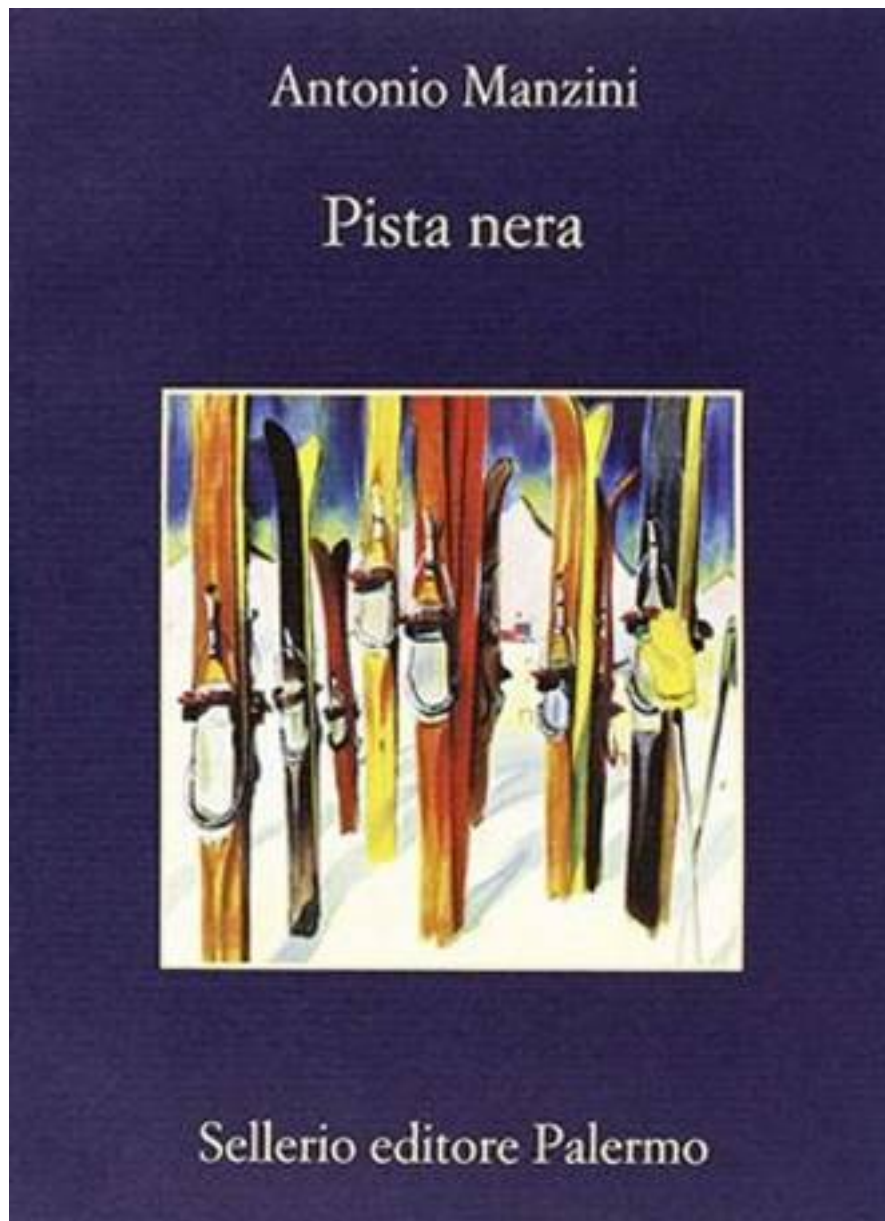




BOOK - Antonio Manzini's Pista Nera

Traci Andrighetti (November 19, 2014)



Murder on the Slopes of Val D'Aosta

Antonio Manzini (b. Rome, 1964) is a man of many talents. He's an actor, screenwriter, director and, luckily for us readers, an author. His works include three short stories, one of which he co-wrote with Niccolò Ammaniti, and the novels [Sangue marcio](#) [2] (Bad Blood) (Fazi, 2005) and [La giostra dei criceti](#) [2] (The Joust of the Hamsters) (Einaudi, 2007). His latest novel, [Pista nera](#) [2] (Black Run) (Sellerio, 2013), is an excitingly unconventional take on the giallo regionale (regional mystery) set in the northern Italian region of Valle d'Aosta.

In the opening pages of *Pista nera*, a body is found buried between two ski trails above the village of Champoluc. Vicequestore (Deputy Prefect) Rocco Schiavone, a shady cop who was transferred from his native Rome to the city of Aosta as a form of punishment for an unknown infraction, is called to investigate. Using methods that are often illicit, to say the least, Schiavone quickly discovers that there are three possible crime "trails:" a Mafia vendetta, a murder for money or a crime of passion. To the wealthy townspeople, most of whom are related, the crime is unthinkable in such a pristine and posh resort town. But, as the title of the novel implies, darkness lurks even in winter wonderlands of white.

Given Schiavone's Roman origins, the Sicilian origins of the victim, Leone Miccichè, and the proximity of Val d'Aosta to France and Switzerland, there is a north-center-south theme running through *Pista nera*. Accordingly, Manzini skillfully incorporates dialect, regional Italian and foreign languages appropriate to these contexts. He also uses entertaining literary linguistic techniques to add to the ambiance of the text. And that's not all: there's even a Hindu mantra (but I'll leave that clue for you to uncover).

REGIONAL ITALIAN OF VAL d'AOSTA

The dialect of Val d'Aosta, known in Italian as valdostano (Eng. Val d'Aostan), in French patois valdôtain and in valdostano patoué valdotèn, is a dialectal variety of the franco-provençal language. Valdostano is spoken primarily in central Val d'Aosta and is one of three Gallo-Romance languages spoken in this region (the others are Occitan in the south and French in the north).

Valdostano has mixed with Italian to produce a regional variety of Italian called the regional Italian of Val d'Aosta. In terms of lexicon, regional Italian comprises words like *insulate* (Ital. *isolate*; Eng. *insulated*), which look Italian but are identified as regional by native Italian speakers. Regional Italian also includes standard or neostandard Italian terms that have a unique meaning in a particular region as well as names of regional dishes and drinks. Below are some interesting examples of the regional Italian of Val d'Aosta from *Pista nera*.

PEOPLE AND THINGS

gattisti (Eng. snow groomers, but literally catists from the word *gatto*, or cat)

Aveva infilato le cuffiette dell'iPod con i successi di Ligabue e s'era acceso la canna che gli aveva regalato Luigi Bionaz, il capo dei gattisti, il suo amico più caro.

He had slipped on the iPad earphones with Ligabue's hits and had lit the joint that his best friend Luigi Bionaz, the head of the snow groomers, had given to him.

rifugio (Ital. *baita*; Fr. *chalet*; Eng. ski lodge)

Aveva un rifugio, uno chalet su a Cuneaz, sulle piste di Champoluc insieme a sua moglie, Luisa Pec,

anni 32, che somiglia un po' a Greta Scacchi.

(He had a ski lodge, a chalet up in Cuneaz, on the Champoluc trails together with his wife, Luisa Pec, 32 years old, who looks a bit like Greta Scacchi.)

ciaspole (Ital. racchette da neve; Eng. snowshoes)

Ma d'inverno per arrivarci ci vogliono le ciaspole.

(But in the winter to get there you need snowshoes.)

FOOD AND SPIRITS

raclette (Ital. formaggio raschiato; Eng. literally, scraped cheese; a dish of melted fontina cheese scraped from its mould and served [in the book] with small artichokes, olives and pieces of salami)

Per cena ti avevo preparato la raclette.

(For dinner I made you raclette.)

grappa al ginepro (Eng. juniper-flavored grappa)

La padrona tornò con una bottiglia di grappa al ginepro e due bicchieri.

(The proprietor returned with a bottle of juniper-flavored grappa and two glasses.)

REGIONAL ITALIAN OF SICILY

Thanks to the victim's brother, Domenico Miccichè, the regional Italian of Sicily also makes an appearance in Pista nera.

dammuso (Sic. dammusu, from the Arabic dammus; Ital. volta; Eng. vault, used to refer to a small home of stone with vaulted roof)

Un maso da ristrutturare vicino Erice e un dammuso a Pantelleria.

(A farm to renovate near Erice and a dammuso in Pantelleria.)

FRENCH

Because Val d'Aosta shares a border with France and Switzerland, the Italian of the region often contains intact lexical borrowings from French.

rascard (reg. Ital. rascana; Eng. a wooden home in the region made from what were originally franco-provençal structures used for storing hay or grain)

"Che bella casa!" esclamò Pierron. "È un rascard."

("What a beautiful house!" Pierron exclaimed. "It's a rascard.")

vin brulé (Ital. vino bruciato; Eng. burned wine, which is a heated, spiced wine)

Fuori c'era un banchetto che vendeva vin brulé e un paio di loro con le giacche a vento rosse, i visi bruciati dal sole, gli scarponi coi ganci ancora ai piedi, scherzavano ridevano e bevevano il liquore

insieme a degli inglesi.

(Outside there was a stand that was selling vin brulé, and a few of them with red windbreakers, faces burned by the sun, ski boots with clips still on their feet, were joking, laughing and drinking the alcohol together with some Englishmen.)

ROMANESCO

One of the coolest dialects on the planet, the dialect of Rome, *romanesco*, flavors Schiavone's speech and that of his friend, Sebastiano Cecchetti.

gabbio (Ital. *prigione*; Eng. *prison*)

Ti fai un bel po' di anni al *gabbio*, lo sai?

(You'll do a good bit of time in prison, you know?)

APPROXIMATION

I also love it when authors write foreign words as they would be spelled in Italian. It's adorable, or, given the mystery-novel context of *Pista nera*, intriguing!

aski (Eng. *huskies*)

La prima cosa che colpiva erano gli occhi, di un azzurro così chiaro da sembrare quello dei cani da slitta, gli *aski*.

(The first thing that struck him were the eyes, a blue so clear that it seemed like that of sled dogs, the *huskies*.)

Concluding remarks: If you think you know regional Italian mysteries (like those of the great Andrea Camilleri, of whom Manzini was a student at the Accademia Nazionale d'Arte Drammatica), think again. *Pista nera* is full of surprises—from the crazy, corrupt character of vicequestore Schiavone to the eyebrow-raising, trail-blazing plot twists. This book is one wild ride, and it's not because of the snowmobiles.

Note: The setting and context of the novel also allow for some curious standard and neostandard Italian words. For example, there are a lot of terms related to the snow and landscape of the region that you don't typically see in literature (I had no idea that snow grooming machines were called *gatti delle nevi*, or snow cats). I also learned a lot from the words that Schiavone's wife, Marina, looked up in the dictionary as a daily ritual (clearly a genius).

In traduzione: Not surprisingly, given the quality and originality of *Pista nera*, translations are forthcoming in France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Spain and the United States (I'm telling you, this book could easily become an international bestseller). Be on the lookout for an English translation from the esteemed Harper Collins in April of 2015.

On the Internet: Antonio Manzini does not have a website, but he has a [Facebook page](#) [3]. Also check out his [IMDb page](#) [4] (he's been in some amazing films and in some of my favorite Italian TV shows!).



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