

Pietro Bartolo and Lidia Tilotta, *Tears of Salt: A Doctor's Story of the Refugee Crisis*. NY: WW Norton, 2019, 208 pp ISBN: 0393356558.

This is the story of Dr. Pietro Bartolo's life and work as an OBGYN on the island of Lampedusa, one hundred miles off the coast of Italy. For 25 years he has worked to assist asylum seekers who make the journey to Europe via the Mediterranean, fleeing war and terrorism in Africa and the Middle East to find protection in Europe. Many of them are rescued at sea and brought to Lampedusa where they are likely to meet Dr. Bartolo, who runs the only medical clinic on the island. *Tears of Salt* shares some of the stories of the suffering he has witnessed. He provides intimate details of how refugees fled their country of origin, and the pathway that they followed in order to find protection, a pathway that is often punctuated by starvation, dehydration, violence, abuse, sexual assault, rape, separation from family, and, in some cases, death. He tells stories of pregnant women who arrive in labour, or lose their baby's due to the stress of fleeing, or die during labour, or only make it to the island as a corpse.

This memoir recounts the story of how the son of a fisherman grew up to be a doctor, husband, and a father of three children. The story begins when he was 16 years old, and facing peril on account of having fallen off of his father's boat into the freezing cold sea, without his father noticing: "I'm overboard. It is the dead of night. I am only sixteen, and I thought I was invincible; how could this be happening? It hits me that I am about to die" (13). He screamed for help until he was heard at last, and retrieved. "Patri!" I shriek, hysterical. "Patri!" The man at the rudder is my father. But he cannot hear me. This is it, I think to myself, but keep screeching at the top of my lungs. Then something astonishing happens. My father turns, and notices me. He sees my flailing arms, hears my desperate, croaking voice, and turns the boat round to rescue me" (14). Years later, he still recalls that harrowing memory. "Now, every time I go to the pier and see a man, women or child, frozen and sodden, eyes wide with fear, I think back to that night when I was sixteen" (15). Bartolo holds no prejudice towards the asylum seekers he aids, but rather he sympathizes with them, in part on account of the connections he makes between their plight, and his own brush with death.

Bartolo and his wife, also a trained physician, could have been very successful had they chosen to work in traditional hospitals or clinical settings. Instead, they chose to return to Lampedusa after Muammar Gaddafi (the former leader of Libya) ordered two missiles to be fired at the US Coast Guard's Loran base in retaliation for a powerful American airstrike on Tripoli. The missiles landed in the sea, startling the people of Lampedusa, but there were no casualties. Soon after, Bartolo returned to Lampedusa, where he was appointed both Deputy Mayor and Councillor of Health. With the small amount of power associated with these titles, he was able to illicit important changes that impacted the lives of refugees who arrived on the island. He fought to procure a permanent air ambulance, so that he could send asylum seekers who were in critical condition to nearby mainland hospitals. By 1991, the clinic on Lampedusa had become Dr. Bartolo's second home, and through his devotion and commitment, he was able to grow it into a major treatment center that housed over 22 specialist departments to serve both locals and new arrivals. Journalists eventually got wind of his work there, and some of them sought him out, eager to interview him about the refugee crisis. In response, he became a spokesperson who challenged the mainstream narratives about the difference between economic migrants and refugees.

One of the most shocking situations that Bartolo ever encountered occurred when a group of women arrived on a boat at the Favaloro pier and were discovered to have suffered horrible burns on 90% of their bodies. "In an attempt to cook one last hot meal before the long crossing, Amina and the other women were trying to fit a gas canister to a makeshift stove with a length of pipe. The

flames blew back, and they could not get away”. He treated them within the limits of the clinic’s capacity, and then arranged for their transportation to a hospital by helicopter. A few days later, he learned that the only man who had been on the boat was at the refugee reception centre with a baby that belonged to one of the women. He was able to track down the mother, and reunited her with her child. Being the only a doctor at the clinic meant that he had many stories like this one, which relay his perseverance, and his willingness to always go the extra mile to help asylum seekers. He is inspirational, and his memoir offers powerful narratives which could inform state officials who so often act without sufficient knowledge about the migrants affected by their policies. Another horrifying episode occurred in the spring of 2016, when three pregnant women arrived on a boat from Nigeria. One of them, named Joi, had been separated from her husband and raped en route to Italy. She begged Dr. Bartolo to help her find her husband.

“Please help me find him,” she implored me. “I don’t want my son to grow up without a father. We have risked everything so that he could be born in a better country. You can find him. Please, I’m begging you.” Sometimes when I am the only friendly face in front of them, patients feel as if I am no longer their doctor, but a saviour who can give them back their loved ones and reunite their families. Regrettably, as in Joi’s case, this is not always within my power. At other times, I am simply the only person in whom they dare confide the unabridged horror of their plight. Too often, when I have performed an ultrasound, the patient makes the same heartbreaking request: to abort a fetus conceived not of love, but of rape. (27)

Dr. Bartolo bore the emotional toll of seeing dead bodies every day, and endured hearing the terrible stories of rape, organ trafficking, and mutilation. Survivors would tell him that when they had decided to leave their country, they had been forced to walk through a hell-like desert, cram into a truck where even the smallest sound could cost them their lives, then upon their arrival in Libya, they were imprisoned and/ or tortured. For the lucky ones who survived, there had been a boat that had taken them across the Mediterranean Sea, and to a better life in Europe.

It’s not surprising that refugees who have been treated by Bartolo see him not just as a doctor, but as a saviour, and thanks to the many stories that have circulated about his work, the word has gotten out in Italy, and beyond. For example, a group of children from an elementary school in Pisa learned about his actions, and donated wrapped gifts with personalized notes to the people he was assisting: “Dear children, you left your countries to find a different and better life in Europe. We young people have got to change this world and follow in the footsteps of men and women who gave everything they had” (92). Even with minimal means, like notes from children far away, there is always a way to help, and to contribute to the cause of providing protection and a welcome.

Not surprisingly, despite the acclaim he has received from his work, and the deep appreciation he has enjoyed from the 300,000 refugees he has assisted over the past 25 years, he has nevertheless born the consequences of working in such a stressful environment. This culminated one day when he suffered a stroke, which caused him to lose control over half of his body. He thought that it was all over for him.

“I thought about Rita, and the sacrifices I had forced her to make over the years. I thought of our children. But most of all, though at the time I could not think why, I thought about my patients; all of the men, women, and children who have risked and will go on risking their lives to reach shores and ask for our help. I thought of the hours I had spent on the pier, of the time when a colleague and I were there for three days straight, taking turns to nap on the ambulance

stretchers, snatching an hour of half sleep here and there, then jumping to our feet again. I knew without a doubt that if I had to go back, I would do it all again". (132)

He did recover, and his work is now celebrated worldwide; but serious challenges remain. In 2011, 7000 unaccompanied children arrived on the island from Tunisia, and he and his team had to work night and day to address the many ailments from which they were suffering. On October 3, 2013 when a shipwreck caused the death of 368 Syrian migrants, 15 days and nights passed of rescue boats retrieving corpses and Dr. Bartolo and his team assessing each one and giving them a proper funeral. On May 25, 2016, a large number of migrants arrived covered in chemical burns because they had been transferred by smugglers onto rubber rafts that run on gasoline, as they refueled on the way the gasoline mixed with the salt water and created a dangerous mixture that caused chemical burns on all the travellers. These accounts of mass migration and the suffering of asylum seekers help demonstrate the reality of the refugee crisis.

The noted Italian film director Gianfranco Rosi visited Lampedusa in search of a story about the refugee situation. This was Bartolo's chance to get the information out to the world, beyond the efforts that journalists had made. As Rosi was preparing to leave, Bartolo met him, and provided a USB that contained details about all the people he had treated, and the stories that he had documented over the years. Rosi reviewed the files, and on the basis of the narratives therein, he created 'Fire at Sea', the award-winning film that has inspired millions of viewers.

I am very passionate about helping refugees, and *Tears of Salt* was a powerful tribute to what can be accomplished, even in the face of negative characterizations of migrants in the media, and aggressively anti-refugee policies in many host countries. This book honors Dr. Bartolo's perseverance, and inspires us to recognize that we can aid suffering people in our own way, with minimal means, but generosity of spirit.