

We Are Family

Fabio Bartolomei

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"How the hell do you start a letter to the UN?" If you're Al Santamaria, you do it with the absolute conviction that your entreaty for their recognition of your family's estate will be heard and respected—because you are a genius, you have always been recognized as such, and your reasoning is impeccable.

If you're Al Santamaria, though, you're working your way towards another disappointment: for once-prodigies in suspended adolescence, dreams do not always come true.

Fabio Bartolomei's *We Are Family* is an extended, guffaw-inducing, and sometimes tragic trip through Al's young life. It reads like an Italian sitcom. The story begins in Al's precocious fours, when his budding pyromania and unfiltered thoughts are his biggest challenge. It moves into his teens and adulthood, as he learns to conduct his play in private and to leverage his mathematical and memory skills for profit.

Al misreads social cues, speaks his mind, and dreams big. For Al, a house that shifts on its foundations is benefit, not risk, and nostalgia for lost artifacts is just sensible: he insists that home video recordings will revert to Super 8s, because that media "so closely resembles memory ... the picture jerks and swerves, then it spins dizzily and stops on a blurry extreme closeup of the sand. End of reel."

Surrounding Al are his sister, Vittoria—also brilliant, but no savant; his parents, whom he earnestly believes will strike it rich as astronauts, Elvis impersonators, or pastry chefs; an imaginary friend; a reformed thief; and a playground annoyance who develops into a true love. They encourage him on as his body outgrows his boundless dreams.

Already a hit in its native Italy, Bartolomei's novel is destined to charm American audiences, too—even if Al's blunt thoughts on our politics might not. Let him rub you wrong here and there: his bighearted revelations are worth the trouble.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (January/February 2019)

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