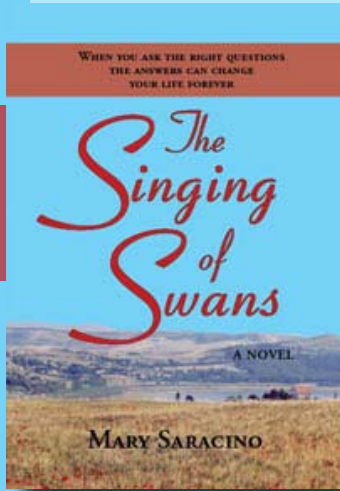


2007 Lambda Literary Award Finalist

The Singing of Swans

MARY SARACINO



WHEN YOU ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS
THE ANSWERS CAN CHANGE
YOUR LIFE FOREVER

THE SINGING OF SWANS takes protagonist Madalene Ross on a multi-century journey back and forth through time to reclaim her soul and her very contemporary American life. Along the way she encounters healers who fly through rooftops, herbalists who paint flaming images of Black Madonnas, an ancient priestess who helps rescue a Goddess statue from the clutches of an evil 70 BCE governor of Sicily, and an environmentally compromised lake in need of restoration. Elements of magical realism dovetail with historical storytelling as this compelling tale of redemption unfolds.



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“Women who fly through the night skies, priestesses who receive initiations, and girls who do vision quests in ancient sacred caves—all this wonderful pagan lore Mary Saracino juxtaposes against an all-too-modern heroine’s chaotic awakening to the deeper purpose of her life. This well-researched page-turner is packed with herbal knowledge, her-story lessons, and a genuine understanding of ancient and contemporary women’s spirituality. Rich and powerful—I hope it will become a movie!”

Vicki Noble

*Shakti Woman: Feeling Our Fire, Healing Our World
& The Double Goddess: Women Sharing Power*
co-creator of *Motherpeace*

“THE SINGING OF SWANS is more than a novel. It combines an immense amount of learning, a great novelist’s ability to weave the present, the past, the far past, and the future into a spell-binding story...and to transmute all this into an offer of life to all of us trapped in contemporary deadening cultures... This novel may give you the courage to quit your dead-end job, book a flight to Italy, and, like Madalene, ‘exhilarated by the possibilities,’ howl ‘at the brilliant blue Sicilian sky.’”

Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum

Dark mother: african origins and godmothers

“The Roman poet Ovid sang of the beautiful Sicilian lake where Persephone descended to the otherworld—a lake now dying from overdevelopment. No siren’s song could be more commanding than this novel centered on that magical lake. Generations of women of the streghe tradition—call them pagans, call them witches—join their voices in this tightly wrought magical chorus.”

Patricia Monaghan

*The Goddess Path &
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“THE SINGING OF SWANS is a remarkable narrative calling—even compelling—us to connect with our own ancestral roots, to seek our own inner wisdom, and to reclaim our own inner voices!”

Margaret Starbird

*The Woman with the Alabaster Jar
& Mary Magdalene: Bride in Exile*

— Author Information — Mary Saracino —



Mary Saracino ♦ Minneapolis, Minnesota
www.marysaracino.com ♦ mary@marysaracino.com

Hometown: Seneca Falls, NY
Occupation: Writer; also teaches creative writing classes and Divine Feminine workshops
Education: B.A. English, The College of St. Catherine, St. Paul, MN; Masters coursework American Studies/Women's Studies, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN
First book: *No Matter What*, a novel (1993, Spinsters Ink)
First published piece: "On Being Italian American: An Introspection", *Sinister Wisdom*, 1990
Interests: Travel, reading, watching independent & foreign films, baking, walking/hiking

Publications

Books

- ♦ *The Singing of Swans*, a novel, Pearlsong Press, Nashville, TN, October 2006.
- ♦ *Voices of the Soft-bellied Warrior: A Memoir*, Spinsters Ink Books, Denver, CO, October 2001.
- ♦ *Finding Grace*, a novel, Spinsters Ink, Duluth, MN, October 1999.
- ♦ *No Matter What*, a novel, Spinsters Ink, Minneapolis, MN, September 1993.

Anthologies

- ♦ "A Talk with the Moon," *Writing by Italian Canadian and Italian American Women*, Fitzhenry & Whiteside (pending, Spring 2008), Gina Valle, Ed.
- ♦ "The Piggly Wiggly and the Black Madonna," *She is Everywhere*, iUniverse (May 2005), Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, Ed.
- ♦ "Ravioli and Rage," *Don't Tell Mama! The Penguin Book of Italian American Writing*, Penguin Books, September 2002, Regina Barreca, Ed.
- ♦ "Smoke and Fire," *The Milk of Almonds: Italian American Women Write about Food and Culture*, The Feminist Press, September 2002, Edvige Giunta and Louise DeSalvo, Eds.
- ♦ Italian translation, excerpt from *No Matter What*, published in *Tuttetorie*, an Italian literary journal, March 2001.
- ♦ "Dusty, the Wonder Dog," *Chicken Soup for the Pre-Teen Soul*, October 2000.
- ♦ "Sunday Rounds," *Hey Paesan! Writings by Lesbians and Gay Men of Italian Descent*, Three Guineas Press, Oakland, California, November 1999, Tommi Aviccolli Mecca, Giovanna Capone, and Denise Leto, Eds.

Literary & Cultural Journals

- ♦ "Red Poppies Among the Ruins," *TRIVIA: Voices of Feminism*, Issue 6, September 2007, www.triviavoices.net.
- ♦ "Valentino, Puglia, & Seneca Falls," *Italian Americana: a cultural and historical review*, Summer 2000, Carol Bonomo Albright, Ed.

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- ◆ “My Italian Aunts,” *Voices in Italian Americana: a literary and cultural review*, Vol. 10, Number 2, 1999, Anthony J. Tamburri, Paolo A. Giordano, and Fred L. Gardaphé, Eds.
- ◆ “On Being Italian-American: An Introspection,” *Sinister Wisdom*, Issue 41, summer 1990, Janet Capone and Denise Leto, guest editors.

Poetry:

- ◆ “It’s a Crying iShame,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, August 10, 2007.
- ◆ “Declaration of Independence,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, July 4, 2007.
- ◆ “Honor Killing,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, June 18, 2007.
- ◆ “Dea Madre della Sardegna,” *OCHRE: Journal of Women’s Spirituality*, Spring 2007.
- ◆ “Olivastri Millenari,” *OCHRE: Journal of Women’s Spirituality*, Spring 2007.
- ◆ “The Mother of Us All,” *OCHRE: Journal of Women’s Spirituality*, Spring 2007.
- ◆ “The Great Silent Gathering of Grandmothers,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, May 13, 2007.
- ◆ “The War on Women,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, May 4, 2007.
- ◆ “Peace Prayer,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, April 22, 2007.
- ◆ “Resurrection,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, April 8, 2007.
- ◆ “Three Thousand and Counting,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, January 12, 2007.
- ◆ “The Hanging,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, January 3, 2007.
- ◆ “Darfur,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, December 14, 2006.
- ◆ “The Fragrance of Flowers,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, September 15, 2006.
- ◆ “Legal Tender,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, August 2006.
- ◆ “How Things Change,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, June 2006.
- ◆ “Derailed,” *The New Verse News Online Journal*, newversenews.com, May 13, 2006.
- ◆ “Lesbian Marriage,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, May 2006.
- ◆ “Mothers Will Make Peace,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, April 30, 2006.
- ◆ “Laying Down the Law,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, March 31, 2006.
- ◆ “Mardi Gras,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, March 1, 2006.
- ◆ “I Spy a Spy,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, February 22, 2006.
- ◆ “Breakfast on Special K Street,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, January 29, 2006.
- ◆ “New Orleans Watermelons,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, January 6, 2006.
- ◆ “Recipe for Yellowcake,” *The New Verse News*, www.newversenews.com, September 2005.
- ◆ “Enforcing the Peace,” *The Pedestal Magazine*, www.thepedestalmagazine.com, October 2004.
- ◆ “Shock & Awe,” *The Pedestal Magazine*, www.thepedestalmagazine.com, October 2004.
- ◆ “My Three Sisters,” www.mothersong.com, October 2004.
- ◆ “My Three Grandmothers,” www.mothersong.com, September 2004.
- ◆ “The Blessings of Ravioli,” *Writers Who Cook*, an anthology of recipes, prose & poetry, Herringbone Press, 1995.

Professional Memberships

- ◆ PEN America, 2002–present
- ◆ National Writers Union, 2001–2005
- ◆ Colorado Authors League, 1999–2007; Board Secretary 2002–2003

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- ◆ American Italian Historical Association, 1998–2004

Honors & Awards

- ◆ 2007, Lambda Literary Awards, Finalist, Spirituality Category, *The Singing of Swans* (Pearlsong Press, 2006).
- ◆ 2005, Writer’s Residency Award, Norcroft: A Writing Retreat for Women.
- ◆ 2000 Salvator & Margaret Bonomo Memorial Prize for Literature, co-winner, for “Valentino, Puglia, & Seneca Falls,” a personal narrative published in *Italian Americana*, Summer 2000.
- ◆ 1999 Colorado Authors’ League “Top Hand Award,” Adult Fiction Mainstream/Literary, *Finding Grace*.
- ◆ 1999 ForeWord Magazine Book of the Year Finalist, Children/Young Adult category, *Finding Grace*.
- ◆ 1995 Writer’s Residency Award, Norcroft: A Writing Retreat for Women.
- ◆ 1994 Minnesota Book Award finalist, fiction category, *No Matter What*.
- ◆ 1991-1992 Loft Mentor Series program participant, fiction category.

Education

- ◆ MA coursework completed, American Studies, 1978–1980, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- ◆ BA, English, 1976, The College of St. Catherine, St. Paul, Minnesota. Elected to Phi Beta Kappa, spring 1976.

Pertinent Book-related Information

For Denver-Area / Colorado

- Mary lived in Denver 1997-January 2009.
- Teaches creative writing classes.
- Worked as a writing tutor at the **Community College of Denver** from January 2003–December 2005.
- Teaches workshops on the Divine Feminine
 - Reclaiming Our Mother
 - Ancient Images/Modern Icons (a hands-on art history/ceramic studio workshop) sponsored by the **Art Students League of Denver**
- All three previous books (*No Matter What*, *Finding Grace*, *Voices of the Soft-bellied Warrior*) were reviewed by the Rocky Mountain News.
- Did a book reading at the renowned independent bookstore The Tattered Cover for *Finding Grace*.

For Minneapolis / St. Paul/Minnesota

- The main character (Madalene Ross) in *The Singing of Swans* lives in Minneapolis.
- Mary lived in the Twin Cities area for 30 years.
- Graduated from North St. Paul High School, North St. Paul, MN.
- Graduated from The College of St. Catherine, St. Paul, MN in 1976 with a BA in English.
- Attended graduate school at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, in the M.A. program in American Studies from 1979–1981, where she began formal studies of women’s spirituality and comparative religion.

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- *No Matter What* (Mary's first novel) was a 1994 fiction finalist in the **Minnesota Book Awards**.
- Accepted into the **1991–1992 Loft Mentor Series program**, where she was mentored by visiting nationally known fiction writers and poets and participated in a reading of her work in progress.
- Twice awarded a writing residency at Norcroft: A Writing Retreat for Women in Lutsen, MN.
- Interviewed by Mary Ann Grossman (books editor, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*) for *Finding Grace*.
- Interviewed by *MN Women's Press* for *Voices of the Soft-bellied Warrior*.
- Public Radio/Wisconsin's Jean Feraca, "Conversations with Jean Feraca," interview for *Voices of the Soft-bellied Warrior*.
- WCCO Radio interview on "The Morning Show" for *Voices of the Soft-bellied Warrior*.
- "Write On Radio," KFAI (independent public radio station) interview for *Finding Grace & Voices of the Soft-bellied Warrior*.

For western New York State & New York City Area

- The main character in *The Singing of Swans* is Italian American.
- Mary was born in Seneca Falls, NY (western NY, Finger Lakes region) and lived there until she was 13.
- She is the daughter of first generation Italian immigrants.
- She was raised Catholic and attended St. Patrick's Parochial School in Seneca Falls, NY.
- Her father and three of her four brothers currently live in western NY.
- Guest speaker at Nancy Caronia's writing class, New Jersey City University, Jersey City, NJ, for *Finding Grace*.
- Guest speaker at Edvige Giunta's memoir writing class, New Jersey City University, Jersey City, NJ, for *Voices of the Soft-bellied Warrior*.
- Reading, 2003 American Italian Historical Association (AIHA) annual conference, Chicago, IL.
- Panel presentation at the 1998 American Italian Historical Association (AIHA) annual conference, Hunter College, New York, NY.
- Reading from *No Matter What*, 1998 AIHA conference evening showcase of writers.

For the Bay Area in California

- *The Singing of Swans* focuses on the Divine Feminine.
- Mary took part in two Dark Mother study tours (2001 to Sicily; 2004 to Sargegna) led by Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, professor in the Women's Studies graduate program at the California Institute of Integral Studies.
- The 2001 Dark Mother Study Tour to Sicily greatly influenced the subject matter of *The Singing of Swans*.
- Spring 2002 guest speaker at Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum's class on the Dark Mother at the California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, CA.
- Mary has been an independent scholar of the Divine Feminine since 1976.
- Teaches workshops on the Divine Feminine in the Denver metro area.

#

The Singing of Swans

A NOVEL

Story Angles

Beyond *The Da Vinci Code*

The questions Dan Brown's bestselling novel *The Da Vinci Code* (and the Ron Howard/Tom Hanks film based on the book) raise about the Divine Feminine represent only the tip of the spiritual iceberg. Long before Mary Magdalene or Jesus Christ walked the Earth, long before God the Father was worshipped as the sole deity on the planet, the peoples of the world venerated a Sacred Mother for hundreds of thousands of years. The Divine Feminine and a woman-centered spirituality are central themes in *The Singing of Swans*. Some of its characters are priestesses of Persephone, herbalists, healers, *streghe* (Italian witches), and worshippers of the pre-Christian Divine Mother. Saracino's novel delves into how the ancient pre-Christian ways were systematically silenced as the new religion of Christianity rose to prominence... as well as the ways pre-Christian worship was integrated into the traditional Church. Saracino is an independent scholar of the Divine Feminine and has taught workshops on the sacred feminine in the Denver, CO area.

What the Bleep...and then some

The current and unprecedented popularity of the independent film *What the Bleep Do We Know?* reflects the public's growing awareness of and interest in non-linear reality. *The Singing of Swans* asks readers to question the concept of solid, linear time-space reality as it interweaves past, present and future into a spiral continuum.

Environmentally endangered lake and eco-feminism

Lake Pergusa, an environmentally endangered body of water near Enna in the center of Sicily, plays a key role in *The Singing of Swans*. The lake figured prominently in ancient mythology and feminine spirituality. In 1958 an auto race track was built around the lake's three-mile perimeter, impacting its viability as a wetland and a nesting spot for migrating birds from all over Europe. Restoring the lake serves as a metaphor in the novel.

Immigration & assimilation issues

Immigration (illegal or legal) makes headline news on a regular basis these days. Assimilation is expected of immigrants, but the loss of cultural identity that can result from joining the "melting pot" is often downplayed. Partway through *The Singing of Swans*, heroine Madalene Ross discovers her family's ethnic heritage; her grandfather had changed his name from Rossolino to assimilate into American culture. By reclaiming her Sicilian roots Madalene is better able to be both American and Sicilian, and feel more whole. Author Mary Saracino is a second-generation Italian American.

Mother-Daughter Relationships

The theme of mother-daughter relationships dovetails with the themes of the Divine Feminine (and the silencing of the Divine Feminine) in *The Singing of Swans*. When heroine Madalene was 10 years old she lost her mother to breast cancer, leaving a hole in her soul. Other mothers and daughters in the novel mirror the positive power of the mother-daughter relationship. How does honoring the Divine Mother (or the lack of that honoring) affect the quality of mother-daughter relationships?

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joannemorgan@pearlsong.com | www.pearlsong.com

Summary

The Singing of Swans takes protagonist Madelene Ross on a multi-century journey back and forth through time to reclaim her soul and her very contemporary American life. Along the way she encounters healers who fly through rooftops, herbalists who paint flaming images of Black Madonnas, an ancient priestess who helps rescue a Goddess statue from the clutches of an evil 70 BCE governor of Sicily, and an environmentally compromised lake in need of restoration. Elements of magical realism dovetail with historical lore as this compelling tale of redemption unfolds.

Advance Praise

“*The Singing of Swans* is a remarkable narrative calling—even compelling—us to connect with our own ancestral roots, to seek our own inner wisdom, and to reclaim our own inner voices!”

—Margaret Starbird

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“Women who fly through the night skies, priestesses who receive initiations, and girls who do vision quests in ancient sacred caves—all this wonderful pagan lore Mary Saracino juxtaposes against an all-too-modern heroine’s chaotic awakening to the deeper purpose of her life. This well-researched page-turner is packed with herbal knowledge, her-story lessons, and a genuine understanding of ancient and contemporary women’s spirituality. Rich and powerful—I hope it will become a movie!”

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Dark mother: African origins and godmothers

“The Roman poet Ovid sang of the beautiful Sicilian lake where Persephone descended to the underworld—a lake now dying from overdevelopment. No siren’s song could be more commanding than this novel centered on that magical lake. Generations of women of the *streghe* tradition—call them pagans, call them witches—join their voices in this tightly-wrought magical chorus.”

—Patricia Monaghan

The Goddess Path & The Red-Haired Girl from the Bog

Author Biography

Mary Saracino lives in Denver, Colorado. She is a novelist, memoir writer, poet, and independent scholar of the Sacred Feminine. Mary’s first novel, *No Matter What*, was a 1994 Minnesota Book Award Fiction finalist. Her second novel, *Finding Grace*, won the Colorado Authors’ League 1999 Top Hand Award in the Adult Fiction/Mainstream Literary category. Her memoir, *Voices of the Soft-bellied Warrior*, was published in 2001 by Spinsters Ink. Mary’s work has been published in a variety of literary and cultural journals, both online and print, as well as in the anthologies *She is Everywhere*, *The Milk of Almonds*, *Don’t Tell Mama*, and *Hey Paesan!*

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The Singing of Swans

A NOVEL

by Mary Saracino

Suggested Interview Questions

1. The Divine Feminine & women's spirituality are central themes in *The Singing of Swans*. You present several ways in which women's spiritual traditions were silenced—sometimes brutally. Are these events historically accurate? Are there any ways in which women's spiritual traditions continue to be silenced in contemporary culture? If so, in what ways?
2. What do you mean by “Divine Feminine” or “Sacred Feminine?” By “women's spirituality?”
3. An environmentally endangered lake plays a role in the novel. Is this a real lake? What's the story behind it?
4. What does the title “The Singing of Swans” mean?
5. *The Singing of Swans* is a big departure from your previous work. How and why did you make that creative shift?
6. In the novel, you present the stories of several women at different times in history—and at different times in their lives. The tale of one woman, Rosalina, an ancient priestess of Persephone, is even presented in reverse chronological order. Why did you structure the novel in this way?
7. What is a *Benandante*? *Malandante*? *Streghe*? Did you invent these terms, or are they a real part of Italian life and folklore?
8. Altered states of reality and magical realism are woven into the fabric of this novel—from the dreams of the contemporary heroine, Madalene, to the “night rider” battles of the 16th century *Benandante*, Ziza. In what other ways does the novel invite readers to question the concept of solid, linear reality?
9. The cover of the book says “If you ask the right questions, the answers can change your life forever.” What do you mean by that?

#

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The Singing of Swans

A NOVEL

Mary Saracino

Book Group Guide

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Author Biography

Mary Saracino lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She is a novelist, memoir writer, poet, and independent scholar of the Sacred Feminine. Mary's first novel, *No Matter What*, was a 1994 Minnesota Book Award Fiction finalist. Her second novel, *Finding Grace*, won the Colorado Authors' League 1999 Top Hand Award in the Adult Fiction/Mainstream Literary category. Her memoir, *Voices of the Soft-bellied Warrior*, was published in 2001 by Spinsters Ink. Mary's work has been published in a variety of literary and cultural journals, both online and print, as well as in the anthologies *She is Everywhere*, *The Milk of Almonds*, *Don't Tell Mama*, and *Hey Paesan!*

Topics to Consider

Madalene isn't close with her immediate family members. Discuss why Madalene feels cut off from her father, her sister, and her brother. How has this alienation shaped Madalene's life?

When Madalene learns the mystery of her grandfather Carl's name change, her view of her family and its history begins to change. What role does her aunt Marie play in Madalene's decision to go to Sicily?

What is Madalene's relationship to her career? Why did she choose the career path she is on?

What behaviors and attitudes does Madalene exhibit that reveal the nature of her relationships with her co-workers? How does this mirror the way she relates to the world in general?

What role does Lake Pergusa play in the novel?

The two lake-related chapters are written in first-person point-of-view while the remainder of the novel is in third person point-of-view. What is the significance of this shift in viewpoint?

Julia and Iside are both strong supporters for restoring Lake Pergusa to its original splendor. What does Madalene learn from their advocacy?

What is the meaning of the novel's title, "The Singing of Swans," with regard to Lake Pergusa?

Rosalina's story is told in reverse chronological order. What is the significance of this?

Mother-daughter relationships play an important role in the novel. How does Madalene's relationship with her mother differ from Ziza's relationship with Carmela? From Ibla's relationship with Fiora?

When Madalene was 10 years old, she lost her mother to breast cancer. How did this loss affect her? In what ways does her transformation heal that loss?

The Divine Feminine & women's spirituality are central themes in the novel. Discuss the historical ways that women's spiritual traditions were silenced. In what ways do they continue to be silenced in contemporary culture?

How do the ancient lives of Rosalina, Ziza and Ibla affect Madalene's contemporary life? What important messages do each of these characters bring to Madalene?

Altered states of reality and magical realism are woven into the fabric of this novel—from Madalene's dreams to Ziza's Benandante night rider battles. In what other ways does the novel invite readers to question the concept of solid, linear reality?

The *Benandanti* and the *Malandanti* wage battles over the prosperity of their community and its people. What role does the struggle between the forces of good and evil play in the novel?

Ibla's tongue is severed, yet she continues to proclaim what is in her heart. How do each of the novel's other main characters find ways to speak their truths despite great challenges?

Fiora and Ibla inspire the members of their villages to unite against the oppression of the *padrone*, Signore Martelli. In what other ways are the themes of justice and equality illustrated in the novel?

The homeless woman with the red beret remains an enigma until the end of the novel. What is her connection to Julia? How does the old woman help transform Madalene's life?

The homeless woman repeatedly asks Madalene, "Gotta match?" What is the underlying meaning of this question?

The name of the homeless woman is identified at the novel's end. What is her spiritual and familial relationship to Madalene, Ziza, Rosalina, Ibla and Fiora?

What role does Madalene's great-grandfather, Vincenzo, play in her transformation?

Past and present are interwoven in this story. In what ways does this continuum act as a spiral rather than a straight line? Why is that important?

#

An excerpt from
The Singing of Swans BY MARY SARACINO

CHAPTER I

Night Rider

THE NIGHT SKY HELD NO MOON as Ziza pushed through the roof of her house and soared into the stark blackness. A gust of wind became her wings, pushing her up and up above the slumbering sounds of her small village, Caneva, in Friuli—a province tucked away in the northeastern corner of a country that would someday be known as Italy.

Far below, beneath an inky darkness, only the occasional stray cat peered up from the cobblestones, twitching its tail in anticipation of a passing mouse. Ziza's neighbors snored in their beds. Her husband, Aldo DeSante, tossed and turned, unaware that while his wife's body lay beside him, her spirit traveled elsewhere. She promised to return before the stroke of five to ensure that death would not claim her mortal limbs. Her children were lost in complicated dreams, and her mother, Carmela, nursing a bout of insomnia, sat before the family's ancestral Lare altar, next to the cold hearth in the corner of their small home. She alone knew that Ziza had been called away on official business.

It was cold that Thursday night in the midst of the Ember days of fasting. A sharp wind howled fiercely down the alleyways that third week of September in the year 1575, foreshadowing a long, frigid winter, but Ziza felt nothing of the chill, for her body was as vaporous as air. Light and porous, she flew past the church steeple, the shops that lined the piazza, and over the well in the center of her village. Dense clouds hovered over the land; no stars shone to guide her, but still Ziza kept on. She levitated above the tiled rooftops, pausing a moment to determine if the others were ready, as well. From the darkened bell tower an owl hooted, signaling for her to proceed.

At the edge of town Ziza joined Lucia, Pietro, Sophia, Antonio, and Filaberta. Without a word, the night riders veered west and south, toward the wheat fields on a stony ridge two miles outside of town. There amid acres of bearded grain the others waited. There, during this time between solstices, this midnight of the autumn Ember Days, they would enact the ritual.

The wind bellowed as the cadre of journeyers sped over roads and rivers, byways and stone fences, olive trees and vineyards. Ziza's tangle of snaky dark tresses swirled around her face as she raced through the night sky. The night smelled of damp grass and wet soil, for the rain had pummeled the countryside earlier that evening. The omen had been favorable, and Ziza knew in her bones that after midnight the battle would begin. A victory was possible, if their hearts were pure enough and focused on the welfare of their townspeople.

Ziza and her nocturnal fellows were keepers of the blood ways, guardians of justice and compassion, trustees of spirit and breath. They were shamans, healers, seers, midwives, oracles, herbalists, astral travelers, and earthly angels of mercy. Born remembering the Old Ways, the ancient customs and mores of the Dark Mother, they were charged with ensuring bountiful goodness. Their task was not always easy.

At birth each had been marked by the ancient sign of the *Streghe*—their faces were covered with their birth caul. Word spread among the elder *Streghe*, who soon gathered and rejoiced, making votive offerings to the Great Mother. Gingerly they removed the afterbirth and baked it under the scorching sun. When it had properly withered, they formed the translucent skin into an amulet. This sacred talisman was worn, like holy lei, around each child's neck. It served to ward off harm and to remind them always of their special powers, for they could choose to beget good or evil. The difference was not always clear.

There would be a traditional Catholic baptism for these babies, for the *Streghe* also practiced the ways of the Church, more for safekeeping than for reverence. They answered to a different God; one who was both dark-skinned and female, one whose status had long ago been usurped by the Holy Fathers in Rome.

Through centuries, the Streghe had kept alive the mysteries of the Dark One. They wore their Christian faith like a cloak, protecting them from inclement seasons of witch hunts, stormy cries of heresy, and other such fanaticism.

Long before the holy waters of the cathedral touched the brows of these blessed Streghe babies, Ziza, and the other chosen ones, were anointed into the cadre of *Benandanti*. Their mothers held them close as the elder Streghe invoked the power of the Great Mother. They strung the sun-dried remnant of their child's birth caul on a stand of thick purple thread and placed it around the babies' tiny necks. They vowed to teach these children all they needed to know in order to fulfill their duties and experience the ripening of their gifts. As the

Madalene sat for a moment in one of the church's wooden pews and closed her eyes. Julia's stories about Sicily and its history reverberated inside her head. She felt as if she were being given something as nourishing and precious as food, something for which she had hungered for a long time, without knowing that she craved such sustenance. Madalene opened her eyes when Julia gently touched her shoulder.

"There is something here you must see," she said.

Madalene followed Julia to an alcove in the back of the Cathedral. Affixed to a red marble wall hung a painting of the Blessed Mother holding the Christ Child. The Virgin's head was draped in a veil of dark blue. She wore a red tunic and upon her lap sat her son, Jesus, also dressed in clothes of red. Her skin was the color of espresso....

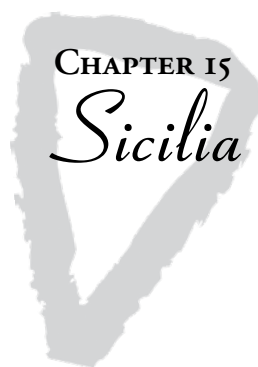
"This is a Byzantine painting of the Black Madonna," Julia explained.

"Why is she black?" Madalene asked...

"There are many theories, of course. But I believe that she is the Christian representation of the Divine Mother, the Dea Madre. The first Divinity known to human kind was both dark-skinned and female. For millennia she was worshipped as the giver of and taker of life. She is known by many names, depending on the cultures in which she was revered. Some, like the Phoenicians, called her Tanit. In west Asia, She was called Cybele. In Egypt, Isis. In the Middle East,

children grew older, they would more completely understand the tasks and obligations to which they had been called.

During the twentieth year of their lives, each *Benandante* was paid a visit during the wee hours of night. The spectral caller entered in darkness when no one stirred and the town was deep in slumber. This Night Guardian, sometimes an experienced Benandante from the village, sometimes a spirit from another plane of existence, appeared to summon the young initiate. "The time has arrived," announced this Wayshower. The long awaited summons had been issued. This night they would rise and embrace the ways of the Benandanti. This night they would be required to fulfill their sacred duties.



Innana, or Astarte or Ishtar. In Sicily she was Persephone, Proserpina or Demeter. She stood for justice with compassion. She is the giver of law and culture. Grain and language. As the Christians became the more dominant force, culturally and politically, she became known as the Black Madonna, Christ's mother. It was one of the ways the authorities could make the new religion more palatable to the conquered. The Virgin became no longer a god but the mother of god. Her skin was lightened through the centuries, as well, but in some places she remains dark-skinned. And where she is thus revered, she is deeply loved by the peasants and the people who have long been oppressed."

"Sort of like Martin Luther King, Jr. Ché. Or Ghandi, eh?"

"Sort of. Yes. Whether you believe in her divinity or not she is a powerful symbol, a metaphor for people left out of the dominant culture, the oppressed. She is the patron of the silenced, the keeper of subaltern reality. She speaks to and for the people who hold the knowledge and memory of the story beneath the story."

..."There's just so much I never knew," Madalene said aloud to no one in particular.

"There is so much they don't want you to know," Julia said. "Because if you knew it, you would never be able to live your life in the same way again."

The Singing of Swans by Mary Saracino
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Fiction Review: The Singing of Swans

by [Dahti Blanchard](#)

The Singing of Swans
 Mary Saracino
 Pearlsong Press (October 2006)

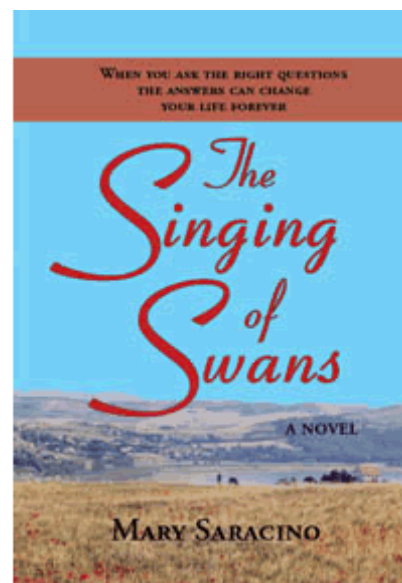
There is a lake, of waters clear and deep
 Not far from the walls of Enna, called Pergus.
 Even Cayster never heard
 Such singing of swans, so many have nested
 here;
 With dark branches, a wood gives shade,
 Encircling the lake as though to defend it;
 Here flowers always bloom, winter never falls,
 Here eternal spring smiles.

These words from Ovid's "Metamorphoses" grace the second page of *The Singing of Swans*, Mary Saracino's lovely novel of a thoroughly modern woman, Madalene Ross, who has no time for either thoughts of eternal smiles or a singing of swans. The first page holds a dedication to "...the Dark Mother, humankind's first deity, our most ancient memory." It is Madalene's reluctant encounter with the Dark Mother and how She leads to that special place where one can hear the singing of swans that form the crux of this story.

Saracino deftly takes the reader between times and weaves the stories of several women tied together in a line that calls to Madalene, though she fights the call, certain that she must, quite simply, be going bonkers.

Madalene, also known as Maddie, is frightened by and tries to avoid a mysterious bag lady who keeps stopping her on the street and asking her if she has a match. Maddie is also having strange dreams she doesn't understand or want. Dreams "...full of women who said and did strange, unpredictable things: women of magic who flew through the air, walked through walls, and defied the laws of nature in countless ways. Women who concocted liniments and teas from strange and unusual plants. Women who chanted weird songs and cradled terra cotta statues in their hands; women who screamed in stonewalled courtyards in a countryside of rolling hills and fields filled with wild, red poppies — a landscape Madalene did not recognize."

As a "sensible" workaholic with no social life, she dismisses the dreams as "something she ate" until the bag lady accosts her one too many times and says,



"My daughter, do not be concerned with all that you are seeing with your dream eyes. They are coming for you. Your sisters are returning. Your Mother wants to talk to you. Listen and you will know what to do." Maddie has no intention of listening — to the crazy old woman or her dreams. But fate steps in and Maddie embarks on an unexpected journey to Sicily, carrying with her a small statue of a dark Madonna that was hidden away in her family's mementos. While there, Madalene discovers many things about the place, the people and herself.

This is not just the story of Madalene Ross, however. The author does a wonderful job of painting a complete picture of the women who are Madalene's "sisters." We come to learn of each of the characters: their lives, thoughts, joys, fears and pain as if we're right there with them, though they and Maddie are separated by time.

Saracino also manages to convey a message that resonates for us in the real present without the unwelcome preachiness that a less talented author might fall into. This is one of those rare, lovely works of fiction that touches on past injustices, ecology, healing and women's spirituality, while managing to keep the reader engaged and entertained throughout.

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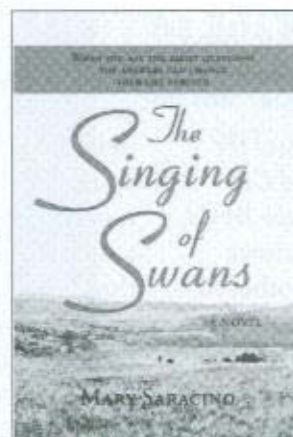
her truths as poignant questions. The complex feminine characters presented in this novel provide evocative renderings of the triple Goddess: Maiden, Mother, and Crone.

In this classic feminist novel, Cunningham gently and skillfully gives voice to the insecurities and ignorance of men, as represented by both Adam and his young son, who secretly long to possess the magic of women. Adam typifies the lust and possessiveness of mankind as he tries to imprison Lilith, the wild spirit-woman. His personality had me gasping with recognition of my own experiences at the hands of dominating and thoughtless men. His cruelties and blindness to the women in his life will surely awaken memories within all who read this wondrous tale.

The Wild Mother contains all the elements of "every woman's" story. Cunningham's powerful retelling of the story of Adam, Eve, and Lilith is so passion-filled and compelling that I plan to share this book with all the women in my life. KATHLEEN Y. RATTIGAN.

The Singing of Swans
 Mary Saracino
 Pearlsong Press, 2006

Inspired by the work of Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, author of *Black Madonnas* and *dark mother* [sic], *The Singing of Swans* is a complex, sometimes disturbing, sometimes enchanting fairy tale about a long line of Sicilian women who worship the Divine She, as they sometimes call the Black Mother of us all. Though the story centers on four women, it does not move chronologically but weaves and braids their individual stories until



they come together in a shamanic initiation at the end.

Ziza, who lives in the late 16th century, is a strega — herbalist, healer, and midwife, but not a witch as (the author repeatedly points out) the Catholic hierarchy defines witches. As a member of the Benandante, Ziza flies out of body at night to join others in the battle against evil. Madalene Ross is a modern woman — a type-A, caffeine-addicted, totally secular systems analyst who starts having weird dreams and mysterious encounters with a homeless woman who keeps asking, "Got a match?" and urges her to "go to the lake." The lake is Lake Pergusa, the lake in the center of Sicily that has been sacred for thousands of years and also becomes a character in the book. The lake speaks in Chapter 12 and again in Chapter 20, where she/it repeats what we just learned in Chapter 19: that she/it has become polluted and needs our help. (Readers can learn more about the Lake Pergusa Restoration Project at http://pages.sbcglobal.net/mrigoglioso/eng_home.html.)

Rosalina is a priestess of Persephone during the years of the Roman Republic. Vociferously steadfast in her belief, she is murdered by the Roman tyrant who owns most of the island at the time. Ibla D'Angelo, who lives in the late 18th century, is equally devoted to the Black Madonna

and, despite threats, never stops speaking of Her — for which her tongue is cut out. But Ibla continues to speak through her paintings.

Like the peoples of South and Central America who created a

syncretic Catholicism that combines the old religion with the new, the women of Sicily become Catholics on the surface while still working for their goddess. Ibla's mother, Fiora, for example, makes the sign of the cross before she begins a treatment. She understands that

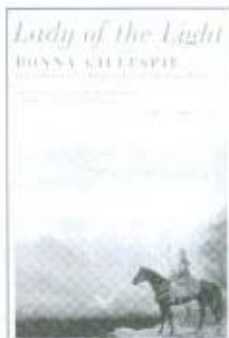
hers was a different way and [her patients] would brand her a heretic if they suspected her true allegiance. They might even refuse treatment when they needed her medicine the most. ... As she prayed their Catholic prayers, she invoked, as well, the healing powers of the Divine She. Fiora completed each healing session with a rosary, a long supplication to the Black Madonna whom she revered in Her non-Christian guise. To Fiora, Spirit was Spirit (p. 83).

The importance of *The Singing of Swans* is that it presents both history and our foundational myths in an accessible format. Like other novels centering on the Goddess, this book also demonstrates why the mainstream publishers need to catch on to the fact that there is an audience for our literature. Many of our novelists are forced to go to small or on-demand presses that do valiant work but just don't have the quality control that we usually find in larger publishers. Let us hope that books like *The Singing of Swans* find wide audiences so that the lessons they teach will bring readers back to the Divine She.

BARBARA ARDINGER.

Lady of the Light
Donna Gillespie
Berkeley, 2006

Did you love
The Mists of Avalon,
and Elizabeth
Cunningham's recent



books in the *The Maeve Chronicles*? Or, do you simply love a riveting yarn comprised of equal parts myth, women's herstory, self-reflection, pre-Christian Roman and Germanic history, and magic? If so, you are in for a treat when you discover *Lady of the Light* (and its predecessor, *The Lightbearer*) two of the most stunning, mature, and intelligent historical/magical novels I have ever read.

Lady of the Light is set in first century Rome and Germanica, and a great deal of my pleasure in reading it came from immersing myself in that long-lost kalidescope of cultures; but its themes — the cost of love, the weaving of destiny, and the way our choices have unexpected consequences — are as contemporary as today's headline news. I found myself compellingly engrossed in the conflicts and decisions faced by the feisty heroine Aurelia — the middle-aged mother of an unruly teen as well as a sulky pre-teen — who finds her domestic tranquility destroyed by the swirling maelstrom of historical events. Aurelia, like most great heroines, is larger-than-life, especially in her battle heroics (anyone who wanted more "warrior" in our recent "warrior goddess" issue will want to read this book right away!) but the fantasy elements never become fantastical, and serve to heighten the intensity of her experiences, not to make them less real. My only regret on finishing *Lady of the Light* (and its prequel, which I likewise devoured in short order) was that I now have to wait for the third volume of the trilogy to be written. (It's a bit like waiting for the penultimate course of a gourmet meal.) This is simply one of the best "Goddess novels" I've ever read.

ANNE NEWKIRK NIVEN.

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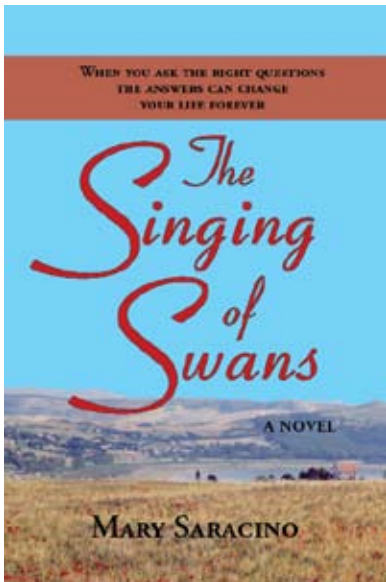
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The Singing Of Swans Named a Finalist in the 19th Annual Lambda Literary Awards!



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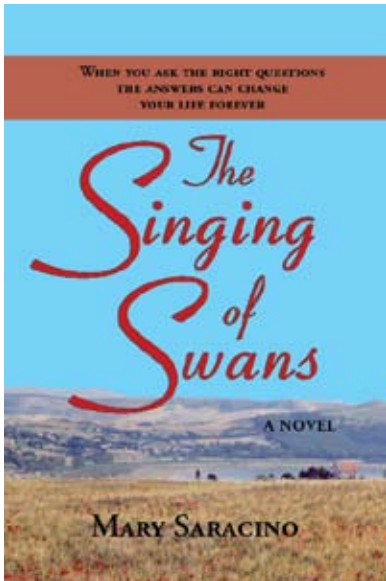
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