



Amalia's Tale: A Poor Peasant, an Ambitious Attorney, and a Fight for Justice

By David I. Kertzer

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This quintessential David-and-Goliath saga tells the story of a wholly unexpected triumph of the poor against the rich and of a crusading city attorney who fought on behalf of an impoverished peasant.

Amalia Bagnacavalli, an illiterate young peasant from the mountains near Bologna, is forced by poverty to take in a child from the city's foundling home to wet-nurse. When Amalia contracts syphilis from the sickly and malformed baby given to her, the city fathers callously dismiss her pleas for treatment and restitution.

Bewildered and frightened, she seeks out Augusto Barbieri, an ambitious attorney looking to make a name for himself. He takes up Amalia's cause, fighting the case for years through the Italian courts before winning an unprecedented and stunning victory for his by now broken client. The unforgettable story of a landmark struggle for basic human rights, Amalia's Tale is the moving drama of a rural woman whose life was ruined and the man from the city who would not stop -- or so it seemed -- until he had seen justice done.

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Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. In this absorbing account, Amalia Bagnacavalli's tale is a horrific one. An impoverished Italian peasant in the late 19th century, Amalia was hired as a wet nurse and contracted syphilis from the infant assigned her by a Bologna foundling home. She in turn spread the disease to her husband and their baby daughter and sons. Her plight was common, Kertzer notes, in a Europe plagued for centuries by poverty, prostitution, venereal disease and legal-religious mores that forced unwed mothers to give up their newborns to institutions where they would be nursed by strangers. But Amalia took the very modern step of suing the foundling home and its aristocratic board, helped by a young lawyer eager to impose a scientific, bureaucratically controlled regimen on an antiquated welfare system. Amalia's court victory over the Italian medical establishment was no feel-good triumph of justice: her lawyer screwed her out of every penny of the huge settlement she won, and the system of bottle-feeding prompted by her suit killed most of the foundlings subjected to it. Like Kertzer's much-praised *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*, Amalia's story is a rich social history, in which new values clash with old in an Italy wracked by the fitful march of progress. (Mar. 6)

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Review

"A compelling story masterfully told." --Peter D. Kramer, author of Freud: Inventor of the Modern Mind and Listening to Prozac

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