

Zona franca: Noir Intrigue alla milanese

Traci Andrighetti (November 04, 2013)



The long-awaited new novel in Massimo Cassani's Commissario Sandro Micuzzi mystery series.

Massimo Cassani (Cittiglio, 1966), journalist, author and instructor of intreccio narrativo (narrative intrigue), recently published the much-anticipated third novel in his Commissario Sandro Micuzzi series, [Zona franca](#) [2] (Duty-Free Zone) (TEA, 2013). Cassani debuted the lazy, Toscanelli cigar-loving Milanese police inspector in 2008 with [Sottotraccia. Un'inchiesta del commissario Micuzzi](#) [3] (Undercover: An Inspector Micuzzi Investigation) (Sironi; TEA, 2013). Inspector Micuzzi promptly returned in 2009 with [Pioggia battente](#) [4] (Pounding Rain) (Sironi; TEA, forthcoming) but then went underground, so to speak, while Cassani took a break from the series to try his hand at psychological noir with [Un po' più lontano](#) [5] (A Bit Further) (Laurana, 2010).

In *Zona franca*, Commissario Micuzzi is tired. He's been transferred as punishment to Milan's Città Studi district, and his unscrupulous ex-wife is using every trick in the book to get back into his life. Meanwhile, he has been forced to take the lead in the investigation of the murder of Luigi Pecchi,



aka Gigi Sciagura (Misfortune), an unbalanced octogenarian who bicycled around town calling for the demolition of the Duomo and denouncing the construction of skyscrapers. But when Micuzzi's journalist friend Ambra is brutally beaten and her dancer lover goes missing, he springs into action. To solve these apparently unrelated crimes, Micuzzi must disentangle a complicated web of suspects and clues: a Nazi gun, a mysterious man from Buenos Aires, a questionable nephew, an engineer in collusion with the 'Ndrangheta, a rumored WWII treasure, a lost love, and a missing body....

The language of Zona franca is lean and direct, in keeping with the noir genre, but unusually rich with history and culture. Because the story features elderly characters in Milan, the Milanese dialect, sometimes referred to as meneghino, plays a key role in the text. The historical events referenced in the novel as well as the contemporary plotlines also involve the use of Spanish, Latin, Romanian and the occasional lexeme from the Sicilian and Calabrese dialects. Cassani further enhances the narrative with numerous varieties and forms of language and literary devices.

DIALECTS

Word

'ndrina (a clan within the Calabrian crime organization 'Ndrangheta) (Calabrese)

Rasoio poteva essere un drogato, ma non aveva le pupille da drogato; poteva essere un killer di una 'ndrina concorrente...

(Rasoio could have been a drug addict, but he didn't have the pupils of a drug addict; he could have been a killer from a competing 'ndrina...)

Expression

robb de matt (Ital. robe da matti; Eng. crazy people stuff) (Milanese)

Il matto non dice mica: ecco, sono matto e faccio robe da matti, robb de matt!

(It's not like a crazy person says: so, I'm crazy and I do crazy people stuff, robb de matt!)

Proverb

L'amis vecc l'è on gran bell specc (Milanese)

L'amico vecchio è un gran bello specchio (Italian)

An old friend is a great mirror (English)

Mentre si incamminava verso piazza della Scala per farsi quattro passi e poi prendere la metro in Duomo, gli frullò nel cervello un proverbio: <<L'amis vecc l'è on gran bell specc>>, l'amico vecchio è un ottimo specchio.

(While he was walking toward Piazza della Scala to take a stroll and then catch the subway to the Duomo, a proverb ran through his head: "L'amis vecc l'è on gran bell specc," An old friend is a great mirror.)

REGIONAL ITALIAN

pirla (Ital. cretino; Eng. idiot)

Da uno con quella faccia da pirla lì, mica si può pretendere, eh...

(From one with that face of an idiot there, it's not like you can expect anything, you know...)

cassoeula (Eng. a type of Milanese stew)

Sopra il sacco, a fare da coperchio, una grande padella rotonda senza manico, che in tempi migliori doveva essere servita probabilmente a cucinare ossi buchi, risotti e cassoeula.



(Above the sack, functioning as a cover, a large round frying pan without the handle, which in better times would probably have been used to cook osso bucos, risottos and cassoeula.)

ANGLICISM

suspance (Eng. suspense)

Cosa faceva, Rosaria, creava la suspance?

(What was Rosaria doing? Creating suspense?)

NEOLOGISM

comesichiama (Eng. whatshisname)

... io allora sono scesa, gli ho chiesto, al comesichiama, al Pecchi, se stava bene, se voleva un'ambulanza...

(... then I got out, I asked him, whatshisname, Pecchi, if he was okay, if he wanted an ambulance...)

ACCLAMATION

ehia ehia (from the Fascist cheer ehia ehia alalà, which was Gabriele D'Annunzio's Italianization of the American hip hip hurrah)

Marciare, fare passo con il piede destro, fare il saluto con la mano tesa, dire ehia ehia e quella roba là.

(March, take a step with the right foot, salute with the hand taut, say ehia ehia and that kind of stuff there.)

APPROXIMATION

Brus Lì (Eng. Bruce Lee)

E te hai potuto fare il Brus Lì de' noiantri.

(And you were able to be the Bruce Lee of our people.)

UNIVERBATION

evvabbuo' (Ital. e+va+buo' [buono]; Eng. literally, and it goes good, meaning "all right")

Evvabbuo', Giampietro, mica son medico, io!

(All right, Giampietro, it's not like I'm a doctor!)

ONOMATOPOEIA

cra cra (Eng. ribbit)

Anche Sarah abitava in via Padova, con mamma e babbo. Quasi affacciata su Loreto, però; Luigi Pecchi, invece, più fuori dove il cra cra delle rane sul Naviglio Martesana certe volte era più forte dei suoi pensieri.

(Sarah also lived on Via Padova, with mom and dad. Almost facing Loreto, though; Luigi Pecchi, instead, was further out where the ribbit of the frogs on Naviglio Martesana was at times louder than his thoughts.)

Concluding Remarks: Cassani does an outstanding job of weaving history and fiction in Zona franca, as in his preceding books. The plot is captivating and complex—you won't figure it out. And there are so many fascinating and even funny details in this



novel, including the nicknames for Hitler and Mussolini, il Baffetto germanico (the Germanic Little Mustache) and il Mascellone romagnolo (the Romagnol Big Jaw), as well as the references to Barbablù (Bluebeard) and **Blek Macigno (Black Boulder)**, an Italian comic book hero who looks a LOT like Davy Crockett.

In Translation: The foreign language rights are currently available for the Sandro Micuzzi series, but they might not last long. Zona franca is an absolute perfect fit for American readers. I mean, noir, Nazis, a lost love and a mysterious treasure—need I say more? So let's hope that a U.S. publisher picks up this intriguing series soon.

On Facebook: Both [Massimo Cassani](#) [6] and [Commissario Micuzzi](#) [7] are on Facebook. Be sure to check out their pages for more riveting reading.

Note: Stay tuned for my interview with Massimo Cassani. It's bound to be every bit as compelling as his books.

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