

# AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANK G. PACI

C. D. Minni

FRANK G. PACI is the most prolific and best-known Canadian writer of Italian origin. He is the author of three novels of the immigrant experience. All of them are set in Sault Ste. Marie, where the men work in the steel plant, and in Toronto, to which some of the children escape. *The Italians* explores the disturbing feelings of ambivalence so typical of immigrants, as the characters re-define their relationship with “the new land” and with one another. The enigmatic *Black Madonna* focuses on the conflicts between parents and children in an immigrant home where the generation gap becomes a canyon because of culture clash. *The Father*, the first novel of a projected trilogy, develops further the themes of the earlier books.

MINNI: To begin, Frank, tell us something about yourself.

PACI: I was born in 1948 in Pesaro on the Adriatic coast in the Marches region of Italy. My family lived in the hinterland, which comprises valleys and hills that are dotted with villages and medieval castles. My mother emigrated when I was four, my father having preceded us. We took up roots in the Italian section of Sault Ste. Marie, close to the steel plant and the Soo canal. The Sault is a small city in Northern Ontario, virtually at the juncture of Lake Superior and Lake Huron. Needless to say, it was very far from what my parents had been used to in Italy.

I led a fairly contented childhood in the working-class neighbourhood. It consisted mainly of playing games, which I was fairly good at. All very unlitrary and uneventful. In 1967 I went to the University of Toronto. For four years during the summers I worked in the steel plant in the Sault in various departments. I started to write while at university, took a Creative Writing course with Dave Godfrey, and had the good fortune to have Margaret Laurence as writer-in-residence the same year. Her kind interest kindled the spark. After I came back to Toronto to do more university work, I began writing on the side and found that it was much more exciting writing novels than talking about them in school. So I withdrew from university and wrote with a vengeance. I didn't know what I was actually getting myself into. I took the stance: I'm going to do this or die in the process. For eight years I collected rejection slips. I wanted to be a writer so bad — I had the images, the stories, and the pretensions, but I didn't have the language or the humility.

Eventually I had to bring myself back to the ground. I went back to school, taught high school in Sault Ste. Marie, and got married. *The Italians*, my first published novel, came out in 1978. In 1980 I threw caution to the wind again and went back up in the clouds — *la testa nelle nuvole*, my mother calls it. I tried to write full time. *Black Madonna* came out in 1982, *The Father* in 1984. I'm still trying to be a writer.

MINNI: What brought you to your subject?

PACI: In 1972, twenty years after my family had emigrated, I went back to Italy — my first and only trip back so far. I didn't realize it at the time, but this trip was the catalyst that finally made me see that I had to come to terms with my Italian background before I could write about anything else. Before and after the trip I had written five novels that no one wanted to publish. The trip dramatically impressed upon me the wide gulf between the Canadian and the Italian cultures and the depth of my heritage, which I had been too naïve and stupid to appreciate. The trip also made me appreciate my parents. For the first time I began to see them clearly. Beforehand I had only seen them in the context of Northern Ontario Canada, if you know what I mean. Seeing them from the Italian context completed the picture, so to speak. When I started to write *The Italians* I had in the back of my mind to celebrate my parents and others like them, to thank them for what they had done. This opened up a wealth of deep feeling that I had never handled in the other books.

MINNI: Are you saying that you have a need to write about your Italo-Canadian background, a sense perhaps that things should not be lost, like that of the pioneers who kept diaries for their children to read?

PACI: Yes, there was a need to preserve the accomplishments of my parents, with the accent on "serve." I had the voice which they didn't have. It's this very sense of preserving that acts as a catharsis, because as you're writing the story of your parents you're also coming to terms with your background and defining yourself in a historical context. Also, in the very act of writing fiction — that is, in literally becoming the characters and things you're writing about — you see real-life people and things more as they are. This is the humility I spoke about before — a humility that produces compassion.

MINNI: Writing, then, is a form of catharsis for you. Was your childhood painful?

PACI: I didn't have a painful childhood, but I did have a painful adolescence. My secure and contented world came tumbling down because of certain events that cut me off from everything that had nurtured me. I wouldn't be surprised if most writers have some sort of inner or outer wound that spurs them to engage in such a lonely and financially unrewarding a vocation as writing. Maybe this

phrase from Hegel goes some way in explaining it: "The hand that inflicts the wound is also the hand that heals it." He was speaking of the wound caused by Adam's Fall. Also, of course, we all want to be loved and accepted in our own way.

MINNI: There seems to be a common thread to Italo-Canadian literature. Various writers, working in isolation and unaware of one another, have been saying the same things, even sometimes using similar images and metaphors.

PACI: Only after writing *The Italians* did I see that there were a few others writing about the same themes. I was as isolated as anyone. It was a pleasant surprise, as if I had discovered a few others on the lifeboat with me. But when I met a few of these people I was disappointed to discover that their sensibilities were as foreign to me as anyone else's.

Of course, since vision or metaphor is based on lived experience and there's much that is common to all immigrant experience, there will be some sort of similarity in the images and themes that we use.

MINNI: Is Italo-Canadian literature a form of exile literature, or a native variety?

PACI: I don't think in terms of Italo-Canadian literature, or exile, or native literature. I don't even think in terms of literature. I think in terms of the deep ontological problems of human beings, and of certain characters in certain contexts. I think of the extremely difficult task of making people live, and of creating a concrete, believable world. I think in terms of capturing that indefinable magic that sweeps me along during composition and that comes so rarely. I think in terms of how boring ordinary life is after experiencing the intensity of writing. And, for that matter, how boring writing is in comparison with the joys of real living. Conceptualizations like "Italo-Canadian" literature are all right as handy terms to use after the fact, and I may have used it myself in certain contexts, but I've never seen myself as an Italo-Canadian writer.

MINNI: Your three novels all ask the same question: Who am I? Must Canadians look overseas for the answer, for their identity? There is a strong suggestion of this in *Black Madonna*, especially for the children, Marie and Joey Barone. But the fact seems true for the parents also. In *The Italians*, Alberto Gaetano has ambivalent feelings about his memories "of the other country, of the other life."

PACI: It goes without saying that Canadians of Italian descent should look overseas to get a more complete sense of their identities. Everyone is a historical creature and must look for his identity in the events that have shaped him. It's not only a question of identity. It's an ontological question. In *Black Madonna* Marie tries to deny her Italian past. She feels superior to the peasant ways of her mother. Yet this is ambivalent because, no matter how hard she tries, she really can't

deny the emotional basis of what has nurtured her without being deeply scarred herself. This is the irony. The past, no matter how one tries to deny it intellectually, constitutes the emotional fabric of one's being. Alberto Gaetano's fond memories of his past life in Italy present a striking contrast to his work in the steel plant. But this is his sacrifice. He has left the emotional well-being of Italy for the economic security of the new world — mostly for his children. This is a variation of one of the themes that interests me — the disparity between the head and the heart.

MINNI: Alberto Gaetano in *The Italians* feels “lost outside the confines of his work and his home.” The same is true of Assunta in *Black Madonna* and of Oreste Mancuso in *The Father*; his home and his bakery shop are his life.

PACI: Limited in adaptability and intelligence, the parents in the three books try to recreate their old world within a limited environment. They can't internalize the dialectic of the two cultures as readily as their children. It remains external. So they naturally create their own small world, whether it be a home or a place of work, which is like a piece of the old world, so there's a sort of buffer between them and the new world. But what happens is that the buffer can turn into a cocoon. However, even if the parents develop a measure of security inside their cocoons the clash of cultures isn't evaded. Their children, nurtured in ever-renewed intensity — so that it doesn't so much become a conflict between two ways of life as a conflict between parents and children.

MINNI: This conflict leads to an identity crisis, which some characters never resolve. In *The Italians* Lorianne does not know if she is “Italian or Canadian”; her brother Aldo sees his entering the priesthood “as an escape from life in the new country.”

PACI: Yes, this ethnic duality or ambiguity starts as an external conflict in the clash of cultures and languages, but is ultimately internalized in some of the characters. So they really can't escape it by going into a seminary, or whatever. In *The Italians* the children only come to partly reconcile their inner conflicts after an act of sacrifice. The father's accident, in a way, demonstrates how self-indulgent they have been. The internal duality can only be reconciled by “getting out of themselves,” so to speak, and doing things for other people — just as their parents have done.

MINNI: But don't such parent-sibling conflicts exist in all families, regardless of their background? Just consider, for example, the youth rebellion of the 1960's.

PACI: Conflicts between parents and children do indeed exist in all families, but the ones I'm dealing with have a different twist, wouldn't you say? In *Black Madonna* Marie “feels a foreigner in her own home” not because she's a punk

rocker or a student radical or whatever. It's a basic ontological fact that children have to divorce themselves from their parents to achieve self-identity. In other words, you can't find yourself unless you leave your parents, your hometown, and your country — and these are just geographical departures. The modern youth rebellion in the Western world has been solidified by the popular media into a sub-culture, whose nose is always sniffing for something to rebel against so it can stand out. Someone asks Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* what he's rebelling against. Nonchalantly he says, "What have you got?" But this overall rebelliousness has little to do with *The Italians* and *Black Madonna*. It does, however, play some part in *The Father*, although Michael Mancuso doesn't use rock music so much to rebel against his father as to highlight the *joie de vivre* in his character.

MINNI: "Babbo, you don't understand," says Bill Gaetano in *The Italians*. Other children, in all your novels, share the same sentiment.

PACI: It's simply *la via vecchia* (the old way) which can't understand *la via nuova* (the new way). Unskilled and uneducated parents who emigrate from as foreign a culture as the Italian (especially from the South) find it very difficult to understand or condone the behaviour of their children. It's not any more complex than that, when rendered abstractly. By the same token, the children don't understand the old ways. Let it be understood, however, that I'm speaking about the characters in my work — not about Italians in general.

MINNI: Invariably, parents want to be proud of their children to justify their sacrifices in coming to the new land. Alberto Gaetano's reply that he did it "for his family" is echoed by the first generation throughout Italo-Canadian literature.

PACI: I can't speak for all Canadian families with ethnic backgrounds, but in my books the pressure placed on the children, I suppose, is not only to excel, but to excel according to two conflicting standards. For example, in *The Italians* Bill's success in hockey is never appreciated by his father because for Alberto Gaetano hockey, unlike medicine or law, is nowhere near a serious profession. Hockey is for kids, he says. By the way, one Canadian reviewer didn't understand how an Italian would feel this way about sports since Italians are supposed to be crazy about soccer. In *Black Madonna* Marie, who excels in math and logic in the academic life, isn't appreciated for very different reasons. But this sort of pressure is obviously not only peculiar to Canadians of Italian descent. And it's not necessarily bad. I've seen all kinds of immigrant kids (Chinese, Greek, Japanese, Finns) who've done very well for themselves because they had a greater impetus to prove themselves in some form of endeavour. New blood feels a greater impetus to assert itself, in other words.

MINNI: In *Black Madonna* Marie rejects her mother's background, as symbolized

by the Hope Chest, and in *The Father* Stephen's bread book remains unopened on his shelf "like any other book he has not read." Later, both feel they have lost an inexplicable something. What, and why?

PACI: This is very difficult to answer through my fiction — and therefore much more difficult to answer in abstract terms. At the cost of trying to speak *ex cathedra*, fiction and philosophy are two different ways of trying to get a fix on Reality. I use Reality — big "R" — to mean the dynamic actuality of meaning and truth, whereas reality — small "r" — is the popular conception of what is verifiably true. Fiction must try to fix or grasp Reality in all its paradox and obscurity and inexplicableness. This is why Wittgenstein, at one time, was a good guiding light for my fiction. "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." Images in fiction have to do the work of ideas. Concrete things like the Hope Chest and the bread book have to speak for themselves. I'm not trying to evade the question as much as highlighting it as a good question.

MINNI: Also, despite attempts to escape — Marie through mathematics, Bill through hockey, and Michael through music — each sibling needs to prove himself/herself to parents.

PACI: It's the bond of blood — that no matter how different one becomes from one's parents one still feels that bond strongly. As a character says in the manuscript I've just completed (*First Communion*): "We can't really be ourselves unless we leave our parents, and yet we can't really be anything else unless we return to them."

MINNI: The bond is like an elastic that stretches but never breaks.

PACI: To elaborate on your analogy, I'd say that the connection doesn't break for some of the children but does break for others. For example, it doesn't break for Joey Barone and Michael Mancuso but does for Marie Barone in *Black Madonna* and Stephen Mancuso in *The Father*. Joey and Michael are very close to their respective fathers in sensibility and no amount of cultural differences will sever that bond. But for Marie and Stephen the connection is severed, which produces a wound on both sides — on the children's as well as the parents' side. But the strength of the bond — the strength of blood, if you will — is so strong that eventually a reconciliation is effected which goes a long way in curing that wound. Unfortunately for the parents, the reconciliation occurs at their expense. Marie sees things about her mother only after Assunta has been killed. Stephen becomes aware of his father's true worth only years after Oreste has died. In other words, only a tragedy seems to be able to remove the blinders on the children's eyes.

MINNI: All three novels underscore certain values, especially with regard to family

and to work — values which parents try to transmit to children, though they may no longer be appreciated in current North American society. Could you describe these values, the real Italian heritage?

PACI: I don't know if they represent the real Italian heritage — or whether they're peculiarly Italian. But there are certain values emphasized in my work which are taken from lived experience. The family, obviously, is the bedrock for social and individual harmony. I'm no student of history, but I'd say the family has had to be the bulwark against political chaos and economic scarcity in Italian history, especially in the South. The bonds in the Italian family are usually very strong, sometimes too strong. You are blood of my blood, says Oreste Mancuso to his sons in *The Father*.

After *la famiglia*, I'd say the sense of community, the sense of families sharing a common ground, of meeting others in the piazza or coffee-bar or the street — this is another important part of our heritage. I think an Italian, especially a Southern Italian, finds it harder than most to be an isolated individual. Usually he is defined by his family and his community — and is not as individualistically inclined as people in the other cultures. In my work, the West End in Sault Ste. Marie represents a little of this community atmosphere.

Next, there's the sense of dedication to one's work, which confers self-dignity. It's like a sense of craftsmanship, which has become virtually obsolete because of industrialization and the alienation of labour. My father and his friends on the same street, for example, all enjoyed working with their hands. They all renovated their homes, made basements, installed plumbing, and then for years afterwards fixed this or that. Then they made wine every year, or did carpentry work. You look at a craftsman, someone who has worked with his hands all his life, making cabinets or gloves or bread, and he's done something with his life — he has nothing to be ashamed of. He's put something there that's good and useful that wasn't there before. Then you look at a lot of other types of work — one guy just pushing a commodity along to another guy, the division of labour, hucksterism, bureaucratic upkeep, and so on. If you hate your work, you hate half of your life. I'm not a Marxist, but this part of Marxism seems on the mark. That's why in the western world we need so many diversions. Anyway, these values are much more complex and fluid than I've described them. And they're not peculiarly Italian.

MINNI: Your characters also have a strong sense of continuity. In *The Father* Oreste Mancuso says, "No matter how I turned out, no matter what I do, I know one thing. My father lives inside me. He didn't die."

PACI: The continuity is a form of immortality. Some sons and daughters, despite leading entirely disparate lives, do in fact "become" their parents. This is another

part of the analogy of the blood. We North Americans tend to think of immortality too much in terms of the prolongation of the individual. There's spiritual truth in this. But at an instinctual biological level the individual "lives on" in his family, his clan, his *polis*, and his species. Hegel says, "Death shows the kind (genus) to be the power that rules the immediate individual." The ancients in their ancestor worship certainly knew this. As did the Greeks. Individuals die, but the whole of which they're a part and which nurtures them, lives on. I would suspect that our basic spiritual and metaphysical yearning for immortality springs from this biological fact. We have the potential for immortality in our life-instincts, in Eros.

But just in matter-of-fact everyday terms, haven't we often made gestures in the mirror, or behaved in a certain way, or found ourselves reacting in a certain way, and said: That's my father in me, or my mother in me? No matter how different we as children become from our parents, in a very real sense we are no more than what they are. It's part of the dialectic of historical change. We go beyond them, but we retain them. They're "in us," as simple as that.

MINNI: Let's talk about your metaphors and imagery. They seemed forced in *The Italians*, your first novel; for example, Alberto Gaetano's comparing his children to the blast furnaces, of which he is keeper. Much of the power of *Black Madonna* and *The Father*, however, depends on connotation. Would you like to say something about (a) the Hope Chest in *Black Madonna* and the bread book in *The Father* and the irony implicit in these symbols, (b) Marie's anorexia nervosa as a physical manifestation of her cultural starvation, and (c) Maddelena in *The Father*, almost dying, her legs spread as if she is giving birth?

PACI: I'm very reluctant to talk about symbols and images in an abstract way, because I don't want to be too self-conscious about them. I'm too self-conscious as it is. But obviously these images and symbols have to spring naturally from the context or "world" of the work. Needless to say, a writer walks a thin line between rationality and irrationality, between being awake and dreaming, between earnestness and play, and so on. Reality can't be caught by one's intellectual-analytical faculties, but by the intuitive-rational ones which grasp the dynamic whole rather than the parts. For example, a scientist may understand all the parts of a flower, but a writer must *be* that flower. Images and symbols, if they hit the mark, contribute to the fusion of thinking and being.

I can say briefly that the Hope Chest grew out of real-life situations between mothers and daughters — as did the anorexia nervosa. There's an element of the Holy Grail in the Hope Chest — the analogy that Parsifal is too stupid to ask the right question, as simple and obvious as it is. In a certain sense, no matter how intelligent Marie is, she's kind of stupid too. And, yes, there is irony in the bread book — perhaps too much irony. I'm glad you mention the image of birth as



Maddelena is dying. I like to play with opposites. A is A, but at the same time it's not-A; that is, it's changing. Too often I fall way short of the mark in trying to represent Reality — things aren't smooth, others seem contrived or over-exaggerated, and so on. But that's the job of the critic. My job is try to give things life.

MINNI: Names also seem important in your novels. "Black Madonna" is a symbol for stoic suffering. It is a good description of Assunta Barone. Maddelena, on the other hand, makes one think of her Biblical namesake, the repentant prostitute.

PACI: I never consciously thought of "Black Madonna" signifying stoic suffering, although that's a good description and may have been an unconscious connotation on my part. All I was thinking of was the Italian widow's black mourning clothes and the fact that her motherhood is emphasized. But I imagine you can take that further and say, for example, that too many Italian widows carry their mourning to extremes, which is one more indication of her paradoxical passive/active role in the Italian patriarchal society — which, in turn, may have its mythic-instinctual roots in the very ancient Greek conception of the chthonic deities (dark, of the earth, and female-oriented) against the Olympian deities (bright, of sky, and male-oriented). But that's another matter. I'm not saying that I was thinking of such matters when I chose the title, but who really knows how dream and self-consciousness and play all work together in representing something. As for Maddelena, I chose that name by chance.

MINNI: Assunta, as a metaphor for the first generation of immigrants who suffered silently, seems a bit exaggerated; she's a bit too primitive. Maddelena is almost her opposite.

PACI: It's not for me to say whether Assunta is exaggerated or not. But, yes, I did have first-generation immigrants — especially women — in mind. And she is based on real-life women who are trapped, so to speak, by the immigrant experience. Not that they don't want to be here. Assunta came over to the new country voluntarily to have a family — but she paid a dear price. Peasants are attached to their native land (not so much their country as the earth they walk on and sow seeds on) in such a strong way. I mean, it's very difficult for us who live in apartments or who have a small back yard with a lawn to really understand that a peasant's land, no matter how poor, constitutes his very being. This is the sort of difference in sensibilities that I'm dealing with in some of my characters. People from a pre-industrial way of life sort of skip generations and settle into not only a highly industrialized setting, but one that has gone beyond that in subtlety and media complexity.

On the other hand, Maddelena is an entirely different woman. She comes from Rome and is well educated. She adjusts to the new country handily because she's

her own person and she's ingenious, whereas Assunta is more a force of nature. Like Assunta, Maddelena tries to do her best for her family. What she does backfires, but that isn't entirely her fault.

MINNI: In your novels (and most Italo-Canadian writing) the immigrant experience is seen through the distorted viewpoint of the children. The first generation remains silent. Is this intentional, or is it an inability on your part — as the son of immigrants — to write from the parents' viewpoint?

PACI: I wouldn't say that the viewpoint of the children is distorted, a word that is too pejorative. Since the second generation is presenting the story, the perspective of the first generation is presented indirectly, I'd rather say. The first generation doesn't remain silent (except Giulia in *The Italians*), except in the sense that their stories aren't as complete as their children's who tell the story. In other words, the first generation remains more problematic. Is this intentional or does it show an inability on my part? Both. To render a person's story as problematic the author must know a lot of what is not presented on the surface. On the other hand, it's very difficult to get into the minds of the first generation. It would demand a *tour de force*, which perhaps I'm not capable of doing.

MINNI: Your novels have caused a shock of recognition among many readers. Yet I sometimes think that English-Canadian reviewers missed the point.

PACI: *The Italians* sold about 15,000 copies, mostly in the New American Library Signet edition. *Black Madonna* sales, however, have been modest. In a certain sense English-Canadian reviewers have not seen the full story in my books so far, obviously because they lack the emotional groundwork of the immigrant experience. But this experience must be judged on universal grounds — that is, if the novels render the experience well enough anyone should be able to empathize with it. There are some things, of course, that only hold deep resonance for the people who've gone through similar experiences. But, on the other hand, some readers with this experience have told me that the Italians I present are very unlike the Italians they know. Also, the very first review of the first book, *The Italians*, was a scathing insulting piece by an Italo-Canadian truckdriver-poet who expected "literature" and forgot the fundamental law of driving: you have to shift through first to get to the other gears.

MINNI: What is next for Frank Paci?

PACI: *The Father* is actually the first novel of a trilogy, the second of which, *First Communion*, I've just completed. But it's been such a difficult book to write that I don't know if it'll ever see the light of day. You could call *First Communion* a transition novel. It deals with the lives of the same two sons as in *The Father*, but very different in content and form. The novel seeks to move the

development of consciousness through another phase. For consciousness you can read what I call the dynamic interplay of head, heart, and crotch. The Dionysian aspects of consciousness fight the Apollonian ones. I'm interested in describing Reality, in rendering it in as much depth as possible. That means including aspects of the unreal, of the indistinct, of the nebulous, of the fantastic — all in a manner that doesn't negate the life of the characters and that doesn't draw attention to the words or the writer. The question that interests me is: What is real? Which is different from what exists. And I think that the poet more so than the modern philosopher or the scientist, contrary to most widespread belief, can best pose this question.

*Autumn 1983*

## FELLINI

*Irving Layton*

Like the *guardiacessi* who unlocks her toilet  
and is deformed but has a winning face  
you show me grossness in earth, in women,  
but also the shy soft-hued floweret  
among thistles, the ugly rapacious thistles.

Your legends, Federico, I've made my own;  
amidst them often lost, often found my way.  
Basta! You use my skull to hive your images.  
Casanova's mother piggybacks to this day;  
your spiritless bird will endure longer than stone.

Master-illusionist you are, every sunrise,  
the exploring poet in your own Satyricon  
seeking the light of remoter shores  
to tell their bronzed surfers the Gods urge on  
only the cripples that stumble to Paradise.

Your felicity, when it comes, is more brief  
than the bubbles you loose over these ancient stairs;  
perilous is the fate you were meant to bear:  
by art alone to modulate human grief  
into a cry so sad, so strange, men call it rapture.

*Piazza di Spagna  
September 17, 1984*