



Amici della Cultura – Enzo Ardire

As a longtime lover of science fiction, I was intrigued to learn that one of our members had recently published their debut novel in the genre. Enzo Ardire, a Sacramento native and longtime supporter of what we do at the Italian Cultural Society, supplied us with a few copies of his novel, *Reklaim*. It is a serious work, one that is certain to bring with it its own share of controversy. Overall, I enjoyed it, specifically the portions that occur in a fictionalized version of Italy, where Italian-coded characters at varying levels of social standing and power collide in ways that can only be described as tragic. What I also found interesting were themes that, as an Italian-American, seem unique to the diaspora experience of living in the United States as an ethnically and culturally Italian person.

Before I go any further, I want to provide the following disclaimer to our members: *Reklaim* is a book intended for mature audiences. Its setting appears to be a fictionalized version of Europe in the midst of World War II, and while its violence is not the caricatured, wanton killing that so much of our modern media portrays (see: *John Wick*, etc.), I found its depictions of the harm humans do to one another all the more unsettling as a result.

As I stated, I enjoyed it overall, but found my eyebrows furrow at some of the ideas Mr. Ardire presents in *Reklaim*. The book offers a perspective on a well-known story that I had not

considered, and the questions that lingered in my mind long after putting *Reclaim* down are what prompted me to request an interview with Mr. Ardire.

That interview is what follows:

Interviewer: *Reclaim* appears to take place in a fictionalized version of Europe as it stumbles toward World War II. I understood Tholia to be your version of Italy, and the Praetoreans as a quasi-Vatican fighting force dispatched to the Eastern Front, as many Italian soldiers were in real-world history. Can you comment on that aspect?

Enzo: When writing *Reclaim*, I set out to create something that would be immediately recognizable to readers as a way to ground their perspective in the world. That being said, *Reclaim* is not simply a retelling of our real-world history. *Reclaim* is the first book in the Awoken Worlds series, so I cannot go too much further into what is actually happening yet, as that will be the subject of future novels. But in general, the ideas you laid out in your question are an accurate portrayal of what readers are seeing on the surface.

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Interviewer: What experiences or influences are you drawing on for your characters—Luca specifically—and the setting of Tholia?

Enzo: I have spent substantial time in Italy, both as a child and as an adult. When I'm there, living among Italians, eating the food, living the life, I can't help but feel a sense of deep alignment—a sense of “this is where I belong, because it's where I was literally evolved to exist.” And yet, there is a reason I live in America and not Italy. My Nonna fled Italy, a place that had been home to her ancestors for thousands of years. She left a place where the soil under her feet and the sky above her head had raised countless generations of her people, all to come to America, a country she knew nothing about other than its promise of a chance at a better life. Trying to understand how a human gets to the point of leaving their ancestral homeland played a large role in writing *Reclaim*.

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Interviewer: Explain that.

Enzo: Well, for much of World War II, Italy was nothing more than a battlefield where the Axis and Allies fought some of the fiercest battles of the entire conflict. The native population of Italians were just collateral damage in the larger ideological war that had turned their home into a hell. If anyone thinks that either the Germans or the Americans cared about the deaths of Italian civilians, I can assure you they did not. Both Axis and Allies had reason to view Italy and

its people as traitors. And while the military and political leadership of Italy had sown that fate for their people, it was innocent Italians who reaped it.

What my Nonna experienced as a little girl growing up—attempting to survive as a small child while, all around her, uncles were gunned down and aunts experienced rape—it's impossible to overstate the horror she faced from her earliest days. She survived, and went from a life of violence to one of abject poverty in an Italy left in ruins by the war. The poverty she faced was something that inhabitants of the first world, and especially those within the wealthiest nation to ever have existed, America, cannot fathom. No such thing as a safety net existed. When a child should be starting their first year of formal education, my Nonna was forced to work on a barren tenant farm in order to eat, where she drank from, bathed in, and defecated in the same river. She rose from this horrific start in the world to go on to build a really wonderful life for herself, one filled with a lot of joy and love. I wanted to explore the key value embedded within Italian culture that sustained my Nonna through her struggles. The thing that when all else fails, is at the core of our being as humans.

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Interviewer: Reading through *Reclaim*, I certainly sensed the unforgiving nature of its world, but I wouldn't classify the story as hopeless—actually, quite the opposite. You mentioned that its underlying moral message is “culturally Italian.” Can you explain?

Enzo: I didn't write *Reclaim* to preach at people. I think readers will understand by the end that if they have to be convinced to believe in an ideology, that ideology is likely a distraction from what really matters. My only goal in writing is to remind the reader of what they already know to be true, but might have lost sight of.

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Interviewer: Fair enough, I won't ask you to pontificate, but can you share the underlying inspiration for your moral concepts?

Enzo: I recently lost my Nonna, which was hard for me. And in the midst of that loss, something occurred to me. Without ever naming it, my Nonna had won a fight that started when she was a child. All around her, ideologies had clashed to prove which system of belief was superior. Men were led into war by eloquent rhetoric—appeals to holy scripture and political philosophy—most of which I am certain my functionally illiterate Nonna could not have read, nor comprehended, even had she wanted to. And yet, she outlived them all.

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Interviewer: Sorry if I'm not following—how is this connected to Italian culture, as you had mentioned earlier?

Enzo: I was born smack-dab in the middle of the Millennial generation. Not since the early 1900s has a generation come of age under such circumstances. Our formative years from 2000–2026 have been strikingly similar to those of 1900–1926: war, terrorism, financial collapse, pandemic, etc. And so, it comes as no surprise that human beings who are enduring similar strife are turning to the same things they did in the past, namely ideologies to help find direction and meaning in the chaos. Many of the same ideologies that brought destruction to the world my Nonna inhabited still vie for power in today’s world.

As an Italian-American, I was given a cultural privilege that my peers weren’t. Italian culture—what it values, what my Nonna valued—is, at its core, something that has been true and will always be true as long as there are human beings to live it. Ideologies come and go, and when they are in power, they require force to get people to care about them. No one is born believing in an ideology, and these belief systems are upheld only through constant propaganda and indoctrination. But what Italians value, what our culture holds as its core truth, and what many have forgotten, requires no convincing for you to care about. It is the single belief that my Nonna held, which carried an uneducated girl from a war-torn hell to a life of joy, surrounded by loved ones. If asked what my politics or religion is, I always give the same, one word answer.

Italian culture carries within it the thing that precedes all religion, all politics, all ideology. It is the one thing that, when threatened, makes everything else irrelevant, even yourself. And it is the point of *Reclaim*.

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Interviewer: I won’t ask you to spoil the ending, so I’ll stop my questions there. I appreciate you taking the time—it’s been a pleasure. I enjoyed *Reclaim*. There are certainly challenging parts to it that aren’t for everyone, but specifically as an anti-ideological work—or at least, a work that attempts to show there is a difference between ideology and a more fundamental truth—I found it provocative and worthwhile.

Enzo: The pleasure has been mine—thank you for the invitation.

To our readers, I hope you found this interview interesting. I enjoyed conducting it and look forward to interviewing other creatives in the community. If you, or someone you know, has created something with Italian or Italian-American themes or inspiration, please consider referring them to us so their work can be showcased.

For those interested in obtaining Enzo Ardire’s book *Reclaim*, it is available on Amazon in both paperback and eBook formats here: <https://a.co/d/07PjVrbR>