

The Cheese Stands Alone

In search of a famous fromage, Michael Paterniti finds as much fiction as fact

By David Hayes, *The Globe and Mail*, July 27, 2013

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

By Michael Paterniti

(Random House, 2013, 368 pages)

Like Russian nesting dolls, Michael Paterniti's *The Telling Room* is a story-within-a-story-within-a-story... As the subtitle suggests, it's partly about Páramo de Guzmán, an artisanal cheese made in a cave in north-central Spain from Churra sheep milk and aged in extra-virgin olive oil for at least a year. Paterniti calls it an "outrageous, overpriced, presumptuous little cheese, almost angelic in its naivety, fabulist in character, seemingly made by an incorruptible artiste who, with an apparent straight face, had stated that its high price came because it was 'made with love.'"

He discovered the cheese in 1991 when, armed with a creative writing degree, he took a job proofreading a deli owner's newsletter. He found the owner's description of this chi-chi cheese – sold at Harrods, enjoyed by the likes of British royalty, the king of Spain and Ronald Reagan – beguiling. Behind the counter, too expensive to buy in its precious little tin, it somehow represented to Paterniti the essence of hope, purity. But it also stirred in him something else: "...the minutiae, the care, the importance of time," he writes, "happened to sound a lot like the job of a writer."

A decade ago, married with a young son, Paterniti, an A-list freelance journalist who has written on topics as diverse as back-country smoke jumpers, Bill Clinton and the Japanese tsunami, felt like he was bouncing from assignment to assignment, balancing a professional career and fatherhood while caught up in the hectic pace of Western urban life.

Then he remembered the cheese and, learning the business had gone under, figured there had to be a story there. Deciding to meet its maker, Ambrosio Molinos, Paterniti sat with Ambrosio in his cave – the "telling room" – where cheese was aged and friends gathered to drink wine and tell stories. Paterniti listened to Ambrosio spin a dense narrative about theft, duplicity, blood feuds, threats, a murder plot; passions dating back to the Spanish Civil War and beyond, all lying beneath the surface of the placid Castilian village of Guzmán. It was like time had stopped.

Paterniti became obsessed with the dramatic history of the cheese, but not because he intended to write a conventional foodie book or travelogue or even primarily as a reporter. As time went on, he writes, "I was telling myself a story, too... This whole business had long ceased being journalism. It was mythicalism,

the making of and suspension in something mythical. This was encouragement, the telling of a story to remind yourself of your higher angels..."

Fair to say that Paterniti began losing touch with reality in the course of this quixotic endeavour.

Ambrosio was a great cheese maker who blamed the loss of his business on his childhood friend and partner. Only toward the end does Paterniti realize Ambrosio is a wretched businessman, far from blameless, despite falling victim to some unscrupulous investors. However, the Spaniard's true gift is his myth-making, and Paterniti spends most of the book under his spell. Rural Spain is like an escape hatch from the modern world so he brings his wife and by now two young children for an extended visit. They enjoy an adventure while he listens to Ambrosio's tales unravel like the paths winding throughout the Castilian hills, which Paterniti tries to capture with footnotes littering the pages like sheep droppings as he gamely follows this unreliable narrator.

But who's telling the story? Ultimately, it's always the author, although in this case Paterniti is both unreliable himself and yet periodically self-aware enough to recognize it. "As a journalist, you enter other people's lives, collecting what you can, positioning yourself off to the side, as the ultimate observer," he writes. But with Ambrosio, he's paralyzed, enamoured by the force of his new friend's personality. Once, after asking yet again about some quotidian detail, Ambrosio booms, "What is it with you My-kull? You *always* ask the colour of the shirt I was wearing when this or that happened. Sometimes, when you tell stories, you need to use your imagination, *hombre!*"

In other hands, *The Telling Room* would have been a train wreck, but two things save the book. First, the sheer beauty of Paterniti's writing. He's no stranger to the creative outreaches of journalism – he wrote a dream-like account of the Swissair 111 crash off the coast of Nova Scotia for *Esquire* and documents a driving trip across America with a fragment of Albert Einstein's brain in a Tupperware bowl in *Driving Mr. Albert* (for Harper's, later expanded into a book). Here, when he eventually tastes the last existing piece of Páramo de Guzmán, he writes: "with the first crumble it spread slowly, in lava flow, across the palatal landscape, tasting of minerals and luscious buttercream, of chamomile and thyme..."

And second, he finally regains his journalist's mojo, interviewing Ambrosio's lawyer and his best friend and confronting Ambrosio about the many inconsistencies in his stories.

But *The Telling Room* isn't an investigation, meant to do what today is expected of the media: piece together facts and provide a neat explanatory conclusion. Still, a book has to end in some satisfactory way, so Paterniti writes that "something terrible had happened to Ambrosio, that by flaw and hubris and other people's trickery he'd let down his family while putting himself in the mother of all holes, and he'd needed a story that allowed him to live with himself, to reassemble and unshatter himself, to get up and re-enter the world."

But that's only one of the stories. What about the author who, in different circumstances, might have been left with an unpublishable manuscript entitled *Paterniti's Folly*? Reflecting on the messy, often unprofessional way he approached this decade-plus-long project, he waxes philosophical: "It wasn't just Ambrosio: We all had our secrets and maybe the most terrible of them was that we weren't exactly who we thought we were, who we said we were, who we dreamed of being, that we were divided and at war and half made of self-mythologies, too. And sometimes on that staircase spiralling up from the darkness, we met ourselves coming up into the light, not recognizing ourselves or what we might do next."

David Hayes is a Toronto-based journalist and author who will be a mentor/advisor for students in the University of King's College's new Creative Nonfiction MFA program launching this year.