

The First Two Pages: *American History*

By J.L. Abramo (Down & Out Books)

How do you open a novel that starts at the close of the nineteenth century and closes at the start of the twenty-first century?

I decided to start at the beginning.

American History is a generational tale of two families, the Agnellos and the Leones. The reader is immediately informed of the time and place—the late 1800s in Naro, Sicily.

The reader is then introduced to Giuseppe Agnello and Vincenzo Leone, the first members of their respective families to emigrate to America. There is the suggestion that in different circumstances, these boys, so alike, could have been friends; however, historical conflict and animosity exists between the two families, which prevents any fraternization between the boys.

In an author's note, before the action begins, the reader learns *agnello* is the Italian word for lamb and *leone* the Italian word for lion. A hint, perhaps, to the dynamic of the future relationship between the clans.

Throughout centuries, peoples from Europe have come to the *new world* for various reasons—including religious freedom, escape from persecution due to social status, hope of improving their lives and the lives of their children and grandchildren, or simply adventure.

My grandfather came to America in 1909, during a period when millions of others made the journey. He left his pregnant wife and two children behind, and only after five years was able to send for them to join him. My father, born in Sicily in 1909, did not meet *his* father until he arrived in New York City with his mother, brother, and sister in 1914. I have always marveled at the courage it must have taken to leave the familiar behind and come to a place of foreign language and foreign custom.

The impetus for Giuseppe and Vincenzo to abandon their ancestral home is suggested in the first two pages—dreams of a better future and the desire to leave the blood feud behind.

And the two young men, who have each found young women to share their hopes, begin a courageous journey to America—and become part of the history of their new home.

And so, the first two pages of *American History*:

Sicily. Late Nineteenth Century.

They were born less than one year apart, in a poor village full of boys so like one another they could all have been brothers.

It was the 1890s. The Gay Nineties for much of the Western World and, in the New World across the Atlantic, a time for casting off the restraints of the Victorian Age.

In the rocky hills surrounding Naro, on the ancient island of Sicily, time seemed to stand still. For Vincenzo Leone and Giuseppe Agnello, the approach of the twentieth century had little consequence—and offered less promise.

In another time and place, these two boys could have been friends.

Amici. Compagni. Fratelli.

The two young boys often crossed paths, and there was a mutual attraction, although part of their curiosity to know one another was likely encouraged by the taboo.

Both had been educated from birth to mistrust and forswear the other, and as they grew to adolescence they succumbed to the prejudices of their fathers—blindly accepting the ageless dissension between the two families if not totally adopting the fierce hatred.

Vincenzo Leone and Giuseppe Agnello might have spent their lives in the hills of Agrigento, working the miserly earth and perpetuating the blood feud that had existed for so long no one could remember when it began.

Or why.

And, as both approached adulthood, this looked to be their fate.

But each young man, independently from one another, had a common dream.

To escape.

To escape the barren land.

To escape the senseless and violent antagonism.

To escape the archaic island prison.

All that was needed was a catalyst, an inspiration, a reason to break away from family and home, a motivation too strong to resist.

And the incentive came for each of them in the form it had taken for all ages—for as long as restless sons struggled to gain a foothold on manhood.

Romance.

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J.L. Abramo is the author of *Catching Water in a Net*, winner of the St. Martin's Press/Private Eye Writers of America prize for Best First Private Eye Novel; the subsequent Jake Diamond novels *Clutching at Straws*, *Counting to Infinity* and *Circling the Runway* (Shamus Award Winner); *Chasing Charlie Chan*, a prequel to the series; and the stand-alone thrillers *Gravesend*, *Brooklyn Justice* and *Coney Island Avenue* (a follow-up to *Gravesend*.) *American History* is his latest novel. Abramo is the current president of Private Eye Writers of America. For more about the author please visit: www.jlabramo.com.