

Raising Poetry's Profile

George De Stefano (June 20, 2015)



Maria Lisella is the new – and the first Italian American – poet laureate of Queens

The borough of Queens has a new, official bard.

Maria Lisella, born in South Jamaica and an Astoria resident for 40 years, has been selected as Queens' new poet laureate, the sixth since the position was established 20 years ago. She is also the first Italian American selected for the honor. At a June 9 ceremony, Queens Borough president Melinda Katz said, "Lisella is an amazing writer who is capable of synthesizing the borough's many cultures and languages into incredible poetry."

Lisella's works to date include the collection, ["Thieves in the Family"](#) [2] (NYQ Books, 2014) and two chapbooks, ["Two Naked Feet"](#) [3] and ["Amore on Hope Street"](#) [4]" (both 2009). Her writing also appears in the collections ["Avanti Popolo: Italian-American Writers Sail Beyond Columbus"](#) [5]" and



["Sweet Lemons 2."](#) [6] She has twice been nominated for the prestigious Pushcart Poetry Prize.

Lisella was recognized for her work not only as a poet but also for her accomplishments as a journalist and for her vision of the poet laureate's role. (The position, which is unpaid, lasts for three years.) She was one of five finalists whom a panel of judges picked from among dozens of applicants.

Her connections to the Queens literary scene and to the poet laureate program are close and longstanding. At Queens College, Lisella studied under Stephen Stepanchev, a Serbian-born writer who was the borough's first poet laureate, and she and the second laureate, Hal Sirowitz, both are active in [Brevitas](#) [7], an online poetry circle. Six years ago, she was a finalist for the poet laureate spot.

Last week, Lisella, whom I have known for more than 20 years, and I met at an Astoria café, where over coffee and pastry we talked about her new role.

She said that the application form asked poets to explain why they wanted the job. "I wanted to say, 'for a little glory, since no one ever notices poets.' Instead, I wrote that I wanted to be the first Italian American poet laureate. There are a lot of us in Queens, so why not?"

"They clearly wanted someone who could organize events and work with people," she added.

The position requires her to conceive and organize three events. Her ideas included a book mart at the World's Fair Unisphere at Flushing Park; publishers and editors would attend, and there would be a tent to host readings. She also wants to create a website to host the work of Queens writers, in multiple languages. She suggested incorporating literary events into the annual Queens Day activities in September, and collaborating with borough libraries. "This year, all 65 public libraries in Queens have agreed to provide space for events. So we're going to see what we can do, how we can plug into something they already have, already existing programs that we can connect with, whether it's seniors writing about their lives or kids learning about poetry."

Lisella said that the [Italian American Writers Association \(IAWA\)](#) [8], an organization that she has been involved with from its beginnings, "provided a model for me of what can be done." For nearly twenty-five years, IAWA has presented readings in New York City, originally at the Cornelia Street Café in Greenwich Village and, more recently, also at Sidewalk Café in the East Village. IAWA, she noted, was founded as a writing and reading community for Italian American writers at different stages, from beginning poets and prose writers to those who have extensive publishing credits. Newcomers are welcomed and encouraged in an environment where they can learn from the more experienced.

Lisella started writing poetry when she was in her teens. "Everybody writes poetry as a teenager," she laughed. "Because you think you're the most sensitive, the most depressed, and then suddenly someone reads a poem to you and you get it, and you think, OK, good, I'll write some of that."

She also was attracted to journalism. "I liked not being in middle of a story, instead being a spectator," she said. While writing poetry, she worked as a travel writer for various magazines, visiting 60 countries in 30 years. That experience, she noted, was an advantage when she applied to be Queens poet laureate.

"I think the judges liked that I had a journalism background, and that I had an idea how to get



something published, how to talk to an editor, that I know what the publishing channels are."

While working as a travel writer, she found that there sometimes were aspects of stories she reported that lent themselves to poetry, or, as she called them "outtakes – stuff you couldn't fit into a B2B [business to business] type of article." In the '90s, when Lisella was researching an article on the Croatian city of Dubrovnik, a woman showed her a fortress where she and her family hid while Yugoslav forces besieged the city during Croatia's independence war. "She described what it was like to spend a night in this fortress while bombs were going off," Lisella recalled. "At night, they would tie each other's wrists together so they wouldn't get separated. She said, 'we were so crazy with fear that we laughed, we would just begin laughing, for no reason. And we slept a lot.' That became a poem."

But despite having traveled to Italy many times, for business and to visit her relatives in Calabria, Lisella has written little about Italy. "I think I've always seen that as my private experience," she said.

"I have written about relationships among Italian family members," she added. "When I was in Italy one time, a woman asked if I was sorry that my grandparents left Italy, because, as she said, 'you're always here.' But as much as I love visiting Italy, I have many choices in America I never would have had in Reggio Calabria. I've written about that. I've also written about being poor in Italy, which my relatives were years ago."

"In my application for Queens poet laureate, I wrote a lot about my italianità; I'm focused on it, I grew up in a house where my grandparents spoke Calabrese – they didn't speak Italian. I think because I can focus on that specificity, it gives me a greater understanding of other cultures. I can totally understand why people hang on to their languages. It's important to hang on to who you are while you are adapting to a new place and circumstances."

Lisella is married to [Gil Fagiani](#) [9], also a poet; together, they curate the IAWA monthly readings. Fagiani's past projects have included Ethnic Encounters, a series of literary readings that alternated between the Cornelia Street Café and an Astoria bookstore. The series featured bilingual poets who read their work in English and in their native languages. Lisella said she realized the importance of retaining one's original language when she heard a Neapolitan poet read at an Ethnic Encounters event. "When he read his poetry in English, it was fine," she said. "But when he read it in napoletano, his whole body language changed, it was like a transformation."

Lisella obviously is a passionate advocate of poetry, regardless of ethnicity or language, and she is committed to promoting it.

"People don't realize how much they rely on poetry," Lisella said. "They rely on it for funerals, weddings, births, that's when they call it up. But they can have the comfort of poetry other times, too. You never hear someone say, 'I was just reading this book of poetry.' So it'd be nice if as poet laureate I could raise poetry's profile a little more, and make people less afraid of reading it."



Links

- [1] <http://ftp.iitaly.org/files/marialisella1434812763jpg>
- [2] <http://www.amazon.com/Thieves-Family-Maria-Lisella/dp/1935520725>
- [3] http://www.amazon.com/Two-Naked-Feet-Maria-Lisella/dp/0984184414/ref=la_B0047WFZAC_1_7?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1434576347&sr=1-7
- [4] http://www.amazon.com/Amore-Hope-St-Maria-Lisella/dp/1599245337/ref=la_B0047WFZAC_1_5?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1434576347&sr=1-5
- [5] http://www.amazon.com/Avanti-Popolo-Italian-American-Writers-Columbus/dp/1933149280/ref=la_B0047WFZAC_1_4?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1434576347&sr=1-4
- [6] http://www.amazon.com/Sweet-Lemons-2-Sicilian-Studies/dp/1881901769/ref=la_B0047WFZAC_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1434576347&sr=1-2
- [7] <https://www.facebook.com/groups/156774861028016/>
- [8] <http://iawa.net/>
- [9] http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/17/nyregion/a-poet-mines-memories-of-drug-addiction.html?_r=0