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Annie's Italian Bronx Butch Freedom Memoir

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

You should not read Annie Lanzillotto's *L Is for Lion: An Italian Bronx Butch Freedom Memoir* just to learn how to catch a fly ball in oncoming traffic, or simply because it's the best tough-minded and deeply poetic prose I can remember reading since Hemingway—"a voice, writes author John Gennari, "as richly soulful as her mother's lasagna and as bracingly unsentimental as her father's Marine masculinity." You should also not read it because it's the best depiction of a Bronx childhood since Kate Simon's *Bronx Primitive*. You should not read it because you're a New Yorker who wants to understand the impulse to freedom that defines the city, or to revel in a deeply sexual coming out story. You shouldn't read it just to learn "how to cook a heart" from a butcher at the Arthur Avenue market. You should not read it because it's the most heart-rending depiction of an abusive father suffering from post-traumatic stress after surviving Okinawa. Don't read it for the stories of a two-time cancer patient, the only one to survive her support group called Teenagers with Terminal Illness at Brown.

You should also not read the book for its astonishing and often outrageous array of metaphors. To discover, for instance, how Annie's father—who called her "Daddy"—handed her a bucket of batteries and taught her how to find which ones had a charge with the tip of her tongue—which she puts to use years later with utter abandonment in her lesbian love affairs where "my tongue was sensitized to the salty sting of energy."

Set all that aside. You need to read this book because it's the most powerful depiction I have ever read of how a human being can draw on her folk culture, her humor, and her poetic insight to pull life-affirming meaning out of the gutter like a lost Spaldeen.

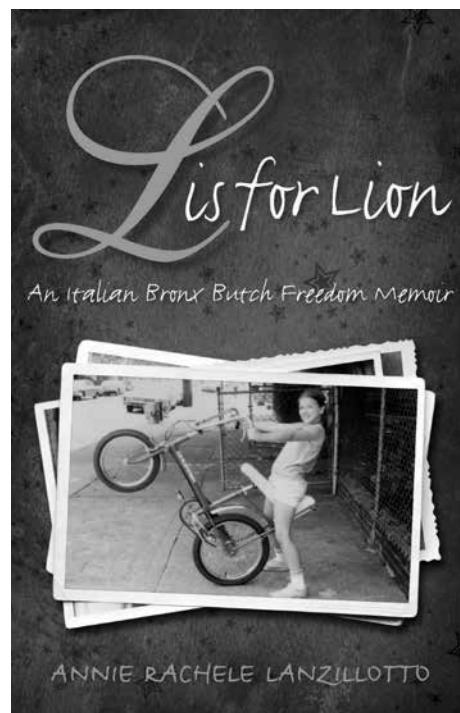
The Spaldeen is the New Yorkism for the ball that became ubiquitous on New York City streets and playgrounds, sold at the corner store and manufactured by the Spalding Company, from whence comes its mispronounced name. Playing Shirts against Skins on Zerega Street in

the Bronx (and upset that she always had to be on the Shirts), Annie describes how "Spaldeens hid behind car wheels . . . Spaldeens took on the smell of the street. Spaldeens sweated and got dirty. Spaldeens taught me soul; to find adventure, to fly, to roll, to hide, to float, to be buoyant, to bounce back even after you rolled down the sewer." At night, "I'd wash my hands and face, and my Spaldeen. I scrubbed it in the sink with soapy water and a washcloth. It smelled clean, ready for the next day. I slept with it under my pillow."

More than a decade ago, the Smithsonian brought Annie down to perform at the folk festival as an iconic New York City storyteller when they featured New York folklife. Among her most well known monologues:

I grew up playing in traffic. Under the arcs of balls, balls hit high—til they became small and black in the sky. The ball's going back and all the while you have your inner ear on the car at the intersection. You don't miss the ball. You don't get hit by the car. With a car coming at you, you face the open sky. You never miss a pop fly because a ball is coming at you. You listen. You turn your ear to the horizon. The ball is in the air. Your feet are moving beneath you. Your ear tracks the speed the car is coming at you. Your eye you keep on the ball. With your throwing arm you flag the car around you. You figure which side of the street the ball is favoring in the wind. You wave the car to the other side of you. You may temporarily halt the car 'til the ball is square in your hands. The car inches forward 'til the ball is in your hands, then the car proceeds. The car is your audience rushing to find you. The car came all this way, down this particular street, around several corners, jumped the exit ramp, to back up around the corner to see you make this play. The car in the middle of the play is part of the play. It's all in the timing.

The Spaldeen taught Annie to bounce back. "What do you think, you're made of rubber?" her mom called out as Annie skinned her knees playing on the street. "Yes, I'm made of rub-



ber," she answered, and her Bronx childhood supported and inspired her as she struggled with Hodgkin's lymphoma at 18, thyroid cancer at 37, along with double pneumonia, a deflated immune system, and recurring tumors through the years.

All through her life, the illnesses came at her like the cars along Zerega. But keeping her eye on the ball and the poetry of everyday life, she flagged them all around her. In the waiting room for chemo as a teenager, she recognized a friend whom she had recently beaten at pool. "What's up Kimosabe?" she said. "Yeah," he answered, "Chemo-sabe." With her unflagging sense of humor and poetry, she called the third chapter of her book, "Kimosabe" and—with her sense of humor and poetry intact—did far better than survive. *L is for Lion* is a lesson on how to live. ▼

Steve Zeitlin is the founding director of City Lore in New York City. Photo by Martha Cooper.



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