

Club Newsletters



3659 Green Road, Suite 124
Beachwood OH 44122
1-800-592-5373
www.iacfcleveland.org

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My Italian Heritage

The book *Mount Allegro* is a memoir of Jerre Mangione's youth, in a Sicilian community in Rochester. Throughout the book there are stories of family squabbles, enormous amounts of food, and unforgettable people that were a huge influence in his life. This book was a fun filled adventure that broadened my understanding of my Italian heritage. By living and experiencing my own Italian family, I was able to smile and realize that just like Mr. Mangione, my Italian family, like most, though they seem crazy, are really wonderful people.

A theme throughout the book was how most Italians were very devoted to their Catholic faith. Being in an Italian family myself, I understand that you go to church every Sunday, and on the Holy Days of the year you go to church as well and be with your family. However what really broadened my understanding of my Italian heritage was realizing how religious Italian families really are. In the book they celebrated the Feast of the Dead, a celebration honoring and paying homage to the dead, as well as the feast of Saint Joseph's Day which is a huge feast celebrating Jesus, Joseph, and Mary. Both of these feasts I had never heard of, but they were celebrations that included family, friends, and food, something that I could relate to very well. In the book they would also have a guardian saint, "A guardian saint was like a friend in court. He had special access to God's ear. If you took care to remember the saint with prayer and an occasional candle, you could usually count on him to remain loyal and carry out your wishes" (69). This was something that was also new to me, this showed me how present religion is in most Italians everyday lives.

The most important idea throughout the book was family. With my own family experience, I understand family is the most important thing in life. Mr. Mangione's family was very close. He was the first born son and had the most responsibilities to uphold, "a good Sicilian son stuck near his family; the only time he left it was to marry, and even then he lived close by so that he could see his relatives often" (227). Being the oldest myself, I can understand how Mr. Mangione felt. My mother always tells my brothers and I that when we get married we have to expect her to live with each of us

three months out of the year. However, on every major holiday we are to come home and be with family no matter where we live.

Family is so important and such a powerful thing that even when you have not met family before or have not seen them in many years, family will always welcome you with open arms. In the book, Mr. Mangione went back to Sicily to meet relatives, whom he had heard countless stories about but had never met, this was the same as my personal experience with my family. When I went to my grandmothers' hometown in San Marco Argentano, Calabria, I did not know one single person. I was a little apprehensive about meeting family that I had never seen before, and had only known by name. I did not know what kind of homecoming, if any, my family would be receiving. However just like Mr. Mangione's homecoming, "they had known me less than a half hour and already they were appalled to think that I could bear to leave" (252). Who would have guessed that even when you live miles apart that these people would treat you like you just saw them yesterday. They would all try to outdo the other relatives, feeding you and then feeding you some more. The same thing happened with Mr. Mangione, "In their eagerness to show how much they loved me. The deluged me with hospitality...I would insist I had eaten and drink more than enough; they would tell me I had barely begun and pile my dish high with food again. 'Mangia, mangia.' They took turns at dining me and each one tried to feed me more than the others"(253). But by the end of our visit we had exchanged emails, and addresses, as well as become close friends.

The experiences that I have learned not only from going to Italy and visiting family myself, but also seeing these experiences lived by Mr. Mangione throughout his book has increased my awareness with my Italian heritage. I have lived through these experiences not knowing that most Italian families participates in the same, sometimes crazy, traditions that my family has instilled in me. This novel has opened my eyes to see that maybe my family is not so crazy after all, just unique, and Italian.

Extracts from the 2008 1st place Senior essay by Eva Wollerman, Lake Catholic High School.