

Ron Ross. *The Tomato Can*. Oyster Bay: Oyster Bay Books, 1993. 183 pp. Paper \$11.95.

Ron Ross's novel *The Tomato Can* would make a great Italian-American movie—move over Norman Jewison! The story is told with charming ingenuousness by a first-generation Italian-American, a minor underworld character who seems to be appointed spokesperson by a whole Italian neighborhood, not just the local gambler who has respect, because the story deserves, no, needs to be told to keep the communal record straight. Consequently, the novel's language and language rhythms are a delight to read. The best word I could use to describe the humor and poignancy of the storytelling would be "aplomb." Each character is so comfortably self-respecting, and drawn with such fair and telling detail, that the reader comes away with the conviction that all the characters, even Rosie, the flaky gambler's daughter, have been dealt with justly and subjected to only the gentlest irony and kindest comic justice.

Although his name doesn't sound Italian, one surmises the author must have grown up with Italian neighbors and schoolmates because he hears Italian-American voices with loving exactitude and raises their vernacular to an art form. It is no easy task to keep intact the language of an uneducated but very articulate narrator and invest his language with the metaphorical richness of a talented writer, but Ross accomplishes the feat. The narrator is never dislodged from his central position as neighborhood storyteller, but the rest of the voices in the neighborhood come through clearly, which gets the story told the way it really happened and satisfies the communal need to tell the truth.

The story itself concerns the almost knightly adventures of Tommy Curcio, a fighter who is known in the fight game as a "tomato can": He goes in there, puts on a show—and loses. A good tomato can loses beautifully. Tommy Curcio was as good a tomato can as there ever was." This is not the fight career Tommy wanted for himself, being the honorable young man he is, but he is owned by a gambler whose daughter he is hopelessly in love with, and Tommy is willing to do anything to please the man he hopes will be his future father-in-law. Tommy's hopeless love for Rosie takes him as low as fixed fights and side bets can take him, and as high as the purest and noblest feelings of the purest and noblest Arthurian knight when Rosie's personal safety seems to be at stake. This mixture of romance and corruption leads to the bizarre and hilarious fight with the Italian champ, in which both fighters try desperately to lose. At this point the reader is ready to throw in the towel after being pummeled so mercilessly with laughter.

*The Tomato Can* introduces its reading public to a very talented new writer.

Frank Kooistra