



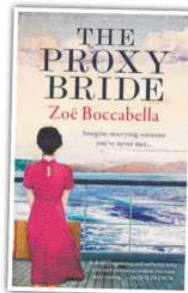
Honouring our proxy past

Love, pain and 'angry spaghetti' ... **Zoe Boccabella** exposes the little-known story of Australia's proxy brides

DURING the 20th century, thousands of women came as proxy brides from Italy to Australia on "bride ships" to be with husbands they'd never met. Poverty, convention and strict migration policies of the time meant these women were wed in ceremonies in Italy to a stand-in groom, with their husbands-to-be already in Australia. Decades later, this remains a largely hidden part of our history.

"She was a proxy bride ..." Nonna and her Italian friends said among themselves. Being about 12, I had no idea what they meant. They didn't sound unkind, more stating fact as they rolled pasta dough and chopped chillies, one throwing a handful of salt in the pot of boiling water, another over her shoulder to ward off ill-luck. I didn't realise then that some of these friends of Nonna's were proxy brides too.

Many years on, it was actually Nonno, my grandfather, who set me to writing *The Proxy Bride* – its truths, secrets and what old recipes like chilli-laden 'angry spaghetti' bring to light. As the Italian saying goes, love, pain and chillies can't help but reveal themselves in the end. While talking of his life for my book Joe's Fruit Shop and Milk Bar, Nonno mentioned by chance that during World War II in Australia, when he and other Italians got sent to internment camps, the wives



and children were suddenly left alone on farms. When I learnt some of these women were also proxy brides, this opened up more to the story. It was a different time with Italy and Australia at war. Ordinary Italians living in Australia had curfews, many weren't allowed to drive or have a radio. Few would employ them. They had to report to the local police station each week and thousands were interned. It didn't matter if they'd been in Australia for years, were naturalised or even born here.

As the war dragged on, the Italian women and children left on farms almost starved, since many were unable to operate machinery only their husbands had used and with no government assistance available to them. "But they banded together," said Nonno. "Kept the farms going and survived." That really struck me. I considered if the resilience gained through being a proxy bride also

played a part.

Proxy weddings came about since neither culture accepted Australian-Italian marriages then. Also, Italian migrants had to be sponsored by relatives with jobs waiting, which led to single men outnumbering single Italian women in Australia. Many couldn't afford a trip back to Italy, unmarried daughters couldn't travel alone and Italy's intense poverty at the time made it a risk worth taking for both spouses.

Despite letters, most women didn't know their husbands. Some men sent outdated photographs. "Their wives arrived to find men much older!" Nonna's friend, a proxy bride, told me. "My husband sent a photo of a fancy house that wasn't his!" She'd chuckled about it then but newspapers of the time reported about women running back on to the ships at seeing their new husbands. Some ended up stranded miserably on isolated farms while others had happy or at least content marriages, after much adjustment.

Italians love sayings and Nonna's friend had shrugged, "Non importa dove tu vada, la tua casa è lì ad aspettarti." No matter where you go, your home's there waiting. She, Nonna and the others nudged each other, smiling. Whatever life had dealt them, they kept on – working hard, raising families, making the best of what they had, where they were. It made me respect them even more.

Back then, proxy brides

remained rarely spoken of, let alone written about. "It's a proxy marriage, not a love marriage," whispered some, since not all Italian-Australians married by proxy. Such stigma and judgment kept it largely hushed to this day. Yet these women, now older, many of them widows, are starting to talk about it. It's unlikely we'll see Italian-Australian proxy marriages again and I wanted to write about them because those women were incredibly brave and their stories deserve more than a whisper.

True reminiscences, diaries and handed-down recipes blend into this book. The twists that generations of secrecy can create spill into a parallel 1980s story. And like the Nonna I've written about, mine also had a 1950s stereogram and record collection. For amid hardship there's song, joy, and hope. "She was a proxy bride ..." shouldn't be whispered or hidden. These women showed courage, resilience and that you can face an unimaginable situation and make the best of it.

ZOE BOCCABELLA'S THE PROXY BRIDE, PUBLISHED BY HARPER COLLINS, IS ON SALE NOW.

OUR BOOK OF THE MONTH - ALL THAT'S LEFT UNSAID BY TRACEY LIEN - SPOTLIGHTS ANOTHER CHAPTER IN THE STORY OF AUSTRALIA'S CULTURAL MELTING POT. GET IT FOR 30 PER CENT OFF THE RRP AT BOOKTOPIA BY ENTERING THE CODE UNSAID AT CHECKOUT. AND FIND OUT MORE AT THE SUNDAY BOOK CLUB GROUP ON FACEBOOK.