



The Telling Room: A Tale of Love, Betrayal, Revenge, and the World's Greatest Piece of Cheese

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In the fall of 1991, while working at a gourmet deli in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Michael Paterniti encountered a piece of cheese. Not just any cheese. This was Paramo de Guzman, a rare Spanish queso reputed to be the finest, and most expensive, in the world. The cheese carried its own legend: Made from an ancient family recipe in the medieval Castilian village of Guzman (pop. 80), the cheese was submerged in olive oil and aged in a cave where it gained magical qualities—if you ate it, some said, you might recover long-lost memories. Too broke to actually buy the cheese, Paterniti made a quixotic vow: that he would meet this cheese again someday. Flash forward ten years, when Paterniti has finally found his way—family in tow—to that tiny hilltop village to meet the famous cheesemaker himself, a voluble, magnetic, heartbroken genius named Ambrosio. What Paterniti discovers in Guzman is nothing like the idyllic slow-food fable he has imagined. Instead, he wanders into—and eventually becomes deeply implicated in—the heart of an unfolding mystery, in which a village begins to spill its long-held secrets, and nothing is quite what it seems.

The Telling Room: A Tale of Love, Betrayal, Revenge, and the World's Greatest Piece of Cheese Details

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From Reader Review The Telling Room: A Tale of Love, Betrayal, Revenge, and the World's Greatest Piece of Cheese for online ebook

Cynthia says

A story teller falls in love with a story

Murder, revenge, bankruptcy, love of family. These are some plot elements in this true story all set against the unforgiving Castile landscape where old castles are falling to bits and villages are slowly draining of people and even more slowly recovering from years of Franco's oppression. Since Franco's death in the mid 70's the country is looking to the future and individuals are trying to rebuild better lives by making money any which way they can yet the old values of loyalty to the land and to family still hold.

Ambrosio is a farmer who's always been a farmer and always wanted to be a farmer. He loves the land. He decides to revive making a traditional family cheese and he not only warms his father's heart (who loves and has missed the cheese he mother used to make) but he's successful behind his imagination...almost. "The Telling Room" is his tale as told to an American journalist, Michael Paterniti. Paterniti has tasted Ambrosio's legendary cheese years ago in the states decides to visit Ambrosio in search of a story. He sure finds one. Ambrosio is a bigger than life character and, as many Spaniards, he loves to tell stories while sitting in his bodega or traditional cave like structure where he stores and ages the wine and cheese he makes on his land. His bodega abuts many other family's bodegas and they often visit one another to share their stories and to share wine and food. It's a way of life. Paterniti is entranced. In a way he falls in love or at least brotherhood with Ambrosio but as a professional he needs to get the whole story and this involves hearing other sides to the tale including Ambrosio's sworn enemy, his former best friend and business partner, Julian. Paterniti is in a quandary emotionally feeling disloyal to Ambrosio by checking his story yet feeling professionally obligated to speak with Julian.

I'm sure my description is not doing justice to "Telling" though it's one of my top reads for 2013. Paterniti's writing style is engaging, he spools out just enough of the story to keep us engaged yet continually alludes to what will come and what the consequences are or might be. Spain itself and the outlying areas of Madrid where the events take place are as much a character as the people who are involved. It's a very human story told with clarity and with compassion. I dare you not to care about Ambrosio, his family, his community, and his cheese.

Daniel Farabaugh says

This book suffers from one basic problem. The author turned away from writing a brief and interesting story about the making of an unusual cheese and replaced it with a story about the author. The narcissistic ramblings of the author are distracting and not particularly interesting. I would have enjoyed a brief book about the cheese, and finding out what happened with the cheese was the only reason that I completed the book. Utterly disappointed.

Jacqie says

I picked this one up because it was food-related- maybe some cool information about cheese? I didn't end up getting very far, though- I may not be the target audience for this one, I'm not hip enough.

The author very much inserts himself into the book. The first part, talking about his naive enthusiasm and then disillusionment as a graduate student, was kind of funny to me, since I've sort of been there. Even then, however, I was worried that I wasn't quite cool enough for the book. It possesses a mocking humor, and I was never quite sure if I was a possible candidate for mockery myself if my foibles became known to the author.

Then we move on to Spain. We get a lot of backstory about larger than life characters who have had a falling out about an artisanal cheese company (company might be too organized a word). I began to become impatient with the author's humorous and very numerous observations and skipped toward the back of the book.

Here I found that the author had made the discovery that there's more than one side to every story, and that history is more complex than mere facts. There are perspectives, there are biases, there are efforts to make oneself the hero of one's own story. Since I've got a degree in history, this was not news to me. It did, however, seem to come as a rather late observation for someone who writes creative non-fiction, the ultimate in subjective writing.

Maybe there was more compelling stuff in the middle. That's why the 3 rating- I may not have been fair since I skimmed.

Donna says

I was really looking forward to reading "The Telling Room," particularly because it is being compared to "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil" - one of my favorite reads of all time. But in the end, "The Telling Room" was a huge disappointment to me.

The book certainly starts out well enough. In the fall of 1991, while working at a deli in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the author - Michael Paterniti - saw a rare piece of cheese. It was Paramo de Guzman, a Spanish cheese reputed to be the finest, and most expensive, in the world. Paterniti couldn't afford to buy a piece of the cheese, but he filed it away in his memory. Ten years later, circumstances lead him to the medieval Spanish village of Guzman (pop. 80), where the famous cheese was made. Paterniti gets to know Ambrosio, the man who made the Paramo de Guzman - and begins to uncover the mystery of why the cheese was no longer being made.

It certainly sounds like the making of a great story...but it doesn't really turn out that way. For one thing, Paterniti spends at least half of the book trying to determine if there is even a story here worth a book and detailing his writing struggles. He also goes off on tangents on Spanish and Castilian history that are occasionally interesting, but often not. In the end, the mystery of why Ambrosio no longer makes the cheese is not all that shocking.

The other thing that really puzzles me about this book are the nearly 150 footnotes that are spread throughout - some of which go on for pages. I'm not clear why this particular kind of non-scholarly book needs hundreds of footnotes. Part of me feels like if Paterniti had a better story here - and was a better writer - this extra information could have been included in the book's narrative.

I think this might have made a quite interesting 20,000-word article in the New Yorker, but it's just not compelling enough for an entire book - and with how much he struggled with the book and how long it took him to write it - I suspect Paterniti knows this as well.

Petra X says

The author was a writer of articles - and therein lies the clue to the really unfocused writing of the book. At times the book seem to be a series of stories, connected ostensibly by the central 'mystery' but what reads like a lot of waffle.

It isn't a bad book, but the premise, discovering the best cheese in the entire world, how it got that way and why it no longer is wasn't anything like as interesting as the blurb made out. Essentially, it was a new business to discover and then make commercially a cheese that had been in the family for a very long time, but that no had made for many years.

Because the cheese was so fantastic, eventually a lot of money is needed to develop the business, enter the financial people and cue the best friend to do a rip-off operation and the ensuing unwinnable law suits. Unwinnable because the man with the money and the signed documents, no matter how obtained, always wins.

That's all. Hard to make a book around that for a writer of articles rather than an experienced author, perhaps even one of fiction, who is used to the writing tricks that open up the plot slowly, a nuanced reveal.

Nonetheless, the story is charming to a degree. The characters are well-drawn, you can imagine if you met the cheese-maker you would know him immediately and that he might invite you into the Telling Room for a story, a drink and some of the last precious, crumbling remains of that fabulous cheese.

Kevin says

I found this book waiting for me at the library because once again in some sleep-deprived (or, okay, I'll admit it: drunken) state I took someone's recommendation and sent in a request without really checking on what I was requesting, and then forgot I'd made the request in the first place.

I do this more often than I'd like to admit, honestly. I get a lot of emails saying, "Hey, your book is ready at the library!" and I have no idea what they are or why I thought I want to read them.

Anyway, I want to go back and figure out why I thought I should read this, because I clearly shouldn't have.

It's a book about a guy who is trying to write a book about himself trying to write a book about a guy he once met who did an interesting thing once. Maybe.

Paterniti is trying to be far too clever with his 1,000 footnotes ("but it's like Castilian storytelling!" I can hear him cry as explanation) and the actual story about the cheese could have been told in two or three chapters. I'll admit, some of his descriptions of Spain are charming and made me want to go back but that's a tiny handful of wheat in a fury of chaff.

I rarely like to do true spoilers, but I'll give one today. Here's a summation of the book, in case you're curious: "When you find an emotional story that revolves around two characters and you ask them independently to confirm the details you will quite frequently end up with conflicting accounts. Also as an author you should try to make their story all about you, or about how you researched their story, or influenced it, or whatever, the point is not the truth, the point is the journey. The journey that the author took. To Spain. Several times, including like six months where he brought his whole family along. Anyway it's about the two guys with the cheese. And also don't forget Michael Paterniti. He was there. A lot."

Trish says

This is not a book about cheese. It is a love story--a cheesy love story, perhaps. Cheese is mentioned, sure, but that story comes early and occupies perhaps 40 pages of the 360. Remember the film version of Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief*? It was called "Adaptation": "A love-lorn script writer grows increasingly desperate in his quest to?...with many self-referential events added.?" The script writer had so much trouble making a movie of the story that he spent most of the time talking about how hard it was to put the story into film, therefore ineluctably inserting himself into the story.

Well, this book does that too. Paterniti spent most of his professional career writing magazine articles—short deadlines, lots of travel, and a mass of information to corral quickly or jettison. When his agent asked him if he wanted to pursue a larger story idea he'd encountered—a special cheese made in a small village in Spain—his life and his editors were in alignment that the time was right to take up the challenge. He was given an advance and a deadline.

All kinds of challenges came to meet him. For one, the man who had been making the cheese was no longer in business. Actually, he was bankrupt and contesting several lawsuits. That's part of the reason why the cheese part of the story didn't take that long to tell. But cheese was the least of it. This is a book about Catalan Spain, male friendship, disconnecting, and taking time for wine, children, and storytelling.

This book is Paterniti's 'telling room.' By the time Paterniti did the bare minimum required of a journalist writing a story—seeking out both sides of the lost-cheese-factory story—I read it avidly, thirstily. It comes at the end, ironically, a decade or more after Paterniti began his researches, "aging" the story until it was crumbly, Herculean, tasting of flower and dirt and minerals. And pretty darn close to indigestible. The footnotes...

The writing changed direction and went around and around like a wild tornado sucking up stray facts, interesting asides, musings, apologies, accusations, justifications along the way. The book editor of this work must have had moments of terrible doubt. By the time the story came into print, nearly twenty years after its conception, technology had changed so much sections of it felt positively dated. But again, this story evolved into the story of a way of life, or men's lives, or the life of one man...it had been begun and worked on and agonized over and left for dead so many times over the years, it is a miracle it has seen print at all.

Paterniti is a good man, an interesting man. Just begin with an open heart and do.not.think.about.cheese.

?imbd.com

?wikipedia.com

Cammie McGovern says

I read an early copy of this book right after finishing Andrew Solomon's *Far From the Tree*, which was interesting because, while they're very different subject matter, the reading experience is similar. Both authors are award-winning magazine journalists with a mind-boggling facility for interviewing subjects and getting them to open up in such an articulate, honest way you have the impulse to invite them to your own home for an interview so you might understand your own life better. Both books also meander off the given subjects into digressions and discourses that are fascinating but would weaken a book that doesn't bring it all together with a fairly extraordinary ending. In both cases, these books do. Both writers synthesize ten years of research by taking an unflinching look at themselves and their own fascination with the subject. For Solomon, it's family (what it means, especially when you FEEL unrelated to other members). For Paterniti, the cheese is a metaphor for the pursuit of perfection--in work, in storytelling, in life. Can one achieve it and hold onto it? Would one even want to? In both these books, the endings made the journey entirely worth the read: I found myself surprisingly moved. *With the Telling Room*, which I confess I ENJOYED reading more, I was blinking back tears I never expected to shed.

TO some extent, the comparison ends there. Paterniti's book is MUCH funnier, lighter read. Anyone who has been a fan of his stellar work in *Esquire* and *GQ* (his story after the Japanese earthquake made it onto Journalism course curricula the same year it was published--it was that good) will love reading this book to understand the legwork, the commitment and the heart and soul that goes into exceptional journalism.

I suspect it's real audience, though, will be globe-travelling food lovers. The people who are less interested in getting served the finest truffled fois gras in a five-star restaurant than in going out to the farm and learning the story behind the farmer and the pigs who hunt for those things.

Bill says

This is a miracle of a book. As beguiling and infinite as a slice of great cheese, *The Telling Room* is by turns funny, self-deprecating, gorgeous, delicious, sad, crude, generous, and entirely transporting. I love the sense of life-or-death urgency and desperation and hopefulness that the narrator embodies as he hunts for his piece of longed-for cheese. I love how both writer and cheesemaker lavish love on every aspect of their work, each man willing to risk themselves completely in order to touch bottom on their dreams. I love how Paterniti's dream for transcendence and meaning gradually emerges in a strange verdigris of cheese, just his cheesemaker's dream emerges in the rough-hewn care of these pages, the one providing the other. And I love how all the dreams of the book converge in a lost little village in Spain, Paterniti and his family living under the spell of a cheesemaker, *The Telling Room* becoming a strange portal to all the hopes and fears we spend our entire lives trying to belittle and ignore. Truly, the lesson of Paterniti's story seems to be this: risk and trust and follow one's dreams, because *The Telling Room* is the kind of fabulous reward that can be found when we put ourselves at stake in the world.

Nancy says

The Author Falls in Love with Catalan and a Special Cheese

Ambrosio, a Catalan farmer, has a dream. He wants to recreate the family cheese. A big, bluff, creative character, he finally succeeds, bringing his father to tears. The cheese becomes famous. People around the world want to taste this fabulous cheese. Ambrosio expands his business beyond his capability to manage it, and the result is predictable.

I enjoyed Ambrosio's story and the feel of the life on a farm in Catalan. The story of cheese making was fascinating. That part of the book is an excellent read. It has heroes and villains, a great story.

Unfortunately, the author decided to tell his own story along side the primary story. He found the cheese when he was a young MFA graduate doing editing for a deli. He traveled to Spain, met Ambrosio and became involved with his life. It's a story he wants to tell. The problem for me is that telling his story takes away from the drama of Ambrosio's story.

The author worked on the book for a long time and apparently collected a great deal of information on the history of Spain, Catalan, and cheese making among other topics. Unfortunately, he insists on putting all the information in the book. Much of it is in footnotes, but instead of putting the footnotes in a Notes section at the end, he intersperses them throughout the text. Yes, you can skip them, but their presence on the page makes the book choppy. It's even worse if you read all the footnotes as you go along. I tried that.

I can only recommend this book if you love Spain and cheese. If you do, it's a book to read slowly and savor. If you're looking for a good story, it's there, but you have to wander through the author's life to find it.

I reviewed this book for the Amazon Vine Program.

LillyBooks says

In its simplest, purest, most reduced form I think this would have been a great book. It has colorful characters, a great story, betrayal, revenge, etc. When it stays true to itself, it does reach greatness, so I am giving it three stars for that.

The reason it is not a great book is because it is so unfocused. The author including himself in the story didn't bother me, per se, as it did some other reviewers. What bothered me the most about this book is how many meanderings and tangents there are. There is El Cid and Goya twice and long distance truck driving, and they all have very little to do with the plot. The author attempts to claim that these tangents are necessary in a Castilian story as that is how all Castilian tales are told. Perhaps, but there is a difference between telling a fable-like story around shared wine and writing a memoir.

And the footnotes! If El Cid and company are unnecessary but vaguely related to the narrative, these footnotes seem to have almost no relation to the plot. Almost every page (seriously!) has a least one footnote, but most pages have several, some with their own subfootnotes (which I didn't even know existed because they shouldn't), and many running several pages. Page 182 has only four lines actual narrative text, for example, and the rest of the page is a 8 point font footnote! I quickly learned to stop reading them and to skim the other tangents, but they still left me feeling unsatisfied.

Antigone says

Magazine writers tend to be experts at the quick sell. They are, by and large, very good at compacting ideas rich with interest into the few short pages allotted them by a space restriction. So it should come as no surprise to discover that the flyleaf of this book is so darned engaging. The author hears about a magnificent Spanish cheese, flies to Castile to investigate and becomes embroiled in a tale of "love, betrayal and revenge." Mystery, duplicity, high-drama and atmosphere. I could get on board with that...and did.

Unfortunately this is not the story of a magnificent cheese, or even a dynamic cheesemaker and some malicious backroom cheese chicanery, as much as it is the story of a writer's long road to disillusionment with his craft. It is the story of Michael Paterniti's idealism. He is front and center throughout - his subjects standing as symbols he uses to reflect the struggle with his own quixotic beliefs about the art to which he has dedicated his life.

From a purely literary standpoint, this was a messy business. The book is as over-written as its title and copiously footnoted, which makes it somewhat of a briar patch. If you can manage to get past the stylistic encrustation, well, hunker down. You're in for a long haul of digression, repression and general historical meandering. Paterniti is so seduced by his own travail that he comes to a dead stop inside it and stubbornly refuses to move. Ten years pass. (That's right.) It's clear he did not want to face certain truths and, until he could afford to do so? It was all going to be filler.

What works here is the slice-of-life he provides of today's rural Spanish town - the land, the community, the farmer. The author at one point moved his family to the tiny, tiny locale of Guzman and brought his eye for detail to the scene. I also believe he captured the character of his protagonist, Ambrosio Molinos, though it's hard to separate the man from all the mythological baggage he was given to carry.

If you are interested in how an author contends with the limitations of his profession, *The Telling Room* certainly presents an experience. (And a little bit of cheese, and a little bit of Spain, and a little bit of lifting your eye to the clock with the suspicion that you really, really *must* have something a tad more pressing to do...)

Gibson says

This is a stunning, wild ride. Like the stories told by the larger-than-life cheesemaker Ambrosio, who is at the center of the book, it is a story filled with asides, short-cuts, side roads, embellishments, and huge, huge heart. It is the deepest kind of writing about a place; Paterniti embedded himself in a small village in Spain over a period of ten years to tell it. No wonder that long process of trying to tell the story--and coming up against the very limits of this story and of stories in general--ended up changing the storyteller too. This is a book that reminds us why we love stories, especially those that take the long, scenic route and deliver a real, unexpected pay-off.

Diane Kistner says

When I started reading THE TELLING ROOM, I had a very difficult time of it. The book is heavily

peppered with footnotes that force you to read them; some are asides with extraneous detail, but some are so important that ignoring them diminishes the story's power.

I finally figured out what was going on with the footnotes, and why, when I found this note at the beginning of the chapter "The Betrayal":

"*I would soon find out that digression was a national pastime in Castile, that to get to the crux of any matter you had to listen for hours, weeks, months, years. Not a fan of annotations and footnotes [and this reader is not either!], I realized I had no say in the matter. Every story here was littered with footnotes and asides. And even then, after the storyteller concluded his tale—or, rather, after you'd gathered and assembled the shards of his story from a thousand other digressions—well, you'd go to the bar and have it immediately undermined by someone else's digressive, heavily annotated account of the same thing."

Reading *THE TELLING ROOM* is definitely like this. It is not a book that can be read straight through, and you cannot plumb its depths by reading it only once. It demands patience, attention to detail, and the development of an imaginative, almost intuitive use of one's senses. If you are willing to invest your time in this book, to allow it to ripen slowly, it will reward you with its strong bouquet and presence in addition to its story—rather like Ambrosio Molinos's great cheese.

Danielle says

The last book I read was all about people obsessed with a fictional painting. This book is all about people obsessed with actual cheese. I really wanted to like this book based on the title and description, but man I did not. I am not someone who reads multiple books at the same time, but about 90 pages before the end of this book I stopped and read something else and had to force myself to go back and finish it off. The only thing that would have redeemed this book was if it came with a piece of the celebrated cheese, but it can't since the cheese at least as described in the book no longer exists and as best I can tell is hard to come by in the United States period at this point.

This is a non-fiction book in which the author becomes obsessed with some fancy, high priced Spanish sheep's milk cheese he comes across while at a deli in Michigan. He decides to hunt down the maker of the cheese and travels to the small town in Spain where he meets the cheesemaker who resurrected an old family recipe for the cheese, rockets it to fame, and then supposedly has the company stolen from him by his best friend while the mass produced version of the cheese degrades what was good about the cheese to begin with. The cheesemaker vows revenge. The author literally spends years and years pursuing this boring story and himself is overly obsessed with this cheese. The book is as much about his pursuit of the story as it is about the actual story. I was just bored. I recommend giving this book a pass.
