

Magnifico

Victoria Miles

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Eleven-year-old Mariangela had been asking for a piano for as long as she can remember. She wants one just like her cousin Gigi's. Imagine her shock and disappointment when her Nonna presents her with her grandfather's old, bulky, heavy accordion. "I remembered remarks slipped by Uncle Tony about 'my some-a day inheritance,'" she muses, "always accompanied by Mamma's sister, Zia Letizia's sympathetic silence."

Set in Canada during the 1930s, Mariangela's trials and tribulations while trying to learn the accordion create a timeline for this engaging middle-grade novel. In between and during her lessons, she conquers her fear of a neighborhood bully, learns why her Italian-born mother keeps a packed suitcase under her bed, helps her friend deal with fear for her Jewish relatives in Germany, humiliates herself at a wedding, and plays said accordion for the Queen of England.

The reader will feel Mariangela's embarrassments, fears, and pride. The author creates a natural, believable voice for her main character. Her ease with writing this voice is informed by her own mother's experiences with an accordion and Italian immigrant life in Vancouver during the thirties. Miles is also the author of *Wild Science: Amazing Encounters Between Animals and the People Who Study Them* as well as many other books and short stories for children. Her short story "The Strait of Orca" was part of the award-winning "Fate of the Strait" series in 1998.

Magnifico is filled with dialogue in broken English with an Italian accent. "Dis notta toy. You keepa dis-a clean." The charming anecdotes about family dinners, swearing in Italian, and The Holy Spirit living in Uncle Tony's attic bring smiles in between the heavier topics. "Uncle Tony talked all the time about getting a boarder, but he never did. Sonia and I figured he didn't want to put God out on the street."

Many of the supporting characters will touch readers' hearts. Mama and Papa struggle with their new lives in Canada. Nonna talks with God in the kitchen while making dinner. Gioseff, the accordion teacher, makes a valiant attempt to follow his passion. Dot, one of Mariangela's best friends, has an absentee father but money. Esther, her other best friend, has no money and parents who collect things from other people's garbage. Even Dennis Lister, the neighborhood bully, has an endearing side.

The novel flows well and will keep a middle reader's attention. The character of Dennis Lister may attract a few male readers but the characters and plot line will appeal more to middle-grade girls. Peppered throughout are comments about Mariangela's luck: "Too bad for you Mariangela" and "Thass-a jus' yo kind-a luck." Of course, by the end of this tale she discovers she is "Magnifico." While this is predictable, it will leave the reader with an "and they all lived happily ever after" feeling.

TROY-MICHELLE REINHARDT (October 3, 2006)

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