

Bridge of Love: a Story of Young Love, Immigration, Family, Hope by Christine Palamidessi. Letters translated by Roberto Romeo. 2020. 114pp.

Review by Carol Bonomo Albright

This is one of the most beautiful Italian-American books that I have seen. The book tells its story in 32 letters (presented in the original Italian with their translation on facing pages) by two young Italian lovers, separated by an ocean, trying to forge a union that will last. The book also has a brief, charming historical introduction as well as an afterword. With its glossy paper, striking collages by the author, its photographs of the people involved and, with their muted tones, the documents needed to emigrate, it presents a unique tale of two characters in all their complexity. Despite their limited education, Pia and Angiolino write sophisticated letters in their graceful Italian script. Their words uncover the psychological aspects of not only their own personalities but also of all the pressures connected with emigration.

The time is the last two months of 1919 to October 12, 1920. Angiolino, now twenty-eight, has emigrated to America. Pia, nineteen years old, is concerned about Angiolino's not showing up to meet her when she arrives in America. This is a fairly constant refrain. Part of her concern is that she and Angiolino don't know each other very well. In the back of her mind may also be her awareness that Angiolino, a handsome man with a confident bearing, who survived a war in which so many men died, would be a real "catch." Her reality is that half a million people died in World War I and almost another million were wounded. When he was in Italy, he had been popular with many women, and now in America he is earning a good wage, working in the mines—a job he never complains about. He says he is well paid and has money for an emergency (83).

The couple had met at a dance. Pia too shows herself to be self-confident. One photo shows her with her hand on her hip. Other photos show her as having the same dignified bearing that matches Angiolino's. From our remove, we can see a couple well matched. But Pia doesn't have the luxury of hindsight.

They must deal with obtaining all the documents needed for emigration. And there are a great many of them: first there is the passport, then there is the deed of expatriation, which Angiolino must obtain in New York City, affirming that he will marry Pia on her arrival, and that, if there are problems, he will pay for her return trip to Italy. The document must be notarized. Once completed, he will mail it to Pia in Italy. This particular document demonstrates the interdependent and cooperative network of Italian immigrants. Angiolino relied on friends in New York to find the consulate and a notary as well as a place to stay.

Then there is the criminal record certificate which Pia obtains in nearby Lucca, which verifies that she does not have a criminal record. The latter document is not surprising when we remember the anti-immigrant feelings welling up in America at that time—an America that four years later passes a law greatly restricting immigration for Italians (and others) to less than 4,000 a year, when almost a million Italians a year had been pouring in.

The couple must also provide their baptismal records to prove that they have not been married before and therefore are free to marry. In getting a visa for Pia, Angiolino must overcome many obstacles, such as missing a day's work twice. But even before his arrival in America, Angiolino realizes that very many people wanted to leave, because it was difficult for him to book passage on a boat in Naples (35, 37). Pia's mother doesn't want her to emigrate to such a distant country because she knows in her bones that she will never see her daughter again.

Pia tells Angiolino that she had heard that his mother wants him to marry a woman of her choosing, a refugee (87), and that she also wrote to Angiolino that Pia had been running around town with other men (89). Pia is surprised by this and denies the gossip. "With me she [her future mother-in-law] is lovely, so friendly" (87). Showing Pia's innate kindness and her ability to control her emotions, she continues to remain kind to Angiolino's mother. Besides, she may have to travel to America with her and, once there, to live with her. Pia knows that it is in her own best interests to get along with his mother.

Pia urges Angiolino not to believe the gossip about her going out with other men (87). He too doesn't let his emotions run away with him. He responds that "if you are not sure about your good feelings for me, there is still time to change your mind" (71). For his part, he too needs reassurance about her commitment to him. He wants a love match with someone who will have faith in him (101).

When Angiolino tells her that he can get angry, she responds that "we all have our little faults. I am not very sweet either." But if we love each other, "we will know how to behave" (81). Such maturity for a nineteen-year-old.

Their (what we nowadays call) communication skills are excellent. Pia writes, "Angiolino, in our life I will tell you everything. With each other we will get rid of thoughts that upset our minds" (27). At another time, she asks him for forgiveness for some mistake she made when they last saw each other. He writes, "Yes, I have forgiven you for everything because I love you too much, and," no pushover he, "I saw that you were really sorry" (41). On mundane matters they agree to disagree on their different perspectives on 'wealth,' as Angiolino refers to the issue (101).

They are also playful with each other and affectionate as well as expressing touching assertions of their deep love for each other. Pia requests his photo. He asks, "Do you believe that I have become more handsome or better dressed since I

left? If so you would be wrong” (69). He also writes that he is not “so attractive” (69). Of her love, Pia writes, “. . . if only you knew how much I look forward to seeing you again and being forever with you” (81). But ever practical and standing up for herself, she adds, “I will respect you as well, especially if you will be good to me” (81).

Accompanying these charming letters are the expressive collages done by Angiolino’s granddaughter, artist and author Christine Palamidessi, who put this book together. The art work acts as a meditation on all that we are learning about Pia, Angiolino and their two worlds. It is distinguished by reminiscences of Modigliani, Chirico, classicism, and Italian Futurism with the ‘grammar’ of the American eagle and the Statue of Liberty.

One of them, on a background of what is Pompeian red, shows flowers and orange halves along with two books and repeated images of classical statues. The books represent their curiosity; the flowers, their love; and the oranges—a common motif in Italian-American literature (see Helen Barolini’s novel *Umbertina*)--which they only received in reality at Christmas, if they were lucky (9).

Another collage (10) is more dire: it shows a figure that reminds one of the devil next to fractured, chaotic images, emphasizing the problems—food shortages, political instability and social conflict--existing in Italy at this time. It also suggests Pia’s conflicting concerns about Angiolino’s not meeting her in America. And let’s not forget that the flu pandemic was also raging at this time. These are all issues that the young couple must deal with.

In a collage in black and white, with bits of color highlighting certain images, we see a sarcophagus (17). In the context of a couple who wish to marry, the sarcophagus reminds one of a hope-chest. While the sarcophagus is highly decorated on the outside, hope chests aren’t, but what rests within, are Pia’s intricately embroidered linens.

Another striking collage (25) has numerous images within an explosion of colors so common in many of the works: reds, yellows and oranges. The cacophonous collage of post-World War I images and family photos—the ubiquitous image of Pia with her hand on her hip is shown here—suggests the migration not only of a people, but of objects and ideas. It shows an experience marked by fragmentation, i.e., of leaving one’s homeland, with the feel of the 1920’s American jazz age along with industrialization, the ideal of marriage and its myths, modern and surreal images alongside remnants of antiquity.

Pia stands next to yellow flowers—yellow, representing her just completed adventure; she stands on top of pink flowers that represent the bloom of young love. Angiolino is in the corner supported by an American flag. A baby may be on

the way, the couple is on the move. But, in the center of the collage is a woman with her face in her hands. She is sad. She has left her home.

A striking collage is at the very beginning of the book (2). It shows a black and white photo of Pia's family, set against an explosion of colors with bits of Renaissance stone edifices, saints, hermits and angels. These images represent Pia's culture and all that she is leaving, but it has made her as strong as the stone, so prevalent in her world. The story ends with their most joyous reunion that leaves one with a smile on one's face—a smile perhaps reminiscent of the Mona Lisa: the mystery within lives on.

The book can be obtained at one of the following links:

<https://www.palamidessi.com/new-book-bridge-of-love> or on the website www.palamidessi.com under 'NEW BOOK Bridge of Love.
