

BOOK REVIEW

By Emily Clark

Republished with permission: *The Old Colony Memorial press, 182 Standish Ave., Plymouth, MA 02360, the oldest weekly newspaper in New England, founded 1822.*

Robert Knox's *Suosso's Lane* features Vanzetti in Plymouth

The work hours at The Plymouth Cordage Company, the scandalous pay, the at-times brutal working conditions and the prejudiced foremen at the head of it all shouting slurs and denigration at immigrant workers.

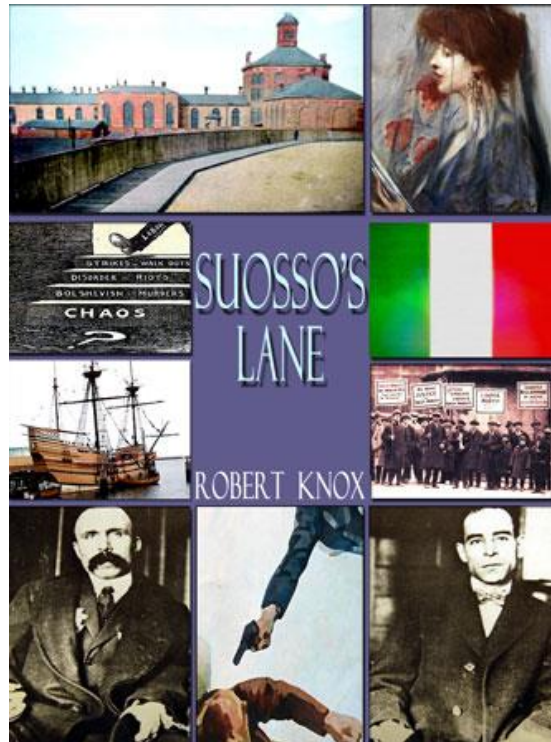
America's Hometown in the early 20th Century could have been two towns for the separation between the North Plymouth laborers and the downtown folks who often knew nothing of their trials. Bartolomeo Vanzetti had little idea that his stay with the Brini family on Suosso's Lane was setting the stage for what many viewed as the kangaroo trial of the century. Italian born immigrants and anarchists Ferdinando Nicola Sacco and Vanzetti would be accused of a murder most believe they did not commit.

And they were executed for it.

What many viewed as an outrageous miscarriage of justice featured a myriad of facts that exonerated the pair. But the other facts, that they were immigrants and anarchists, weighted the scales of justice against them, and the American public largely considered the case a frame-up. It was the 1920s in America, and the social and political climates were anything but reasonable.

Boston Globe correspondent Robert Knox, who formerly worked as an associate editor for the Old Colony Memorial, said his years as a reporter and editor in Plymouth sparked his interest in the case and Vanzetti. That interest led to extensive research, which fused with Knox's creativity and has culminated in a rich and powerful novel *Suosso's Lane*.

The book is engrossing to say the least, as the reader is introduced to Vanzetti and his unique perspective, culled from poverty and struggle. The reader learns that the American Dream drew immigrants like him to cross the Atlantic, only to find poverty and endless labor on the other side. In those days, there were no social programs to assist the poor. If you didn't have enough to eat you starved. If your job increased your workload and decreased your pay, there wasn't necessarily an alternative. Knox masterfully delves into Vanzetti's mind, his experiences and his interactions with other



immigrants. The author illustrates how a man such as Vanzetti might logically decide that anarchy, a world of equality where there are no bosses, was infinitely preferable to the “American Dream.”

But this is first and foremost a story, not just a historic account. And Knox is a consummate storyteller, pulling the reader into the Plymouth of 1920 with its corsets and its hats, the early autos, the neighborhoods where people knew one another. **You feel the bitter cold Vanzetti turns his collar against as he heads to a job digging in the frigid harbor. You hear the barking foreman, the Italian spoken under breaths as muscle, cold sweat and fear fuel each shovel full of dirt in a monotonous and, yes, terrifying succession.** When the muscle fails, when illness arrives, if an injury occurs, the man is without work and cannot feed his family. Knox illustrates the truth – that these immigrants teetered on the edge of survival and suffered the resulting despair daily.

The reader finds welcome relief from this world as Knox expertly jumps ahead to the year 2000, when a professor and his wife decide to rent a home on Suosso’s Lane, only to discover it was the former home of the Brini family, which housed Vanzetti. The reader is suddenly seeing him from a bird’s eye view, enmeshed in the professor’s search for evidence in the case, search for the truth, as old black and white photos, letters and sources draw him away from his full-time job.

And then Knox skips to the 1940s, where there is the question of who killed the police officer – the son of the Plymouth patrolman involved in the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Did he know too much? Who killed him and why?

Suosso’s Lane is rich in these plotlines that run parallel to the main story and seize the reader’s attention with characters that are real enough to touch. Vanzetti’s romantic involvement with a well-to-do feminist is deftly and carefully drawn. **In the end, the novel is an edge-of-your-seat read because the characters are so real, and the reader has invested in them.**

“I think that people have forgotten and can forget what it was like 100 years ago in Plymouth or in any American city, and that was a peak time for immigrants and it was a peak time for the industrial era with all its abuses of workers and labor and immigrants,” Knox said. “And we forget just how hard life was to be a member of the working class, to be a laborer, to be expected to work long hours at repetitive and exhausting tasks, and in environments that were not well ventilated or were cold or badly lit – to have no rights and no protections and no laws to protect them.”

Did Vanzetti really have a love affair with the widow Lavinia? This is a purely fictionalized story, Knox said, laughing, but there was a woman who wrote to Vanzetti while he was in jail that he was purported to have developed feelings for. Other characters, like Dolly, are drawn carefully from Knox’s research, which included oral histories, documents, books and Plymouth historians like Jim Baker. **The mix of history and fiction makes this novel a wonderful read, put simply.**



Knox lived in Plymouth for 20 years, where both of his children attended Plymouth schools, before moving to Weymouth, where he has lived for the past 10 years. He graduated Yale University with a degree in philosophy, taught English at Boston University and other colleges, and edited and wrote for community newspapers. The *Globe* correspondent’s poems, creative nonfiction and short stories have appeared in numerous literary publications.

Suosso’s Lane offers a wonderfully unique fictional account of Bartolomeo Vanzetti, complete with a murder mystery and even a dash of romance. Available for \$7.95 on <http://web-e-books.com>