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A Sacco and Vanzetti Mystery with a Modern Twist

2021, Summer

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A Sacco and Vanzetti Mystery with a Modern Twist

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a review of
Suosso's Lane by Robert Knox (Web-e-Pub 2016). web-e-books.com/suosso/paperback.html

During the Red Scare following World War I, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were the perfect candidates for judicial murder. Italian, immigrants, and anarchists.

They were convicted in 1921 of murdering a paymaster and a guard during an armed robbery at the Slater and Morrill Shoe Company in Braintree, Massachusetts. Although their innocence became increasingly evident, they were executed in the electric chair in 1927. Mass demonstrations protesting the trial and the verdict took place across North America and the world.

My head was spinning after finishing this powerfully written novel. The quality of the prose is impressive. Author Robert Knox, a novelist and poet, who covers the arts for *The Boston Globe*, seems like an unlikely candidate to write a novel so sympathetic to his anarchist characters, but he brings them to life in marvelous fashion.

The story easily goes back and forth between the early years of the 20th century, the trial and death of Sacco and Vanzetti, a cop killed in the 1940s, and the present, following different people connected to the victims of the State and of anti-immigrant and anti-anarchist campaigns.

This is literature, not a history course. We vividly encounter the horrible working and living conditions people endured, the activities of anarchists, some well-known, who act in reaction to their oppression and imprisonment and deportation of their comrades, the Palmer raids, and the Red Scare.

The characters are well-developed. Some very human, with doubts and faults, including men and women from different social classes who defend Sacco and Vanzetti, and the descendants of the two anarchists who appear as part of a developing mystery.

Others are inhuman. From foremen who treat workers as beasts of burden, police who attack strikers, to the judge, prosecuting attorney, and Massachusetts governor who condemn the innocent anarchists to death.

But the story doesn't remain in the past. Leading up to the near-present, the author weaves in the question of greed (a foundation of capitalism), an unsolved murder in the 1940s (who killed the cop and why?), and a much sought-after letter relating to the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti.

A reporter for a regional paper, a history professor, a social worker, the owner of a resale shop seeking fame, and a greedy restaurant proprietor willing to do anything, are fluidly integrated into the story. They all want the letter. To what lengths will they go to find it?

Don't let the novel's 570 pages scare you. By the end, you may be wishing it were longer.

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