



Novelist Nelson DeMille

Courtesy of Nelson DeMille

Nelson DeMille

Action, Adventure and Suspense

By Anthony Sciarratta

The world was introduced to Nelson DeMille in 1978 after the publication of his first major novel, *By the Rivers of Babylon*. With 21 novels published and a 22nd on the way next year (*The Maze*), DeMille has become a household name. Readers may be most familiar with his famed characters John Corey and John Sutter, but there is a mystery that remains behind the six-time No. 1 New York Times bestselling author.

While the name DeMille does sound Italian, it is of French origin. On his father's side, his roots can be traced back to Avignon, in the south of France. But DeMille's paternal grandparents were of Italian descent, his grandfather born in Roccamorice, a small town in the Abruzzo region and his grandmother's family from Tivoli, a town in Lazio outside of Rome.

In the early 1930s, DeMille's father immigrated from Canada to America and, before fighting in World War II, married his mother. His mother was American with Italian roots in Naples. DeMille was born in Jamaica, Queens, N.Y., in 1943. His family later moved to Elmont, a neighborhood in Long Island that had less of an Italian presence.

"Elmont wasn't the old neighborhood," DeMille says. "Even as a kid, I realized that everybody around me wasn't Italian anymore. I used to think that only Italians lived in America."

DeMille felt the camaradery between Italian Americans, but when his grandmother started teaching him to speak Italian, his father was not happy. "When my father came home from the war and found out I was speaking Italian, he flipped," he says.

"During that time, Italians wanted to become fully American and not teach their children the native language."

Today, DeMille remembers bits and pieces of what his grandmother taught him but can't speak Italian fluently. It's something he wished he could have changed. "I missed out on something," he says. "There were enough Italian Americans and Italian-born people around me that I could have been fluent, but teaching a secondary language just wasn't the way of the world at that time."

Many prominent members of the Italian American community are known to have drawn inspiration from their culture and it's safe to say that DeMille did.

He is an avid lover of history, which led him to explore his Italian roots by making a pilgrimage to Roc-

camorice and visiting Rome nearly 20 times. He says he has been immersed in Italian culture, and was inspired to channel his experiences as an Italian American by the novelist Mario Puzo.

“When I read *The Godfather*, I realized there was something there,” DeMille says. “Puzo got onto something that was just amazing. He revived and popularized the immigrant culture. I knew I wanted to do something like that eventually.”

That was the incentive for one of his most popular novels, *The Gold Coast*. When it came to the Italian American characters and traditions, DeMille didn’t need to research anything. “The Italian culture just poured out of me,” he says. “When my editors saw what I was doing, they were amazed.”

While writing *The Gold Coast*, DeMille kept the Italian hallmark of literature—*The Divine Comedy*—in mind. “The devil is interesting, and I kept Dante’s *Inferno* in the back on my head.”

Fans of *The Gold Coast*, and DeMille’s other novels, will be thrilled to hear that he wants to revisit and dive deeper into Italian American culture as his career progresses. “The pandemic actually helped my writing,” says DeMille, who recently penned his upcoming 150,000-word novel, *The Maze*. “Every author wishes for quiet time without interruption. I took advantage of it because I didn’t think a lockdown would ever happen again.”

Throughout the pandemic, DeMille wrote seven days a week in his writing studio, which he refers to as Area 51. It has no postal address and is located on the third floor of an office building in the suburbs of Garden City. The location is considered remote by those who know DeMille, but the pandemic made it eerily quiet. This is especially true when you’re doing everything in longhand, like DeMille.

“I write about three drafts of every book on legal pads with a No. 1 pencil from around 12 p.m. to 6 p.m.,” he says.

The pandemic accelerated this process and helped him meet the deadline for *The Maze*, eighth novel in his John Corey series. “In a way, *The Maze* is a sequel to the first John Corey novel, *Plum Island*,” says DeMille. “It begins where *Plum Island* began.”

The plot of *The Maze* surrounds the unsolved Gilgo Beach murders (referred to in the novel as the Fire Island murders) that took place on Long Island. “It’s always hard to fictionalize real stuff,” says DeMille. “I’ve only done it once before.”

Reflecting on his career, DeMille remembers when he barely made enough income to live on writing. “I quit my day job in 1974 and the rest is history,” he says. “It was then that I realized I could really make a career out of this.” ▲

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