

Discussion questions for *The Boston Italians*

In telling the story of the Boston Italians, Steve Puleo weaves in the experiences of his own family. Which member of the Puleo family did you find most interesting? Whose story do you think best illustrated the larger themes of the book?

The book includes a detailed portrayal of George A. Scigliano, a prominent champion of Italian immigrant causes. In your view, what made him a larger-than-life figure in the eyes of the Italian immigrants? Does he bring to mind any other figures in history who had a similar influence?

The book also includes a detailed portrayal of James V. Donnaruma, founder of *La Gazzetta del Massachusetts*. Like Scigliano, he had a profound influence on the lives of Boston's Italian immigrants. In what ways did his newspaper — and his role as editor — ease Italians' transition to the United States?

Immigration is a significant theme in *The Boston Italians*, including government attempts to place limitations or restrictions on new immigrants. Do you see any parallels with today's immigration issues? How does today's situation differ from that of the early 20th century?

The book describes the “battle” to change the name of Boston's North Square neighborhood to “Scigliano Square.” Proponents argued it was a fitting way to honor a man who had given so much to the neighborhood. Opponents argued that “North Square,” one of the richest names of Boston in its historic associations, shouldn't be changed. Would you have been in favor of the name change? Do you think George Scigliano would have been in favor of the name change?

Prior to reading the book, did you know the reasons why so many Italians chose to emigrate? Were you aware of the difficult conditions they endured in Italy? Were you aware of the magnitude of emigration from Italy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries?

Based on what you learned about the enormous challenges faced by immigrants, would you have taken the risks involved with seeking a new life in America? Why or why not?

How well did the book depict the experience of immigrants at Ellis Island? Did you learn anything new by reading about it through the eyes of Italian immigrants?

Were you aware that Italian-Americans were the victims of lynching, and that they were lynched more frequently than any other group except African-Americans? Why do you think this is such a little-known fact?

Have you visited Boston's North End, or an equivalent “Little Italy” in an American city? What was your impression of the neighborhood when you visited? Did *The Boston Italians* help you see that neighborhood with a new perspective? Would you like to visit again?

Prior to reading the book, how much, if anything, did you know about violent activities of Italian anarchists in America? What are your thoughts on Sacco and Vanzetti? Were they violent anarchists or simply victims of anti-Italian discrimination?

In addition to telling the story of the Boston Italians, the book discusses major historical events such as the Great Depression and World War II. Did it help you learn — or learn more — about these events? Did seeing these events through the eyes of Italian immigrants provide new perspective or make the events more interesting?

The book includes portrayals of today's influential Boston-area Italians, such as Sal Balsamo, CEO of TAC Worldwide, and politicians Salvatore F. DiMasi, Robert Travaglini, and Tom Menino. Whose story did you find most interesting, and why?

Did the book change your perception of Italian-Americans? Did the examples of stereotypes in movies and the media raise your awareness of negative portrayals of Italian-Americans? Did it change your opinion about whether these portrayals are humorous?

If you are of Italian heritage, explain the impact of this book on you personally.

If you hadn't been involved with this book club, would you have chosen to read *The Boston Italians*? Do you typically read non-fiction or history?

After reading *The Boston Italians*, do you want to read other books on related topics (Boston history, Italian-Americans, Italian history, anything written by Steve Puleo?)