

The Daily Review, Wed., Mar. 3 The Globe and Mail

Relative simplicity



John Calabro's *The Cousin* brushes over a disintegrating marriage and a dysfunctional family

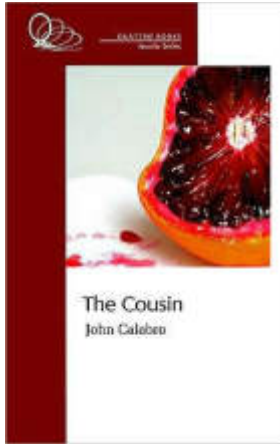
Reviewed by Judith Fitzgerald

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From the author of 2005's critically acclaimed *Bellecour* comes *The Cousin*, John Calabro's follow-up novella, commencing with a bang, concluding with a whisper.

“The bathroom door is ajar and Susan is combing her wet hair ... I love observing women going through their morning rituals, as if I'm seeing a painting by Renoir come alive ... The hint of her nakedness aided by a vodka and blood-orange juice begins to arouse me...”

This self-described Canadian “conservative bank manager” watches his Italian-teaching “Celtic wife” primping so she meets the approval of his trio of surviving Sicilian family members: “It is not so much that I hate the idea of showing up in that small feudal town perched hundreds of feet above sea level; it is more that I don't want to see or talk to the relatives that still live in Petra,” reflects Sal. “I don't particularly like people on any given day, let alone people I have not seen for thirty years.”



The Cousin, by John Calabro, Quattro Books, 143 pages, \$16.95

Still, they see the septuagenarian couple with youthful no-good-nik Charlie (begrudgingly honouring his traditional filial duties). Peacemaker Susan frequently soothes Uncle or Cousin. Edgily dejected Sal broods, regarding Uncle with barely concealed revulsion, noting Cousin swallows the same indignities engendering his own simmering hatred.

Sal replays his tyrannical bullying Uncle's belittling and humiliating ways; and, because his own father manqué had abandoned wife and son to the brute for long stretches before the ill-matched pair suddenly relocated to Canada, he additionally recalls other long-suppressed secrets insistently making their presence felt. His heart-hardened and long-deceased mother appears, an apparition beseeching him to practise forbearance. Cousin, a petulant semi-servant, only risks removing his mask when he subsequently invites the miserable narrator along for the ride of his life.

Upon reaching their destination, gaiety prevails. Charlie reveals he dreams of joining his lover. Sal drinks too much before popping illicit pills and dancing with Simone, an alluring transvestite who may possess the necessary package to lead him astray. The combination knocks him for a loop; thus, for the remainder, readers join Sal on a psychedelic trip that could involve either Simone's demise or the realization of Charlie's romantic fantasies.

Echoes of Pirandello and Calvino punctuate the text, best described as tragic surrealism. Calabro writes well, particularly when he renders the Italian countryside or illuminates several flamboyant characters with deft turns of phrase. Yet, despite its judiciously charted journey between past and present, *The Cousin* fails to delineate a defined portrait of a marriage on the fringes of dissolution or an ending satisfactorily pulling together several disparate strands to create a fully finished piece of work (considering the genre's constraints).

Hence, *The Cousin* will appeal to readers seeking an author fearlessly negotiating emotionally graphic streams of thought flooding the LGBT community; however, a few may find little to appreciate in this poorly edited and lopsided wobble on the wild side:

“My mother was unhappy. My father was unhappy. My uncle made my mother happy, and then my father took her away, and she became unhappy again. It was so simple...”

A scintilla too simple, perhaps?

Contributing reviewer and In Other Words blogger Judith Fitzgerald lives in Northern Ontario's Almaguin Highlands. She is completing her 30th work, a poetry collection provisionally titled Rogue Lightning, slated for 2010 release.