

The Interview

Sturbridge author buries the past with her latest book

Writer Rita Schiano talks about coming to Sturbridge and finding the truth about earlier events in her life. During her senior year in college, her father was murdered, the victim of a mob hit. She has written a fascinating book about truth, coincidence and forgiveness.



RITA SCHIANO



"When I started writing the book, a lot of why I was the way I was became clear."

Rita, your mother sang opera and your father, who worked in the produce industry, was mob-connected. As a child, what were you thinking when you watched "Father Knows Best?"

Hmmm. That's interesting. Well, when I was a kid growing up in Syracuse I didn't see my life as unusual. What was around me was what I knew as normal.

Was it a close family?

I have a brother. He's seven years older. My mother adored her nieces and nephews.

You grew up in Syracuse?

Yes, and I went to college in upstate New York, at Wells College in Aurora. My father died during my senior year. After that, I had no desire to go back home. He died in December. I graduated a semester early in January. I had 16 bucks in my pocket and moved to Boston.

Why Boston?

There were so many colleges in Boston. The city was full of other young people my age. I stayed there

a year and a half, and then went to graduate school in Ohio at Miami University in Oxford. I majored in Philosophy, which was also my undergraduate major.

Did you have a big stretch of life between graduate school and coming to Sturbridge?

Well yes, I came here after 8 years in Manhattan.

What did you do in New York? Where did you live?

I lived at 10th Ave. and 57th. The west side. I went there to pursue a career in music. I spent a few years working as a jazz and pop singer. Jazz wasn't real big in the '80s, but my heart was always in that. I formed a band in order to play the big clubs. That was my passion job. During the day, I worked for a publishing company. I started as an acquisitions editor and became a vice president.

Did you specialize in any particular type of book?

Business law.

How did you find that work?

I liked it very much. It was the full gamut of business law: H.R., banking, real estate. I like learning many different things about one subject area. An acquisitions editor finds the trends. I found 'The Managers Guide to AIDS in The Workplace' back in '86.

So you spotted that one early on.

Yes. Actually, it might have been even earlier than that.

Did you tire of Manhattan?

In '85, crack really hit the scene in New York. I started to feel unsafe living there. Crack changed that city for me. It got to the point where it seemed to be everywhere and it was getting more and more dangerous. That issue began the journey away from New York for me.

How did you come upon Sturbridge?

In 1988, I decided to open a restaurant with a partner. We knew we wanted to do it outside of New York City. We went on a hunt for the

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Rita Schiano

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right location. We knew the Cape because we'd vacationed there, and each liked Massachusetts, so we went to down there to check it out; we quickly concluded that it was too seasonal. Then we aimed for the Berkshires—to check out that area — and, on the way, we stopped in Sturbridge for an overnight stay. We ended up staying for three days. On Father's Day weekend in 1988, we came back to Sturbridge and found a house, made an offer, and moved here that August.

And you opened your restaurant.

Yes, we opened the Casual Cafe. It was a small place and we were definitely just a two-person operation. We had just 27 seats. We created our own dishes — a blend of Japanese and Italian meals. Actually, we were the first place around here where you could get sushi. Within about a year and a half we had a heck of a following. Keeping that restaurant going was a lot of work during the next 11 years. Finally I said I'd had enough of it.

I imagine with the grueling hours of a restaurant, over an 11-year span, there wasn't much time for writing.

Well, I did write to relax. One of our customers at the restaurant, a writer, always sat and talked about writing. She encouraged me to take a stab at it again. One of the short stories I was working on back then just kept getting longer and longer. It ended up being Sweet Bitter Love, published in 1997 (Rising Tide Press). I wanted to continue working for myself, but didn't know if I could make a living as a writer. Then I found out that I could.

After your debut novel, you also wrote for business?

Yes.

When you stumbled upon some news about your father's death you were doing research for a client?

Yes, it was right after the 9/11 attacks. I was working on a project for a company called Kids Terrain

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Rita Schiano's book takes on tough issues from her real life

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 up in Wilmington, Mass. They wanted to create a song for children that would help kids deal with what was happening. I had already done a cd for them (co-wrote). My cousin, Jamie, was up in the Syracuse area. He had done a children's festival up there (where he had performed the song) so my client asked if I would go online to see if there was any news coverage of it. I got online to do the research at the local paper up there and made a keying error. Instead of ordering one article from the archives, I hit 10. I got the article I needed and then started putting in names. I don't know why I put my father's name in, but I did and there were 37 articles that referenced him. The one that caught my eye was about a mob enforcer who was talking about a 20 year old murder that he'd gotten away with. It had gone to trial twice. When my father died I took off and never stayed around through all the trials. None of us spoke about it.

So it was a mob hit.

Yes.

How did you find out your father was dead?

I was home for Christmas break. It was December 21st. I had got the morning paper and my Mom said 'Gee Rita, listen. They could be talking about your father. '...well dressed man in his 50s found shot to death on a country road.' We were joking about it. That morning my Mom, who was a choir director at one of the churches, said she had to go out and play a funeral. After she left, I kept looking at that article. She wasn't gone 10 minutes when there was a policeman at the door looking for my brother. He was very persistent. He said 'I need to talk to you brother because your father was in an accident.' I asked repeatedly what happened and he finally told me he was dead. I punched him. I thought he was lying. He was a very nice man who knew I was just a distraught 20

year old kid. I called the sergeant at the station who confirmed this. Then I knew that what we had read in the paper was about my father. All of the details are in the new book.

You fictionalized this story. Why didn't you do it as a memoir?

A lot of what takes place in the book goes back to when I was 10 and 11 years old. I used to carry a rubber pellet gun, took pictures of everything, wore a vest that carried smoke bombs to protect myself. I had no understanding of why I did these things. When I started writing the book, a lot of why I was the way I was became clear. I had to rely a lot on memory, had to create and recreate some scenes from my childhood. One of the major players in the story is alive. There is a sense of wanting to protect a few people. I needed the distance to write in terms of fiction. It took almost three years to make the decision and another two to get it done. At one point my partner said 'You talk

about this but none of it is on the page.' I realized I was trying to approach the project like a journalist.

And then the floodgates opened?

That's right. The writing came very quickly after that.

It must have been a tremendous relief.

You know — I always hated Christmas because he was buried on Christmas eve. Two Christmases ago, when I was really into the writing of this book, I pulled out the ornaments that were from my childhood. I held them and made peace with my parents. I realized that my mother, who was a very public person, a tremendously beloved woman, a phenomenal musician, had to go through those very public trials with her head held high. I wasn't there for her—and that realization was one of the most painful moments in the writing. Even though this is just a story, the book

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