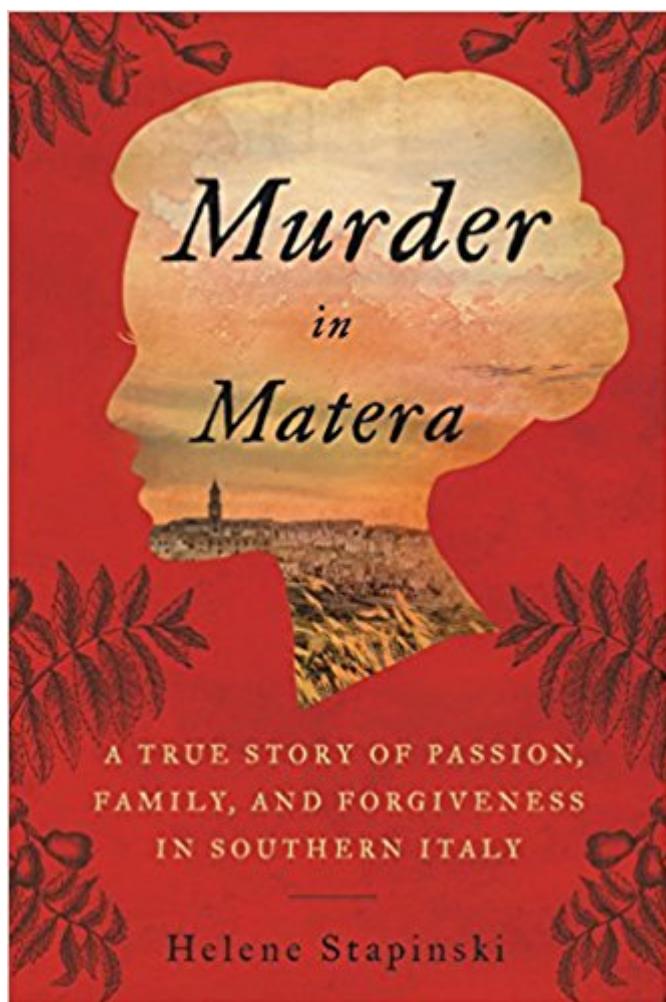


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# Murder In Matera: A True Story Of Passion, Family, And Forgiveness In Southern Italy



## Synopsis

“A murder mystery, a model of investigative reporting, a celebration of the fierce bonds that hold families together through tragedies” | *Murder in Matera* is a gem. • San Francisco Chronicle “Tantalizing” • NPR “A thrilling detective story” | *Stapinski* pursues the study of her family’s criminal genealogy with unexpected emotional results. • Library Journal A writer goes deep into the heart of Italy to unravel a century-old family mystery in this spellbinding memoir that blends the suspenseful twists of *Making a Murderer* and the emotional insight of Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels. Since childhood, Helene Stapinski heard lurid tales about her great-great-grandmother, Vita. In Southern Italy, she was a loose woman who had murdered someone. Immigrating to America with three children, she lost one along the way. Helene’s youthful obsession with Vita deepened as she grew up, eventually propelling the journalist to Italy, where, with her own children in tow, she pursued the story, determined to set the record straight. Finding answers would take Helene ten years and numerous trips to Basilicata, the rural “instep” of Italy’s boot • a mountainous land rife with criminals, superstitions, old-world customs, and desperate poverty. Though false leads sent her down blind alleys, Helene’s dogged search, aided by a few lucky • even miraculous • breaks and a group of colorful local characters, led her to the truth. Yes, the family tales she’d heard were true: There had been a murder in Helene’s family, a killing that roiled 1870s Italy. But the identities of the killer and victim weren’t who she thought they were. In revisiting events that happened more than a century before, Helene came to another stunning realization • she wasn’t who she thought she was, either. Weaving Helene’s own story of discovery with the tragic tale of Vita’s life, *Murder in Matera* is a literary whodunit and a moving tale of self-discovery that brings into focus a long ago tragedy in a little-known region remarkable for its stunning sunny beauty and dark buried secrets.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 320 pages

Publisher: Dey Street Books (May 23, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 006243845X

ISBN-13: 978-0062438454

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 49 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #45,619 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #8 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > Italy #19 in Books > History > Europe > Italy #62 in Books > Travel > Europe > Italy > General

## Customer Reviews

“The style is streetwise Hemingway, the theme is Faulkner in a nutshell.” (New York Times Book Review) “Murder in Matera is a remarkable family saga that captures the beauty and grit of southern Italy. The powerful and complicated matriarch at the center of Stapinski’s tale will stay with you long after you finish the book.” (Gay Talese, author of *Unto the Sons* and *The Voyeur Motel*) “This book is many things: a gripping murder story, an ancestral journey, a tender yet funny reflection on motherhood and love of country, family, and food. But mostly it’s just a total page turner. Helene Stapinski is incapable of delivering a dull moment.” (Meghan Daum, author of *The Unspeakable: And Other Subjects Of Discussion*) “Meticulously researched and evocative, *Murder in Matera* is a powerful story of identity and destiny and it’s honestly, beautifully told.” (Mark Rotella, author of *Amore: The Story of Italian American Song* and *Stolen Figs: And Other Adventures in Calabria*)

From the age of four, Helene Stapinski heard lurid yet inspiring tales about her great-great-grandmother Vita, a loose woman back in Southern Italy who fled to America in 1892 with her three children after committing murder. Gripped by her family’s story, Helene embarked on a decade-long fact-finding mission, making numerous trips to Basilicata, the rural “instep” of Italy’s boot—once known for its superstitions, criminals, and desperate poverty. It’s an undiscovered land filled with badlands-like hills, ancient caves, and fertile valleys with silver-tinged olive trees, whose isolation is matched only by its forlorn, incredible beauty. In a stunning turn of events, Helene comes to learn what really happened, sparking an upheaval of her own identity and sense of history. Deeply researched and reported, *Murder in Matera* is a remarkable true story about one family’s hidden secrets. It is also a powerful and timeless story of immigration and motherhood—a profound testament to how far one woman would go in search of a better life in America, not only for herself, but for her children and the preservation of her family.

As my family came from Calabria and Basiicata being so near.....the book was good. For me geographically interesting.

It was good

An engaging summer page-turner. This family history set in southern Italy is both an intensely personal story that unearths the story of the author's family, and one that describes the lives of many of our great (and great great) grandparents who immigrated in the early 20th century. I sat up until 3 a.m. to finish.

This marvelous book -- funny and tragic and enlightening -- successfully blends memoir, travel reportage, and history as the intrepid, witty and soulful author, searches her own family's clouded past in order to understand a dark secret that had been passed down over generations from the bleached and impoverished villages of southern Italy to the streets of Jersey City. By the final pages of this accessible genealogical detective story, Helene Stapinski's brave journey over time and across cultures reaches an understanding beyond dark and light, past guilt and innocence; and the grateful reader arrives at a place of understanding that expands like a deep breath, that feels like self-understanding and appreciation and relief, that feels like joy -- that is about a love honestly earned.

Many big differences really, beginning with the author's passion and the wonderful characters, the holy and unholy places, the excellent local food and the beautiful scenery. This is a first person adventure that takes the author from Jersey City to Siena, to Brooklyn, and then, most tellingly, back to Italy, to the deep southern Italian province of Basilicata. Remote and picturesque Matera, Bernalda and Pisticci hold secrets they are reluctant to reveal. The author returns again and again; she is determined and persistant, so much so that we become parties to her quest, learning history going back to the Greeks, who colonized the area centuries earlier, to the impoverished citizens and their oppressors who followed, to the present day, where, in many ways, little has changed. Language barriers are overcome, the reticence of the locals is breached, family connections are raveled and unraveled, and the warm comradery of those who join the author in her quest is rewarded, but only after a great many surprises. You will be fortunate, as I was, to go along for the ride.

I just finished Helene Stapinski's *Murder in Metera* and am writing this review immediately, after wiping away my tears. What a great book. And yes, it's a great story, but it's so much more than that. This is my favorite kind of non-fiction, in which the central tale unfolds in tandem with the history that surrounded it, with creative imaginings all beautifully written and weaved in. Helene Stapinski struck that perfect balance. While I discovered the truth of the tragic life of her great-great-grandmother, I not only learned about life in Southern Italy in the late 1800s which was never less than fascinating but also about Stapinski's own journey as a writer and a detective and as a mother searching for the truth behind the family murder while raising her kids. It captured me the way Jon Krakauer does especially in *Into Thin Air*. Every detail was compelling in *Murder In Metera*, the way fish curing was compelling in *The Perfect Storm*. I sped through this book. I was surprised at every turn, right to the very end, when I was flat out crying. Stapinski's writing had me laughing most of the way through even though the details of the story are mostly sad. She writes like she's telling the story out loud, maybe to her children, the way the story had been passed down to her (and lost in the process!), with all the colloquialisms and sayings from Southern Italy to Jersey City. I highly recommend *Murder in Metera*.

This book gave me a far deeper appreciation of the abject poverty and extremely difficult lives of my southern Italian ancestors. To bring - or abandon - your family to an unknown world that offered uncertain hope and a dream required a deep, quiet courage. Their ultimate motivation was to try to provide a better world for their descendants so that their children and grandchildren could rise out of poverty, hunger, and misery. By and large, most Italian and other Europeans immigrants were eventually able to achieve this, as evidenced by my generation. For all of our failings, our lives are much better off than those of our ancestors. I would imagine that some parts of this story will resonate with immigrants from many parts of the world. Ironically, the author's family's experiences has some striking parallels to my own family. I am pretty sure we are not related, but it is even odder, based on these coincidences, that we are not related. It speaks to some of the very similar pathways of the lives of immigrant families. No one of these coincidences are unique, but the sum of them is striking:1) We share the same ancestral last name in one branch of our family.2) My family is from the same town (Bernalda) where this book is largely set.3) My grandfather became a barber in America, as did one of the author's great uncles.4) Some of my relatives were involved in criminal

activity, though not to the extent of the authors and I am pretty certain none of my immediate ancestors were guilty of a murder<sup>5</sup>) One of my parents is Polish and the other is Italian, just like the author's parents<sup>6</sup>) Here is where it gets really weird - my wife and the author's husband have the same last name (even though they are not related!)<sup>7</sup>) And, for a little icing on the cake, the author was quite concerned about her children's hereditary risks of criminal behavior. I happen to be a genetic specialist. No doubt other readers of the book who are descendants of immigrants from Basilicata will find their own parallels. Our families may not have intersected, but they sure did travel closely together.

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