Clarion Review

General

Soft as Iron: Disparaged Creation
Giovanna Lavena
AuthorHouse
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Three Stars (out of Five)

Soft as Iron, a novel based on events from the author's life, is a survival story that shows how one woman's indomitable spirit allows her to rise above adversity, discouragement, and depression to eventually take charge of her own destiny.

Born to an unwed mother in Italy, Vanna spends her younger years in an orphanage but is reunited with family when her mother marries Gino, who willingly accepts Vanna into his home. Gino dies young, and when grieving Vanna finds out that her biological father is alive, she convinces her mother to arrange a meeting. Things are never the same after that. The balance of power in the family shifts, and jealousies split the once close relationship Vanna had with her mother.

Both her mother and father are domineering and keep Vanna on a short leash. Vanna, insecure and naive, finds it easier to capitulate, although this creates inward rebellion that eventually drives her into a marriage to escape her family. Her husband becomes abusive and the marriage collapses, leaving Vanna to raise five children alone.

The dynamics of this Italian family are believable, and Giovanna Lavena sketches an authentic picture of life for a young girl becoming a woman in pre-World War II Italy. Vanna is a sympathetic character, one that readers will care about, and it is for her that they will keep turning pages.

The story's synopsis and the author's bio on the back cover are nearly identical. While the dramatic story is worth telling, by choosing to recount Vanna's life in a sequential narrative, Lavena misses the opportunity to introduce tension; the story lacks drama and suspense. Moments that could be emotional are dismissed with a statement or two, distancing the reader, and keeping them from experiencing Vanna's feelings. For example, when Vanna flies to Venezuela with her new husband, one of the plane's engines catches on fire. Her husband wakes

to see the flames, but tells his wife it won't be much of a problem. "That was all Vanna needed to hear, and she kept calm," Lavena writes. "Eventually they landed safely." Another time, her drunken husband wants sex. Vanna tells him she's exhausted. "But he forced himself on her," writes Lavena, who then moves on to discuss Vanna's arthritis.

The story comes to a rather abrupt ending. Vanna boards a plane that will fly her to new life in the United States. Lavena ends with, "Far was she from imagining how difficult the years ahead would be."

While the lack of closure might be disappointing for those who have stuck with Vanna through thick and thin, it creates an opportunity for a sequel. Having followed her this far, many readers will be anxious to hear how Vanna manages the second half of her life.

Ruth Douillette