

Finding Gracie

Grace Papagno

iUniverse (May 14, 2016)

Softcover \$13.99 (192pp)

978-1-4917-9388-6

A storyteller's flair makes this memoir a pleasure to read.

Finding Gracie collects Grace Papagno's nostalgic vignettes of her mid-century, Italian American girlhood on Long Island. Salient impressions are stitched together with subtle insights to reveal her lifelong journey toward independence and her search for peace with her flawed, strong-minded mother. Reflections on the rewards of raising her own daughter with a different outlook allow her troubled past to inspire joy.

Papagno effectively captures the exploratory wonder of childhood, which prevailed for her despite her volatile home. In more than forty lucid chapters, a sharp self-awareness is revealed as the author describes outings with sisters and friends, Catholic school adventures, her mother's cold approach to parenting, memories of relatives, a sustaining love of music, and the uneven path toward adulthood. As much an account of learning to love without reservation as it is a tribute to an era, *Finding Gracie* brims with authentic details.

Memorable images range from that of her mother throwing her sister's baby blanket into the furnace to those of her lonely grandmother, newly transplanted from her Brooklyn home to an attic apartment at Gracie's. The middle-class, post-World War II neighborhood inhabited by the women, down to its stifling atmosphere, is clearly sketched. Gracie comes across as an impressionable, alert child whose attentiveness to the adults around her suggests deep concern with the workings of the world and her place in it.

One of the book's strongest features is the strength with which it filters memories through hindsight. No one is drawn in simplistic terms. Gracie's mother is especially well-defined; with a change of context, traits that seem unyielding can also suggest an effort to preserve her own dignity. Whether she banishes the family cat without warning or summons an "inner steel" to face her husband's cancer, her desire to control situations is affecting. One especially insightful incident features Gracie's mother leaping from a yacht to save her drowning daughter, then remaining tight-lipped about the incident.

Some vignettes linger on innocent delights, such as a classmate's forty-eight-color Crayola box. Others depict personal triumphs, failures, and milestones. The most moving scenes are set in later years, once Gracie finds herself in the role of caregiver and parent. With the benefit of time and distance, tensions begin to disappear, and the past is paved over by forgiveness.

In *Finding Gracie*, memories steeped in the theme of second chances offer a view of growing into one's self. Papagno has a storyteller's flair for finding the right anecdote, making her memoir a pleasure to read.

KAREN RIGBY (August 11, 2016)

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