

Comments  
Launch For A Better Life, Club Savoy  
Myrtleford 15 May 2021

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Launching books is one of the pleasures of the kind of work I do, but this one is very special: a book about my people and my town.

According to Sayoni Ghosh of the Seagull School of Publishing, drawing on the Oxford English Dictionary, “*a book is factually defined as a written or printed work consisting of pages glued or sewn together along one side and bound in covers that communicates information*” ... [1]. Wikipedia describes a book as “*a medium for recording information in the form of writing or images, typically composed of many pages(made of papyrus, parchment, vellum, or paper) bound together and protected by a cover*” [2].

BUT these are describing the book as a mere physical object- when really a book-and especially THIS book-is so much more. In this deeper sense FOR A BETTER LIFE is a collection of stories that binds generations, that informs and delights, amuses and emotionally affects people.

Between the covers of the physical book 324 pages are bound together physically, but across the stories young and old, migrant and host, Italy and Australia, are bonds of common experience, struggle, emotions and success in a much deeper binding.

Large scale emigration of Italians from Italy has been occurring for more than 150 years. We use the word *diaspora* to describe populations that are scattered far from their origins. Italy has experienced two and possibly three large diasporas. Between 1880 and 1924 when the US closed its borders to further Italian migration more than 16 million people left Italy in search of work. Most went to North and South America. Today About 15.6 million Italian Americans, one million Uruguayans, about 30 million Argentines (over 60% of the total population), and 31 million Brazilians, or 15% of the population, have Italian ancestry. The population of Italy today is 60 million but the diaspora is estimated at 75 million, much larger than the entire population of Italy. Australia received some migrants from Italy during the first diaspora, Raffaello Carboni, who documented the Eureka Stockade, and the civil engineer Carlo Catani, are two famous names from this period. But the main migration from Italy to Australia was during the second diaspora, from the 1950s to the 1970s. Over both periods Italians have been the largest voluntary migration of people ever documented.

FOR A BETTER LIFE contains a priceless account of 34 family stories from both of the diasporas of Italian migration. The stories are funny and sad, moving and beautiful. The alternate moments of struggle with joy and adversity with success. Myrtleford is a microcosm of Australia, an instance which reflects the whole. We see that in this room, surrounded by magnificent Indigenous art that reminds us that all non-Aboriginal Australians are ultimately migrants, under small flags of Italy and using English as our language of convenient and common communication.

FOR A BETTER LIFE has chapters written around common threads of leaving and arriving, of enterprise and challenges, of friendship and women’s perspectives, of home, wisdom and legacy and in the second part the 34 detailed family stories. Every story is particular and different because it is about individuals and their circumstances, but they are also very similar in some ways, sharing common efforts and struggles and overcoming adversity with resilience, stoicism and determination. Although the actual span of time is 100 years it is really timeless because what drives people to upend everything secure and familiar and risk suffering, hardship and rejection, is the hope that future generations can

have a better life. It is a selfless act of love and optimism, of trust that with hard work, creativity and super human effort, our children's lives will be better than ours.

I loved reading this book. A great deal of it is familiar to me because it is also the story of the young Vincenzo Lo Bianco and Antonia Ferraro, my parents, who left Melicuccà, a small Calabrian mountain village of very ancient Greek origins in the early 1950s. They had one son born there and three others born here. The two towns, Melicuccà and Myrtleford, are to me a single extended concept of home and belonging. In all of the stories there is a similar feeling of connection and sometimes of nostalgia.

In my foreword to the book I thank and congratulate the authors, editors, contributors, Chris McCracken, Roy Ward and Joy Phillips, and the great strategist of the entire project, Jan Mock. I repeat my congratulations today. But I also thank and congratulate the families who so generously gave time and information, trusting in the professionalism of the researchers, and taking the risk to share their stories with strangers. Your stories are a gift to the young and future Myrtlefordians, but really to any and all Australians about the meeting of cultures and lives in this land.

We live in a place of exceptional beauty and success, and you have contributed hugely to the security, comfort and decency of the society we share today.

The people who study storytelling are anthropologists and they point out that storytelling is a universal human quality. When our children come home from school we ask them to tell us about their day, when we visit someone in hospital we relate to them an account of what we and others have done or where we have been. When we call friends or relatives on the phone we launch into stories about acquaintances, family, or issues. We are a storying species. Storytelling is important in all cultures and for all ages. Everyone wants their story told and listened to and respected, or at least acknowledged. Our story is our side, our account of events, our interpretation, our perspective. As we say our piece we want to be understood and we know this entails that we should listen to others' stories too, allow them the recounting right that we claim for ourselves. Humans are a social animal that narrates itself. It is through these stories that we build bonds of common and shared experience, or explore differences and their meaning. In our stories we provide explanations for our lives and justifications for our actions.

Storytellers are prized in all cultures because they provide the glue that links people and folds them into the common enterprise of being both individuals and part of a community. Telling stories instils moral values, but also entertains, explains and helps us make sense of our experiences and the world around us.

Storytelling is central to human existence and every culture tells and values stories. Italian storytelling is a famous and well recognised tradition, one of the reasons Italian cinema is so successful, but migration is a special kind of storytelling of homeland and host-land and the meeting of the two.

For all these reasons FOR A BETTER LIFE is a donation made by the families to all of us, but especially to the young to ground them in what has gone before and shaped their world.

I am delighted to launch this book, it is an honour and a special pleasure to do so. I hereby launch FOR A BETTER LIFE and I encourage you to purchase a copy, to read and discuss.

## References

[1]. Sayoni Ghosh, 2015, Makers of the Book: The Printing Press  
The Seagull School of Publishing, Calcutta, India.

<https://theseagullschool.wordpress.com/2015/06/15/makers-of-the-book-the-printing-press/>

[2]. Wikipedia Entry: Book, no date, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book>