



Styx & Stone, Murder in the Italian Department of a University Uptown

Natasha Lardera (October 23, 2013)



James W. Ziskin's first novel is a mystery where hot Ellie Stone plays by her own rules and breaks boundaries while searching for a killer among the renowned scholars of Columbia University's Italian Department.

It is always hard to discuss a mystery/detective novel without giving away any of it. As it is hard for a writer who is a middle aged man to write in the voice of a 23 year old hot chick. Hard but not impossible. The detective novel in question is titled [Styx & Stone](#) [2], its writer is [James W. Ziskin](#) [3] and its sexy narrator is reporter Eleonora (Ellie) Stone. And no, the ending was not revealed, the ending is awaiting readers in the book.

The novel, published by Seventh Street Books, was proudly presented at [NYU's Casa Italiana](#).



[4][Zerilli-Marimò](#) [4]. The event was a pleasure for readers and lovers of culture as all events held at Casa are but this was a bit extra special as it hit close to home. Indeed Ziskin was, for 5 years, the Casa's director before [Stefano Albertini](#) [5]. "I am sure many of you remember Jim's tireless work as Casa's director and are grateful to him for having put Casa on the map of the most prestigious Italian cultural institutes in the country. For over three years, Jim was my boss, colleague, and friend. Please join me in telling him "bentornato a Casa!" as we are all excited to find out more about his new literary venture," Albertini declared.

A linguist by training, James Ziskin studied Romance Languages and Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, where he taught elementary/intermediate French and Italian. He also spent a year teaching English at the University of Paris X, Nanterre. After completing his graduate degree, he worked in New York as a photo-news producer and writer, and then as Director of NYU's Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò. He has since spent fifteen years in the Hollywood post production industry, running large international operations in the subtitling/localization and visual effects fields. His international experience includes two years working and studying in France, extensive time in Italy, and more than three years in India.

"Styx & Stone is the first of the Ellie Stone murder mystery series," Ziskin explained during the presentation at Casa, "I started writing it in the early 90s but then I put it away. I went back to it and I rewrote it with major changes. Now when I look back at the first draft I see a lot of mistakes and I cringe. I hope this version is not going to do the same to me in a few years."

The novel is a thriller that takes place in the year 1960 in a department of Italian studies in a University that is "uptown" ([Columbia University](#) [6]). "I did not set it at NYU," Ziskin explained "because at the time it was not the school it is today. Back in the 60s it was almost a commuter school and it did not have an Italian department. Columbia did. I believe the world of Academia is ideal for a mystery. It's a place where egos and reputation really matter, a place with great people but also with big jerks who are great targets as victims."

Setting his story in a specific year, a year he was not in NYC himself, involved a lot of research work because the Big Apple is a city in continuous evolution. A street that is here today may be closed down tomorrow and Ziskin wanted to be as accurate as possible. "I think it is nice to set a story in a different time and place," he said, "and my choice to set my novel in January of the year 1960 was thoroughly thought. It is the beginning of a new year, and of a new decade. A time when people were looking at the future with hope, they left WWII behind and were walking into a modern era. Ellie is a woman of this time whocan hold her own with the boys."

At the beginning the narrator and detective was a guy, Ellie came along after. It was Ziskin's agent who suggested the change and "rewriting the novel did not simply imply changing the pronouns from he to she," Ziskin joked, "it involved a whole new set of ideas and behaviors and so forth. I resisted at first but as my work progressed I had fun with it."

Ziskin's new novel No Stone Unturned will be released soon. "Unfortunately Ellie will not be dealing with scholars of Dante or of other Italian topics. She will be Upstate New York and not in the city, but she will use her reporter skills to solve another crime..."

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[2] <http://www.amazon.com/Styx-Stone-An-Ellie-Mystery/dp/1616148195>

[3] <http://jameswziskin.com/>

[4] <http://www.casaitaliananyu.org/>

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[6] <http://www.columbia.edu/>