

## SEMPRE AVANTI

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### WHAT'S SO FUNNY?

By Dona De Sanctis

“What’s going on in the comics these days?” a concerned Italian American asked a few weeks ago. His question was accompanied by a link to the syndicated “Neolithic” comic strip, *B.C* by Johnny Hart. In his April 27, 2007 strip, Hart presented this dialogue between two cavemen:

"My Uncle Spagatinni invented the ski mask."

"Wow! How much did he get for it?"

"Twenty years."

*B.C.* runs in more than 1,300 newspapers across the U.S. and has a readership of 100 million.

Not to be outdone, Canadian cartoonist Paul Gilligan offers up *Pooch Café*, featuring a dog named Poncho who loves cheese, drinks from the toilet and mixes it up with a gang of Italian greyhounds who are “made mutts” that speak like characters from *The Sopranos*. This daily strip is syndicated in English, Spanish and Dutch newspapers.

Also recently, the popular comic strip *The Piranha Club* by Bud Grace presented a scenario in which a housewife is buying fish. The fishmonger points out that the octopus is from Italy. “How do you know it’s Italian?,” she asks. “The gold chain and the chest hair,” he says. *The Piranha Club* runs seven days a week in more than 200 newspapers around the world.

These newspaper comic strips illustrate how pervasive unflattering Italian stereotypes have become, but at least they are targeted at adults. Of far greater concern is the way Italian characters are presented in comic books that kids read.

### **CHILDREN'S "LITERATURE?"**

Although they have been around since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the popularity of comic books soared in the 1930s when a new hero named Superman appeared on the cover of an edition of Action Comics in 1938. The Man of Steel was soon followed by other superheroes, including Batman, Captain America, the Green Lantern and even Wonder Woman.

After World War II with the advent of television, comic book sales declined only to rise again in recent years, thanks to full-length movies and video games featuring Batman, Spiderman, Superman, the X-Men, and the Fantastic Four.

Today, comic books are recognized as a serious art form by some scholars, literary critics and art museums. First editions have become collector's items, bought and sold at astronomical prices, while teachers have begun using comic books in the classroom to encourage children to read more.

### **THE MAFIA**

None of this would constitute a problem for Italian Americans were it not for the way that DC Comics and Marvel, the two largest English language comic book publishers in the world, routinely present characters of Italian descent, according to Joseph Guida, who has read and collected comic books for more than 20 years.

“Ironically, in addition to plenty of villains with Mafia ties, DC Comics and Marvel have several heroes who come from Mafia families, but have repudiated organized crime,” he says.

For example, a recent DC comic book introduced a violent, racist villain named “Little Italy,” whose nemesis is Helena Rosa Bertinelli. She comes from a prominent New York Mafia family, but has vowed to fight crime after the Mob murders her entire family at a wedding. This comic book alone reached 150,000 readers, according to Guida.

The Italian characters in Marvel Comics are even more disturbing. One popular anti-hero is “the Punisher,” a.k.a. Francis Castiglione, who was born in Queens to Sicilian parents. As a youth, he studied for the priesthood, but left to marry.

Tragically, his wife and children are murdered by the Costa crime family after they witness a gangland execution. He survives and devotes his life to fighting the Mafia, but first he changes his name from Castiglione to Castle because he is ashamed of his Italian heritage.

Another popular comic book crime fighter with Mafia roots is Paulie Provenzano (“Omerta”), who is rejected by the Mafia because he is a mutant and instead joins the X-Men.

## **THE SEEDS OF STEREOTYPING**

Until now, Italian American advocates have focused their attention on the damage that movies, television and advertising do to the image and reputation of this nation’s estimated 26 million Americans of Italian heritage.

But Guida rightly points out that the seeds of stereotyping are being planted even earlier in the minds of impressionable children, largely young boys and teen-agers, who read comic books that expose them to characters of Italian descent who are connected to the Mafia—even when they are fighting crime.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the history and contributions of Italian Americans are strikingly absent from the textbooks children study from. In effect, nothing kids learn in school about Italy, Italians and Italian Americans counterbalances what they learn about us from comic books.

Small wonder then that a Zogby survey of teens ages 13 to 18 several years ago revealed that 78 percent associated Italian Americans with either criminal activity or blue-collar work.

How to reverse this trend? Past experience has taught us that no amount of letter-writing, face-to-face meetings or street demonstrations will convince the executives at Marvel or DC Comics to drop those characters or even to simply change their last names. The CEOs at these corporations have to answer to their stockholders so as long as these characters boost comic book sales, they will be here to stay.

Any ideas?

***Dona De Sanctis, Ph.D., is deputy executive director of the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA), the oldest and largest national organization in the U.S. for men and women of Italian heritage. To join the Sons of Italy Commission for Social Justice and fight defamation, contact her at [ddesanctis@osia.org](mailto:ddesanctis@osia.org) or call (202) 547-2900.***