

# **The Queen of the Big Time**

**by Adriana Trigiani**

## About the Book

*New York Times* bestselling author Adriana Trigiani returns to the charm and drama of small-town life with *The Queen of the Big Time*. Nella Castelluca, middle daughter of five, aspires to a genteel life “in town,” far from the rigors of life on the farm. But her dreams shift when she meets and falls in love with Renato Lanzara, a handsome, worldly poet. When Renato disappears without explanation, Nella is shattered. Four years later, Renato’s sudden return just before Nella’s wedding to the steadfast Franco Zollerano leaves her shaken; for although Renato has chosen a path very different from Nella’s, they are fated to live and work side by side for the rest of their lives. Etched in glorious detail in Trigiani’s trademark style, *The Queen of the Big Time* is the story of a determined, passionate woman who can never forget her first love.

## Praise for the Book

“[An] epic of small-town life. . . . Trigiani takes from her own heritage to craft a generous plot-driven novel that’s a breezy page-turner. [It is] a personal saga of American history and a romance woven together with warmth and good humor.”

— *The Oregonian*

“Moving and poignant . . . Trigiani has again defied categorization. She is more than a one-hit wonder, more than a Southern writer, more than a women’s novelist. She is an amazing young talent.”

— *Richmond Times-Dispatch*

“[*The Queen of the Big Time*] will make you smile and reminisce about gentler, more civil times in small-town and rural America.”

— *The Boston Globe*

“Intensely detailed characters . . . Deaths lead to births, dreams deferred yield wondrous new visions.”

— *Entertainment Weekly*

*Courtesy of Ballantine Books*

## About the Author

### **Adriana Trigiani**

American Writer (1959–)

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**Personal Information:** Born in Roseto, PA; married Tim Stephenson (a lighting designer for television); children: Lucia.

**Education:** St. Mary's College, graduated 1981.

**Addresses:** Home: New York, NY.

**E-mail:** ATrigiani@literati.net; adriana@adrianatrigiani.com.

**Career:** Writer of novels, plays, and television plays. Producer, documentary filmmaker, and comic. Worked previously as cook, office worker, and housecleaner. Part of comedy troupe, The Outcasts.

## WRITINGS

### **“BIG STONE GAP” SERIES**

- *Big Stone Gap*, Random House (New York, NY), 2000.
- *Big Cherry Holler*, Random House (New York, NY), 2001.
- *Milk Glass Moon*, Random House (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Home to Big Stone Gap*, Random House (New York, NY), 2006.

### **OTHER NOVELS**

- *Lucia, Lucia*, Random House (New York, NY), 2003.
- *The Queen of the Big Time*, Random House (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Rococo*, Random House (New York, NY), 2005.

### **NONFICTION**

- (With Mary Yolanda Trigiani and others) *Cooking with My Sisters: One Hundred Years of Family Recipes from Bari to Big Stone Gap*, Random House (New York, NY), 2004.

Author of off-Broadway play *Secrets of the Lava Lamp*, produced at Manhattan Theatre Club. Writer and producer of documentary *Queens of the Big-Time*, 1996. Contributor to anthology *American Girls about Town*, Downtown Press (New York, NY), 2004. Writer for television programs, including *A Different World*, *The Cosby Show*, *Good Sports*, *CityKids*, *Linc's*, and *Working It Out*.

## Sidelights

Novelist and television screenwriter Adriana Trigiani found the inspiration for her “Big Stone Gap” series of novels in her childhood. Born into an Italian immigrant family, Trigiani moved to Big Stone Gap, Virginia, a small valley town in the Blue Ridge Mountains, when she was six years old. Remote and isolated, Big Stone Gap was surrounded by mountains that prevented television reception, and “magazines from the Bookmobile were my connection to the world — and they came a month late,” Trigiani told Benedicte Page in a *Bookseller* interview. Trigiani left this isolated setting when she attended St. Mary’s College in South Bend, Indiana. She excelled in writing there, and subsequently went to New York, aspiring to become a playwright. She founded the all-girl comedy team The Outcasts and worked for five years writing, directing, and performing with the troupe. She also scripted an off-Broadway play and wrote for television. *Big Stone Gap* started out as a screenplay, but when Trigiani was unable to sell it, her agent suggested she rework it as a novel.

Ave Maria Mulligan is the town pharmacist in *Big Stone Gap*. Thirty-five years old and already convinced that she will be a spinster for life, she lives vicariously through the love life of her friend Iva Lou Wade, a bookmobile librarian. When Ave Maria discovers that her father was not who she thought he was, she begins a search for her biological father and her identity. “Chock full of engaging, oddball characters and unexpected plot twists, this Gap is meant to be crossed,” remarked Cynthia Sanz in *People*. Rebecca Sturm Kelm, writing in *Library Journal*, called the book a “nice, old-fashioned, feel-good first novel,” while Sanz declared it to be “delightfully quirky.”

The sequel to *Big Stone Gap*, *Big Cherry Holler*, picks up the story of Ave Maria’s life about a decade later. She and miner Jack MacChesney have been married for eleven years. Their daughter, Etta, is a bright and lively young girl. Some years earlier, however, the couple lost their young son, Joe, to leukemia, and his death put a seemingly irreparable fracture in their relationship. Their marriage is stressed further when Jack loses his job. Ave Maria and Etta head off to stay with family in Italy for a while, and Ave Maria finds her dedication and fidelity tested by a new acquaintance in Italy. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called *Big Cherry Holler* a “big-hearted novel that alternates dollops of comfort with moments of folksy charm and stark poignancy.”

Mother-daughter conflict forms the core of Trigiani’s third novel, *Milk Glass Moon*. Etta MacChesney has matured into an independent and self-assured young woman, but Ave Maria MacChesney has difficulty in letting go and allowing Etta to forge her own path. The MacChesney family, along with Iva Lou, visit Italy for some soul-searching in Ave Maria’s ancestral homeland. “The final installment of Trigiani’s heartfelt trilogy will not disappoint fans” and longtime readers, commented Margaret Flanagan in *Booklist*.

Trigiani stepped outside Big Stone Gap in *Lucia, Lucia*, a novel set in modern-day Greenwich Village, New York. Lucia Sartori, a dignified Italian lady of some seventy years, invites Kit Zanetti, a local hopeful playwright, to tea. Kit marvels at the 1950s

memorabilia in Lucia's apartment, and when she asks about a luxurious full-length mink coat, Lucia shares her life story. "Finely drawn characters move the story along with warmth and humor, [and] relationships in Lucia's big Italian family are lovingly detailed," observed Carol Clark in *School Library Journal*. "This old-fashioned drama wears its heart on its sleeve — subtlety is not its strong suit — but readers will laugh and weep for Lucia and her lost dreams," commented a reviewer in *Publishers Weekly*.

Trigiani again chose a different setting for her novel *Rococo*, published in 2005. It takes place in New Jersey, and in another break with her earlier works, its main character is a man, Bartolomeo di Crespi. "B," as he is better known, is a confirmed bachelor and a highly successful interior decorator who longs to renovate his local Catholic church, where he has attended Mass all his life. Passed over at first, he manages to get the job after a confrontation with the parish priest, but B then is confronted with the realization that he may not be equal to the task before him. "The renovation and the people he meets during it leave him questioning not only his abilities as a designer, but ultimately his faith. Trigiani's fascination with family dynamics shines through loud and clear in her tales of the raucous Italian-American di Crespi clan," wrote Amy Scribner on the *BookPage* Web site. She concluded: "Throughout this fast-paced, abundantly charming novel, Trigiani focuses on the things that really matter: family, faith and home. Especially home. It is a deeply rewarding book that should make her legions of fans very happy indeed." Another positive assessment came from Kathy Perschmann on the *Armchair Interviews* Web site; she credited Trigiani with giving readers of *Rococo* "another great Italian-American family and tale."

In 2006, Trigiani revisited the scene of her first success in a new novel called *Home to Big Stone Gap*. Set several years after the last installment of the series, the book sees Ave Maria and Jack struggling to adjust after their daughter, Etta, marries and takes up a new life in Italy. Old secrets from the past also spring up to rattle long-standing relationships. "To say more about the plotline of *Home to Big Stone Gap* would ruin it, because much of the joy here is in the unexpected — like taking a walk through your long-forgotten hometown and rounding the corner, only to bump into your best friend from your school days," wrote Lourdes Orive on *Bookreporter.com*. According to a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, *Home to Big Stone Gap* succeeds in providing readers with "memorable characters and small-town magic."

## **FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

### **PERIODICALS**

- *Booklist*, February 1, 2000, Marlene Chamberlain, review of *Big Stone Gap*, p. 997; May 15, 2001, Marlene Chamberlain, review of *Big Cherry Holler*, p. 1734; July, 2002, Margaret Flanagan, review of *Milk Glass Moon*, p. 1823; September 1, 2003, Joanne Wilkinson, review of *Lucia, Lucia*, pp. 62-63; July 1, 2005, Barbara Jacobs, review of *Rococo*, p. 1902; October 1, 2006, Allison Block, review of *Home to Big Stone Gap*, p. 38.

- *Bookseller*, December 13, 2002, Benedicte Page, interview with Adriana Trigiani, p. 29.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, April 14, 2000, review of *Big Stone Gap*, p. 68; July 11, 2003, Jennifer Armstrong, review of *Lucia, Lucia*, p. 85; June 17, 2005, Melissa Rose Bernardo, review of *Rococo*, p. 87; November 3, 2006, Tina Jordan, review of *Home to Big Stone Gap*, p. 83.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, May 15, 2002, review of *Milk Glass Moon*, p. 703; May 15, 2003, review of *Lucia, Lucia*, p. 712; May 15, 2005, review of *Rococo*, p. 563; September 1, 2006, review of *Home to Big Stone Gap*, p. 874.
- *Library Journal*, April 1, 2000, Rebecca Sturm Kelm, review of *Big Stone Gap*, p. 133; May 15, 2001, Rebecca Sturm Kelm, review of *Big Cherry Holler*, p. 165; May 15, 2003, Rebecca Sturm Kelm, review of *Lucia, Lucia*, p. 127.
- *People*, May 1, 2000, Cynthia Sanz, review of *Big Stone Gap*, p. 41; July 29, 2002, review of *Milk Glass Moon*, p. 41; July 18, 2005, Beth Perry, review of *Rococo*, p. 51.
- *Publishers Weekly*, May 14, 2001, review of *Big Cherry Holler*, p. 52; June 24, 2002, review of *Milk Glass Moon*, p. 39; July 7, 2003, review of *Lucia, Lucia*, p. 54; August 18, 2003, Joseph Barbato, interview with Adriana Trigiani, pp. 51-52; October 4, 2004, review of *American Girls about Town*, p. 70; May 30, 2005, review of *Rococo*, p. 40; September 4, 2006, review of *Home to Big Stone Gap*, p. 38.
- *School Library Journal*, December, 2003, Carol Clark, review of *Lucia, Lucia*, pp. 176-177.
- *USA Today*, August 28, 2003, Carol Memmott, "There Was a Real 'Lucia' in New York," p. D07.

## ONLINE

- *Adriana Trigiani Home Page*, <http://www.adrianatrigiani.com> (June 24, 2007).
- *Armchair Interviews*, <http://www.armchairinterviews.com/> (June 24, 2007), Kathy Perschmann, review of *Rococo*.
- *Bella Stander Home Page*, <http://www.bellastander.com/> (July 10, 2007), interview with Adriana Trigiani.
- *BookPage*, <http://www.bookpage.com/> (June 24, 2007), Amy Scribner, interview with Adriana Trigiani.
- *Bookreporter.com*, <http://www.bookreporter.com/> (June 24, 2007), Lourdes Orive, review of *Home to Big Stone Gap*.
- *EW.com*, <http://www.ew.com/> (June 13, 2005), Melissa Rose Bernardo, review of *Rococo*; (October 27, 2006), Tina Jordan, review of *Home to Big Stone Gap*.

**Source:** *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2007

**Source Database:** Contemporary Authors Online

## Author Q & A

### *A Conversation with Concetta “Chettie” Ricci Marucci*

**Adriana:** My readers are nuts for you, Chettie.

**Chettie:** (*laughs*) Why?

**Adriana:** They tell me that they have a best friend just like you.

**Chettie:** That’s very sweet. But it wasn’t hard to be best friends with Nella. I looked up to her.

**Adriana:** Tell me about her.

**Chettie:** I wish I would have had a quarter of her pep. She had more energy than ten people. She was straight as an arrow, honest, and very decent. I miss her every day.

**Adriana:** Tell me about your hometown.

**Chettie:** I wish everyone could have the experience of being raised in a town like Roseto. It was very safe — we never locked our doors! Our parents worked hard, but they gave us a hundred percent of themselves. They tried very hard to show us the world. We’d go to Philadelphia and up to Connecticut, places that were close by but different. I loved when we went to the shore in New Jersey. Atlantic City is one of my favorite places.

**Adriana:** Did your mother remarry after the loss of your father?

**Chettie:** Never. She didn’t even go out on a date. She said she had the best and there would be no topping that. So, no, she didn’t. But that wasn’t uncommon. Her friends who were widowed young didn’t remarry either. Maybe it’s just our culture.

**Adriana:** So many readers have asked me about the Roseto Heart Study led by Dr. Stewart Wolf of Tott’s Gap. Can you tell me about it?

**Chettie:** Well, it was a known fact that our people lived to be very old and didn’t die of heart attacks at the same numbers as the general population. In fact, our little Italian community in northeastern Pennsylvania had the lowest mortality rate for heart attacks in the country. And if you stepped across Division Street — just a few feet outside of Roseto proper into Bangor — the numbers shot up.

**Adriana:** Just a few steps?

**Chettie:** Literally, just a few! Dr. Wolf came with a team of doctors in the late fifties and early sixties and studied all of us, from the very old to the very young. At first they thought it was the food we ate — fresh from our gardens. Then they thought maybe it was the homemade wine that made us live so long, then the olive oil . . . Well, there were so many theories. But after the study was completed, Dr. Wolf said that it was our sense of community that made us live long. In Roseto, we had no fear, only a sense of family and community to sustain us. We knew that we would never go hungry, that we were safe from crime, and that when we were old we would not be put away somewhere, but rather would be taken care of in our own homes — so we didn't have stress.

**Adriana:** I've heard stress can lead to heart attacks.

**Chettie:** Evidently. Stress can break your heart.

**Adriana:** And the women in your community worked.

**Chettie:** Of course. So many times, society's ills are blamed on the working women, but we all worked, all our lives — in the factories, on the farm — and the men in the slate quarries. We did this while we raised our families! No one talks about that, but it's true. We were traditional, and yet we had, as women, a sense of purpose outside our family structure. But you see, we had built-in day care. These two family houses in Roseto were often home to grandparents, parents, and their children — so when I went to work, my mother watched my children. But the whole community participated. All the children felt safe, and the adults surely felt they could look after the children. It was like one big family, if you will.

**Adriana:** What was the best part of growing up in Roseto?

**Chettie:** Oh, how can I pick one thing? Fall brought the hog killing — we all shared the bacon and the hams and cured our own prosciutto. Winter was wonderful because many families had horses and the fathers would hitch them up to a sleigh and take us for rides down Dewey Street and then on to Garibaldi. Spring brought Easter and the planting of the gardens. Summer meant the Our Lady of Mount Carmel Feast would come at the end of July. Main Street would be lined with stands selling candy and local delicacies, and there were games and rides and fireworks —

**Adriana:** So many folks remember the fireworks!

**Chettie:** They always went off at midnight on the Saturday night of the Feast. Then the next day was the Solemn Procession, where we would walk and say the rosary in thanksgiving. The Queen of the Big Time led the rosary procession, by the way.

**Adriana:** So religion played a big part in the life of the town?

**Chettie:** Oh yes. There's our Catholic Church, but then, of course, the Presbyterian Church, too.

**Adriana:** On Garibaldi Avenue?

**Chettie:** Right. When the Italians first arrived here from Roseto Val Fortore, the diocese of Philadelphia would not send a priest to the immigrants here. The Presbyterians came, and saw a need for a church, so some of our forefathers converted.

**Adriana:** I noticed that there are two cemeteries in Roseto.

**Chettie:** Right. One for the Catholics and one for the Presbyterians.

**Adriana:** Is there anything else you'd like me to tell the readers about your town?

**Chettie:** We love where we come from. And we are so proud to be Italian American. In fact, when we built this town, we modeled it after our hometown in Italy. Many of us have visited it over in Italy, and we're amazed at the similarities.

**Adriana:** So you've come so far and yet . . .

**Chettie:** Nothing has changed. We still hold each other close, even though the world has changed, and try to hold on to our traditions. It's not easy. But there's nothing more wonderful than making fresh pasta with the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren. I love to teach them everything I know and tell them all the stories I remember. It just seems right.

*Courtesy of Ballantine Books*

## Discussion Questions

1. Describe the relationships within the Castelluca family. Do you think families today possess similar values? How does Nella relate to her sisters, in particular Assunta and Elena?
2. When Nella first meets Renato Lanzara, she thinks, “This must be what love at first sight feels like.” Do you think Nella’s first encounter with Renato Lanzara is really love at first sight? What is it about him that is so attractive to her? Do her feelings signify more than simply an adolescent crush?
3. By setting up an arranged marriage between Assunta and Alessandro, Nella’s parents are employing a tradition from their past in Italy. Does this practice gel with their new existence in America? How does Nella’s generation view this arranged marriage? How does Alessandro’s arrival change the dynamics within the Castelluca family? How does Alessandro regard his sisters-in-law?
4. Upon meeting at the Columbus School, Nella and Chettie quickly become friends. How does their relationship compare to those that Nella has with her sisters? What qualities does Chettie have that differ from the Castelluca girls’? How does the quarry accident affect their friendship?
5. In the 1920s, it was rare for a woman to receive admiration and respect in the workplace, especially from a man. What is it about Nella that impresses Mr. Jenkins?
6. How are issues of class and race explored in *The Queen of the Big Time*? How do you think the Castellucas’ lives would differ if they didn’t live in their transplanted Italian enclave?
7. When tragedy hits, how do the Castellucas deal with change and adjust their roles within the family? How do the ways they rely on one another change?
8. Why isn’t Nella interested in Franco at first? What are the qualities she’s looking for in a man? How do Franco and Renato differ, and why do you think she ends up choosing Franco over someone like Renato?
9. Religion plays a large role in the townspeople of Bari. How big a part does it play in Nella’s life? When does she turn toward her religious values? Did your view of clergy members change after Nella and Renato’s encounter in Italy?
10. In many of her novels, Trigiani has explored the complicated dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship. How would you characterize the relationship between Nella and her mother, compared to that of Nella and Celeste? How does Nella and Celeste’s relationship change as Celeste grows older?

11. Do you think it is possible for one to find true love more than once in a lifetime?  
How is Nella's love for Renato different from her love for Franco? Are both loves  
"true"?

12. In what ways can Nella be considered a "Queen of the Big Time"?

*Courtesy of Ballantine Books*