

Her novel based on grandparents' love letters

Aunt Susie had invited Linda Cardillo over for lunch. Linda was living in Germany at the time, but was home in Mt. Vernon, N.Y., for a short visit in early 1990.

Aunt Susie still lived next door to Linda Cardillo's late grandmother in an Italian immigrant neighborhood, where eggplant grew in gardens and grapes hung from backyard vines.

Aunt Susie was the family cook and baker. And that was quite the compliment in this sprawling Italian-American family where the operas of Puccini and Verdi and the baseball play-by-play of Phil Rizzuto played in the background.

Aunt Susie recently had been diagnosed with breast cancer. She might have been concerned that she would not see Linda again.

As usual, Aunt Susie had prepared a small feast: homemade pasta, beef, garlic, parsley and cheese.

When lunch was over, Aunt Susie excused herself before returning with a small box normally kept in her dresser for safe keeping. She handed it to her niece.

Inside were two dozen letters from the turn of the century, written in flu-

ent Italian and precise penmanship. Love letters.

The authors were Linda Cardillo's grandparents.

Linda never knew her grandfather. He had died from complications from the flu when he was a young man and Woodrow Wilson was still in the White House.

But she knew her grandmother well.

As a child, growing up Italian in America, Linda sat in her grandmother's kitchen and listened to her "chant the spells that cast out the headaches and heartaches of the women of the neighborhood who sought her help."

She was the matriarch.

Linda was the family reader.

The day the bookmobile came to her grammar school was her favorite day of the week. In high school, Linda had written to John Knowles, the author of "A Separate Peace," to tell him she wanted to be a writer.

The famous author wrote back and encouraged the dream.

In 1970, Linda was graduated from Tufts University with notebooks full of ideas, planned to write novels for a living. She worked in publishing and at magazines. She taught writing



workshops. She married, gave birth to her first child, divorced and graduated from Harvard Business School. She remarried. Lived in Germany. Was there when the Berlin Wall came down. Wrote books filled with technical writing. Gave birth to two more children. Rose to the position of executive director of development at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester.

She and her family have lived in Longmeadow, her husband Stephan Platzer's hometown, for the past 10 years.

"I didn't really know what Aunt Susie gave me that afternoon," Linda says. "I thought it was a little bit of family history. But I discovered my grandparents as young people. I was struck by their passion for each other. It is an immigrant's tale. What Aunt Susie gave me turned out to be something close to magic."

It also was the seeds of Linda Cardillo's first novel, "Dancing on Sunday Afternoons," published today by Harlequin Everlasting (\$5.25).

Linda wrote much of the book over approximately five years longhand, with Pilot fine point pens on narrow-ruled legal pads.

"Writing longhand freed me from the computer," she says. "I could write waiting for my kid's soccer practice to end, or waiting in the dentist's office, or stuck in traffic."

Many a morning, before the rest of the household woke, Linda would set a timer and write in 20-minute bursts. She wrote at night and on weekends.

Reading Ann Lamott's "Bird by Bird" inspired Linda. So did the research she did on Italian immigrants who arrived here in the early 20th century.

Reality and imagination intersected like streets in a vast city.

When Linda, now 59, completed what she believed was a book in 2001, 25 agents rejected it.

The 26th fell in love with the manuscript.

Twenty-three publishers turned down the book before Harlequin bought the rights to start a new line of "emotionally complex, long-term relationships, not just a burst of passion. This isn't your mother's Harlequin romance," Linda notes.

On Saturday, she will give a benefit reading at the Philoptochos Society at St. George's Greek Cathedral in Springfield. Later this month, she will sign books at the Barnes & Nobles in Enfield and Holyoke.

During the Christmas season, she and her family stopped at Gate of Heaven Cemetery in her hometown of Mt. Vernon.

She placed a "Dancing" bookmark into the ferns in front of the family headstone, which reads, "Forever in Our Hearts."

"The only disappointment I have about 'Dancing on Sunday Afternoons,' is that my parents, grandmother and Aunt Susie aren't alive to read it," Linda says. "If those letters weren't saved . . ."

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