

## **Interview with Tom Piantanida about In the Shadow of the Big Apple**

This week we asked Tom Piantanida, author of the newly released book *In the Shadow of the Big Apple*, a few questions about his book.

*Your book In the Shadow of the Big Apple was just released. The main character is Kenny. Can you tell us where the inspiration for Kenny came from?*

Kenny is an amalgamation of kids I knew while growing up in Union City, NJ. Of course, some of the adventures are autobiographical with literary license. That is, the stories have a kernel of truth, but were embellished to provide more interest. If you think of Kenny as my alter ego, you would not be far wrong.

*The book is called In the Shadow of the Big Apple, can you tell us where the book is actually set and what are some of the locations Kenny ends up visiting?*

Kenny's home base is 28th Street, Union City, NJ, and most of the local action takes place on that street and the two closest cross streets - Bergenline Avenue and Central Avenue. Bergenline Avenue is the most interesting street in the stories because it is lined by the car barns, Caputo's Fish Market, Vincent Giuliani's Italian Grocery Store, and Reguzzi's Produce Stand.

Columbia Park, where Kenny and two friends were apprehended for setting a fire was a defunct amusement park that Kenny's dad and others of his generation passed some time decades earlier. The park was actually beyond Kenny's territorial limit, being across Hudson County Boulevard, which was one of the main thoroughfares in Union City.

Palisades Amusement Park was actually in the town of Palisades Park, NJ. It was poised on the edge of the New Jersey palisades, overlooking Manhattan. The huge PALISADES AMUSEMENT PARK was clearly visible from the West Side of Manhattan. I only recently learned that the management of the amusement park knew all about the private entrance the Kenny and other kids used, and they had told their security force to turn a blind eye to kids sneaking into the park.

The Highlands is a real town on the "Jersey Shore." In fact, the movie Jersey Girl with Ben Affleck, George Carlin, and Liv Tyler was set there. After a few summer vacations - always the last two weeks in August - at Keensburg (another Jersey Shore town), my family settled into a pattern of renting from Captain Brown in the Highlands. The family would stay either in the Big House or The Boat House, but always at Captain Brown's. When the excitement of a carousel waned as Kenny got older, the family vacationed in Seaside Beach, NJ where there was a boardwalk and a huge amusement park.

What can I say about 42nd Street in Manhattan that hasn't already been said? In Kenny's time, the street was lined by movie theater that showed first-run films and businesses that sold a wide variety of inexpensive items, particularly binoculars, pocket radios, and switchblade knives. These business perennially displayed "Going Out Of Business" signs. Sandwiched between the businesses and the theaters were Grant's, where you could buy a great hotdog, and Hubert's Museum that featured a flea circus, among more exotic fare. The museum was at the rear of a penny arcade, and had a downstairs where the actual fleas circus and other acts could be found.

McDougall's Camp is based on a real camp that I attended near Sparta, NJ. And, as the story suggests, an "association" of which my parents were members, sponsored the trip. The camp was

about as decrepit as described in the story, right down to the chlorine and gypsum-laden pool. And, incidentally, while I was at camp, my family did move out of Union City. I found them, though.

*There are several distinct stories in the book, which one is your favorite?*

I think my favorite story is about the Highlands, because there are so many fond memories of summers spent there.

*What is it about that story that you like?*

I am particularly pleased that an illustration from the Highlands graces the rear cover of the book. It is the only photo I have of Uncle Ben, who was my grandmother's "boarder" (a polite term used in the early 20th Century for a cohabitant of the opposite gender), and who I loved as the grandfather I never had. My fondest memory of the Highlands is chronicled in the story. It was not until many years later that I learned that because my dad had been laid off at work, the only way we could afford a vacation was if we lived off the sea, which we certainly did that year.

*Can you tell us about one or two of the characters that Kenny interacts with?*

Two of Kenny's closest friends were his two male cousins, one six months younger and the other a year younger than Kenny. The three cousins were a physical contrast. Kenny was of average build, if small; the next younger cousin, Max, (AKA Crisco, because he was "fat in the can") was taller than Kenny whether he was standing up or lying down; and the youngest cousin was rail thin and was called JJ Candybody by his father because he seemingly survived on candy, refusing to eat whatever his mother prepared. The cousins were very attuned to each other, so if one

started a prank, the others joined in immediately.

*Are you planning any appearances or signings to promote your book?*

I am, indeed, planning some book signings, although it will be a bit more difficult now that I have moved out of the San Francisco Bay Area. My original plan involved signings at a multiple book stores in and around SF, and I fully expect to contact many of them to arrange for signings. However, having moved to the boonies 150 miles north of San Francisco, my signings may be somewhat curtailed.

*If you had to convince someone to pick up a copy in two sentences, what would you say?*

Wow!! Two sentences to convince someone to buy my book. Could one of them mention my cousin Guido, the Enforcer? No, I guess not. I don't know whether comparison is permitted, but if so, I like to compare my writing to that of Jean Shepherd, who wrote such books as WANDA HICKEY'S NIGHT OF GOLDEN MEMORIES (and other Disasters), and IN GOD WE TRUST, ALL OTHERS PAY CASH. Jean, who was my inspiration, had a zany talk show on WOR in NYC in the early 60's. He also morphed many of his stories into a film that has become a classic: A CHRISTMAS STORY.

Okay, try this: Experience what was like to grow up in an Italian ghetto in the mid-fifties with street-wise friends destined to dichotomize into cops and criminals.

*Is this the last we will see of Kenny?*

You have not heard the last of Kenny. In fact, I have self-published two other books about Kenny. KENNY'S KEMPS is a

collection of short stories about Kenny's adventures as an older adolescent. Most of the stories involve cars and girls, which were the two intertwined themes in Kenny's life. DAVIES LAKE EPISODES is a novel that expands the cars-and-girls theme, while documenting adventures and misadventures at a summer resort where Kenny worked, and in Kenny's high school. Both were published by Lulu.com, and are available on Amazon.com.

*Thanks Tom, we enjoyed reading about Kenny and we wish you and the book much success.*

***In the Shadow of the Big Apple, by Tom Piantanida. \$12.95, 170 pages, Diversion Press Young Adult, paperback ISBN-13: 978-1935290056***