

Heart of the matter

A rich debut novel focuses on the struggles of an Italian-American family in 1950s Chicago

When the World Was Young

By Tony Romano

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By Jessica Treadway

If "family is the country of the heart," as 19th Century Italian leader Giuseppe Mazzini observed, then Tony Romano's first novel is a vivid and eloquent map.

In "When the World Was Young," Romano tells the story of Angela Rosa and Agostino Peccatori, Italian immigrants who struggle to raise their family in a culture foreign to them in more ways than one—specifically, Chicago in 1957. Angela Rosa devotes her time and energy to her husband and children, while her husband runs the local social club and indulges in what he calls "*divertimento*"—diversion—or what most Americans would refer to as "affairs."

In 1957 the Peccatoris have five children: Santo, at 18 the eldest son; Victoria, the only daughter; twins Anthony and Alfredo; and baby Benito. Early in the novel, Benito dies of fever in his teenage sister's arms, setting off a collective grief that will have emotional repercussions for decades.

The novel moves around in time, sometimes bringing us forward 20 years, when things have changed drastically for the Peccatori clan. One son has become estranged, one has become a priest, and a third—the youngest, Nicholas, who starts out believing he is an "afterthought," a replacement for Benito, "the living marker of what could have been"—is just coming of age and planning to leave for college.

Romano, who teaches at Fremd High School in Palatine, splits the novel's narrative among several familial voices and perspectives, most prominently Santo's and Victoria's, whose dramas intersect when Santo beats up one of his poker buddies, Eddie Milano, for getting too close to his little sister. At first Santo thinks he is defending Victoria's honor—even though she has pursued Eddie—but after the fight, he reconsiders his motives:

"He was fighting over a cigarette? . . . Because Darlene had called him a loser? Because he *was* a loser? He couldn't explain, not so that anyone would understand."

What's bothering Santo—what he would like to explain to somebody—is the knowledge that his father sired a child by a young neighborhood grocery cashier. Agostino doesn't know his son is aware of his secret, and Santo is confused by the conflict he feels. Almost perversely, he seeks out the baby's mother, who is, perhaps understandably, inclined to resist his initial advances. Santo's choices in the context of his father's shame are a major driving force of the novel, fueling an ultimate rupture in the Peccatori family.

Victoria is the source of the book's other line of forward motion. At 16 she is at once a rebel (cutting her parochial-school classes to smoke cigarettes and hang out with her friend Darlene) and a traditional nurturer, playing second mother to baby Benito. As with all the family members, his death has a profound effect on her, causing her to remember, obsessively, a time "when a little boy in a second-story apartment on Superior Street took up his own small space in this world and breathed his own pocket of air. She had to shake loose the icy shiver that ran up the small of her back."

One of the most compelling relationships in the novel exists outside the family framework, between Victoria and the local parish priest, Father Ernie. By teasing her with a recurring line—"If I weren't a priest"—he gains the teenager's trust and also be-

Preserving a more-innocent past

By Kristin Klobberdanz

Tony Romano wrote "When the World Was Young" as a sort of homage to the neighborhood of his Chicago youth.

"It was a way to preserve a past that seemed more innocent," the Glen Ellyn resident said in an interview. Romano, who grew up near Ashland and Grand Avenues in a tight-knit Italian-American community in the late '60s and early '70s, recalled languid summer days playing kick the can, listening to portable record players and drinking lemonade on his family's front stoop. He and his family would occasionally take lunches of meatballs wrapped in oil-soaked waxed paper to Lincoln Park Zoo, but mostly they relished their free time with their neighbors.

"I like to think I have three languages: Italian, English and 'Chicago,'" Romano said, referring to his neighborhood's Italian and English hodgepodge that carried its own distinct rhythm.

One memory that is not so idyllic is that of Romano's first job in junior high school: He delivered milk around the neighborhood three mornings a week. Beyond the predawn wake-up call, the worst part about it, he said, was dropping a milk bottle off at someone's door and seeing other children watching cartoons through the window on Saturday mornings. "It was a year-and-a-half of hell."

But Romano knew better than to complain to his factory-employed parents. They immigrated to Chicago in the late '50s (like the protagonists of his



Tribune photo by Terry Harris

Tony Romano

novel) and made it a priority to instill a strong work ethic in their son.

"I had to work for it," he said of cultivating his love for reading through comic books. "I would scrounge the neighborhood for pop bottles to sell, then make the three-block trek to the store for the latest issue."

Romano's favorite comic books included Superman, Batman and World's Finest, and he eventually had a collection of thousands.

"I took care of them, didn't even have a page turned down," he said. When he was 13, he said, he made the poor decision of storing his comic books in the attic—and his mom accidentally threw them all out.

"It still hurts to talk about it," he said with a chuckle.

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comes a three-dimensional character himself, because we sense that were it not for his vows and collar, he would be attracted to her.

For some readers, the two predominant siblings' voices may be diluted by the author's decision to include the occasional observations of others in the family, perhaps most notably Nicholas, whose thoughts serve as the novel's bookends. One could argue that because he has the first and final word, the story of "When the World Was Young" is his; however, the space and intensity given to Santo's and Victoria's experiences suggest otherwise. In the end, perhaps it is best to view the novel as the Peccatoris' collective family saga, with each member having his or her say in the context of social and personal history.

Romano is a careful and evocative writer who takes time with his descriptions to give his fictional world depth and texture. Here is his depiction of Agostino's Singer sewing machine, as seen through Santo's eyes:

"The black, cast-iron pedal, wrought with leaves, brought him back for a moment to his father's lap not so long ago. . . . The pedal made a sweet, rhythmic click when his father worked it, causing a leather belt to rotate iron wheels that pushed the needle like a greased piston."

And in the passages devoted in the opening pages to the Italian neighborhood feast stretching four blocks on Ohio Street, you can almost see "the African Dip, where for twenty-five cents you got three chances to dunk a Negro into a tank of water"; the women making their barefoot procession with the Madonna, their hands working "in a flurry, nimbly pinning pale lilies and irises at Mary's feet"; and the cherry bombs exploding, "The smoke thick and rising in ash clouds, black pollen, the sulfur bitter and metallic."

As adept as he is at rendering visual images, Romano is even more skilled at presenting his characters' psychic landscapes. In vivid emotional detail, we witness Nicholas' search for meaning in his life; Santo's efforts to avoid ending up like his philandering father; Victoria's conflict over sleeping with Eddie, and its consequences; and their mother's pain at losing Benito.

These narrative threads provide internal drama but there is plenty of good, old-fashioned, external plot as well, culminating in a breathtaking birth scene in the Apennine hills of Italy, where Victoria and her mother have gone to recover from Benito's death but also to allow Angela Rosa to try to "knock out all the American nonsense that filled [Victoria's] head." Mother and daughter return to Chicago from this trip with a new infant and a secret they will likely keep to the end of their days. This is one advantage of the narrative being divided among perspectives: The reader can be privy to information not accessible by some characters, so whereas they are limited in their insights, we are privileged with the panoramic view.

"When the World Was Young" is a most-accomplished first novel, rich in characterization, setting and psychological acuity about the wages of sin, and about the conflict and cohesiveness inherent in families. At one point when he is cautioning his sister that she had better shape up, Santo warns her, "Mark my words." We would do well to take the same direction from Tony Romano.

Jessica Treadway is the author of the short-story collection "Absent Without Leave" and the novel "And Give You Peace."