing they are to find an antidote. America is the first producer of antidepressants. It is to say, in the midst of their accelerated lives, perhaps they are more likely to catch a sense of stop and renewal, as happens to Pietro Palatini.

At the end of the conference some paragraphs of the novel's chapters were read by Veronesi and Moore, leaving the entire audience fascinated.

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