

Between the lines – The Measure of Time and Gianrico Carofiglio’s underrated genius

Robert Fox April 24, 2021

Most of the cases of Guido Guerrieri, the defence lawyer hero of Gianrico Carofiglio’s tales from contemporary Bari, start on a bit of a downer. The latest to appear in English, *The Measure of Time*, is no exception. Guerrieri, in many ways the author’s alter ego, is called on by an old girlfriend who wants him to help in the near hopeless case of her son’s appeal against a murder conviction.

The son is a mess, the case is a mess, and police, public prosecution and judges won’t budge. So far, so downbeat. The whole story of tangled lives, legal misdirection, crossed destinies and life in downtown Bari is a joy. This is one of Carofiglio’s very best crime novels, and it leads into a series of other short stories and essays, which should be published in English post-haste.

Gianrico Carofiglio was a distinguished investigating magistrate – and cracked some of the biggest recent Mafia cases in Puglia. He served a full five year term as a Senator in the Rome parliament – an experience he told me he is desperate never to repeat. Guerrieri came along as an outlet to his literary bent. Both he and his brother are successfully involved in films, theatre and opera.

Avvocato Guerrieri is a gregarious loner, wandering through old Bari – the shadow and mirror image of his creator, the defence lawyer matching the prosecutor. In the physical setting and ambiance of the action, these stories are among the best of contemporary fiction. The evocation of Bari is more than a match for the Sicily of Andrea Camilleri’s *Salvo Montalbano* and the dark Naples conjured by Maurizio De Giovanni.

Sometimes, the author and his creation seem to work as close companions, but other times, they become estranged. “I got fed up with Guido at one point,” Gianrico told me a few years back. “I thought he was being far too successful with his girlfriends, and I was having a really low time.”

The outcome of the case is almost incidental to the story in the Guerrieri chronicles. They all turn on perception, how we see the truth, interpret the law in terms of justice, exchange views, share experiences, inquire and empathise. In his investigations into the quirks of the law, in terms of jurisprudence and the procedures and foibles of criminal investigation by police and the magistracy, admirers such as Jeffery Deaver and Scott Turrow believe Carofiglio is unrivalled.

The new story, which is elegantly translated by Howard Curtis, focuses as much on what happened to the relationship with the old girlfriend, Lorenza delle Foglie, as much as the business of getting her son Jacopo off the murder rap. Both are a story of time and timing.

What has happened since the part-time lovers parted? Why do the police and prosecution insist on a particular timetable for the son Jacopo murdering his friend, a drug dealer, in his flat in broad daylight – not bothering to conceal his arrival and departure?

The police have a telephone tap of Jacopo rowing over a mobile phone with the drug dealer, just a few hours before the latter is shot. That's good enough, and they are not prepared to accept any alternative hypothesis. The cops and Pubblico Ministero – the prosecution office – suffer according to Carofiglio/Guerrieri from “cognitive tunnelism” – they just cannot think round their case, and see it a broader and more plausible setting – though there is good reason to do so.

In a wonderful digression Guerrieri takes a morning out of the case to give a lecture to a course of trainee magistrates on the complexities and ambiguities of building a defence case. He tells the graduate class you have to see all round the case, at all possible and impossible scenarios, and then persuade the court of the subtleties and nuances of the story.

In his digressions and sallies, he is like a good companion in one of Bari's downtown bars telling you a glorious shaggy dog story. Not for nothing does Guerrieri show up in the office one morning with a well-thumbed copy of Tristram Shandy, the greatest shaggy dog story in literature.

Carofiglio has the same ambling conversational style as Sterne. He is talking to you, catching your eye and ear with a telling detail. Talking to him on the phone last week was like joining a discussion in one of the stories and essays.

The outcome of the Jacopo murder story is almost incidental to the narrative of the book – no spoiler alert needed. The big mystery is the relationship with Lorenza, at once attractive, cultivated, well-travelled, mysterious. And yet, after a good measure of time, a colossal bore.

Her knowledge of philosophy and literature is broad and discursive. She is a rotten conversationalist though, because everything has to be stated in clear, binary, Manichean, terms – good, bad, black, white, sufferable and insufferable. She cannot accept nuance, ambivalence, alternative viewpoints – no more than the police and PM prosecutor in her son's case. This is the fulcrum of the whole book, and Carofiglio's recent essays. Borrowing a phrase from the brilliant David Foster Wallace, Guerrieri accuses Lorenza of being an ‘ambiguophobe.’

“Appreciating ambiguity, the context to the arguments of others is essential to understanding and civilized politics today,” Gianrico explained in our recent telephone conversation. “Too often dialogue turns to a statement of rejection and insult. It gets you nowhere. You have to learn where those you are questioning are coming from. This is a real problem today,” he says.

The cradle of civilized exchange and discussion in Guerrieri's Bari is an all-night café and book shop called L'Osteria del Caffellatte run by a character named Ottavio. Ottavio is a chronic insomniac and runs the shop as a refuge for itinerant litterateurs and street philosophers. At a low point in the Jacopo case, Guerrieri calls in for a pit stop of consolation. Ottavio introduces him to an old friend, an alternative therapist. The old man snorts at the description, then admits to being a “philosopho – therapist”. He prescribes

specific texts to people in low case. Favourites are Pyrrho and Montaigne – but for the really defeated, nothing beats Aristotle for “learning to exercise the ethical muscles”.

An appreciation of ambiguity, now a major theme exhorted by the likes of Carlo Rovelli and Martha Lane Fox, is not an invitation to passivity and inaction – quite the opposite. It should encourage one to act out of character if need be, says Guerrieri/Carofiglio, to act courageously, altruistically in the cause of truth, even if it is likely against one’s immediate interest.

Ambiguity and empathy are major themes in the latest story of Carofiglio’s other brilliant creation in stories about contemporary Bari. Pietro Fenoglio is a melancholic senior Carabinieri detective, a Maresciallo who never wears a uniform. He is based on a young Carabiniere Carofiglio once met during the investigation of a particularly difficult Mafia case – “he was perhaps the best read cop in uniform I ever met,” he told me. A fictionalized version of the case is told in *The Cold Summer*, which was a bestseller two years ago.

Last year Fenoglio starred in a novella *Fenoglio’s Version* (*La Versione di Fenoglio*), which is yet to appear in English. Let’s hope it is translated soon because it is an ideal companion to *The Measure of Time*. It is a novella with a difference because it is really an elegant essay on the arts of investigation and inquiry, of understanding truth and empathy. Fenoglio is undergoing a course of heavy duty physiotherapy – he feels broken down and surely near the end of his active service with L’Arma (the Force) – which, by the way, he feels in every one of his stories. His companion is a young man recovering from a major car crash.

He beguiles his young friend with his views on the arts of investigation and understanding, through a series of stories of his life as a lead detective in Bari. I am pretty convinced that each anecdote has a base in fact. The wisdom and aphorisms make a brilliant breviary of instruction – of value to anyone staring out in journalism or public life today. In my virtual library it sits alongside brilliant manuals of common sense such as Orwell’s *Why I Write* and *The Historian’s Craft* by Marc Bloch.

In questioning a suspect, or in general dialogue, explains Fenoglio, you must be careful to allow the other person to explain how they see their story, the setting and circumstances of their narrative in their own terms – whether true or false. Here Carrofiglio returns to one of his great topics which was the title of probably the most successful *Avvocato Guerriero* stories – the phenomenon of *Involuntary False Witness*. This is where a suggested narrative of events becomes so familiar that the protagonist believes it, however false it may be.

This bedevils broadcast journalism interviews nowadays as much as it does police and forensic investigation. The witness or accused is given a set of events that sound so familiar, so plausible, they are convinced that it cannot be otherwise. In UK journalism, we would loosely call it ‘suggestibility’, but in the Fenoglio and Carofiglio version it is something more powerful and insidious.

Rereading Fenoglio’s warning that an investigator should avoid leading a witness with his interpretation of a narrative – because that will condition, most likely irreversibly, what the witness gives back, I realised I could never listen to most broadcast interviews in the same way again. The loaded questions and emotional bias of interviews on the likes of the *Today* programme or *Newsnight* are open invitations to involuntary false witness.

The Fenoglio Version was followed last year by a brilliant nonfiction companion *On Kindness and Courage* – a breviary on politics and other things. Here the notion of kindness and understanding, of tolerance, courage and understanding are brought up to date, the era post Trump and in the middle of Covid.

Trump is dispatched swiftly – “he was a great manipulator, not communicator, because he encouraged his base to bury their fear in hate. All with the vocabulary of a ten-year old.” The essay on stupidity is equally mordant. He argues stupid people cannot entertain argument, ambiguity and alternatives, and they always have to show they are right. Honestly I can’t look at certain Home Affairs front benchers with a straight face again.

The last essay in this short book, *Kindness and Sense* is a jewel. It is a scintillating update of Voltaire’s *On Tolerance*. The essence of kindness and sense was shown by Lincoln in establishing rapport and then friendship with his erstwhile foe Frederick Douglass. “I don’t like that man. I must get to know him better,” Lincoln is alleged to have said.

He concludes with a touch of Montaigne. “We don’t conduct ourselves with kindness and courage because it looks good. We act with kindness and courage because we are members of the human race.”

So is this the end for Carofiglio’s alter egos Pietro Fenoglio and Guido Gueriglieri? Both are masters of the world weary put down – as deadly with a quip of philosophy as Philip Marlow with a gun in his left hand.

The good news is that we are not quite on the last reel in this movie. “Fenoglio is always in the margin, a figure ‘un po’ del crepuscolo’ (twilight). He is going to have another story, a resumé of his most tricky cases. I would like to put his books, long and short, into one omnibus. There’s another Guerrieri, too, but I think it will be the last.”

These are to be looked forward to. But the latest three show a writer at the top of his art – and with Guerrieri and Fenoglio he has taken a familiar literary genre, twisted it and made it absolutely his own.