

## Author Illustrator notes written by Cristina Neri

*For Love* is a story that really did come straight from my heart. The idea itself had its genesis in the Aeolian summer of 2010. I had taken a family trip with my daughters to Salina. I was in a phase of reclaiming my Aeolian identity. Growing up in an Anglo-dominated country town, I had spent a lifetime rejecting my family's culture and after my father's diagnosis with dementia, I became very focused on the father/daughter relationship.

Walking around Salina made my father's stories spring to life. Seeing where he lived, visiting the Civic museum that showcases the manual tools once used daily on the islands and learning about Aeolian traditions fuelled my imagination. The more I thought about my father's childhood, migration, accomplishments and prognosis, the more love for him grew inside of me. The story became a vehicle to express it.

In Matteo, I conjured the sort of love that my own father had found difficult to express but that I had discovered for him. I wanted my own children to understand that love can be found in the darkest and most painful places, as is represented by Carina's fall into a prickly pear tree, and that just as Matteo demonstrates the ability to reframe an event is both marvellously healing and the key to resilience.

This is one of life's lesson that so few of us take the time to digest which is why I believe that this story is as pertinent for the parent reader as it is for the child being read to.

The story, for the most part, takes place in the family garden plot in a bygone era. It was a self-subsistent lifestyle where people farmed the land and fished the seas to sustain their humble lives. The daily cycle was dictated by the light of the moon and that of the Sun as well as the seasons. Farmers were attuned to the environment. They cared for their animals and land knowing that their family's own ability to thrive was interdependent.

Surviving on the Aeolian Islands in the time of my *nonni* and parents' childhood was incredibly challenging, the steep terrain and the harsh winter conditions coupled with everything being done manually, made their lives arduous. Signified by Matteo's constant hoeing, toiling the land was back-breaking work.

Like my relatives, when the Italians migrated to Australia, they laboured just as furiously, rising before dawn and often retiring only hours before the start of a new day. They worked

7 days a week to sustain the family often at great personal sacrifice. I recognise that there is such honour in hard, manual work and I wanted to express my gratitude to my forbearers and my parents just as Matteo does when he contemplates the souls of his generational fathers as he starts to hoe the land to the beat of his heart. The act of work can also be defined as an act of love.

But what is love? As Carina comes to learn, love isn't a romantic feeling nor is it purely familial. I believe it's the meaning behind everything.

It's what connects us to the world and everyone in it. It is how we understand ourselves and give meaning to our lives as one of our greatest capacities as humans. I believe this is the most critical lesson we can teach our children. In this way, Matteo is entirely triumphant!

## **IMAGERY AND METAPHORS**

Like every good fable, *For Love* is filled with metaphorical imagery. There are bees that sting, snails that destroy plants and worms that spoil fruit but the one I'd like to focus on most is the prickly pear.

In *For Love*, the prickly pear tree represents all the struggles we have in life. They are dangerous and like that damn spine that gets embedded into our finger, as we walk through life, we are constantly reminded of our own suffering.

Yet, the fruit of the prickly pear is a gift and has the potential to sustain us. In contrast to its fear-provoking, spiny exterior, its flesh is so vibrant and so incredibly sweet that it conjures all the joy that our human experience has to offer. The fruit of the prickly pear is the paradox of life and represents our need to embrace the risk of our own suffering to experience the fullness of love.

Then, there is the garden itself. Ubiquitous to the Italian migrant experience, the *giardino* owes its origins to the traditional lives of peasants from which most Italian migrants from my parents' generation hailed from. In the book, Matteo's *giardino* serves as a metaphor for the opportunities that life presents to us. Just like tending a garden, achieving our goals,

whether personal, at school, in our careers or in our family life, requires a dedication to work, commitment and resilience.

## THE PROCESS

Once I finally decided to embark on illustrating my story, I began by researching and collecting reference material. I sifted through my own photos and online for images of caper bushes, prickly pears, donkeys, vintage tools and kitchen items. I also found 19th century etchings of traditional Aeolian kitchens and houses and studied them carefully as I wanted to place the characters in an authentic Aeolian setting.

I then proceeded to sketch out the story as one continuous narrative on sheets of sketch paper that were taped together because I wanted the illustrations and ideas to flow into each other just as a string of words form the narrative of a story.



The next part of the process was to break apart the images and transfer them onto a surface called clayboard. Then I'd use black ink applied with brushes and pens to define the images and a scalpel-like tool to scratch into the inked surface to create an etching effect.



I'd done a wood etching workshop with a celebrated wood engraver, David Fraser and loved the technique but wanted to produce a similar effect without requiring a printing press so I experimented with ink on clayboard. This part of the process was very meditative. You could say that scratching away was my version of hoeing! And here is that illustration completed.

In regards to colour, I had a very specific idea of how I wanted to use it and settled on a limited palette of the iconic colours of the islands – blue, green, yellow and red. I also wanted to use colour in such a way that accentuated the yesteryear aspect of the story. I really liked the look of the screen-printed images in retro story books and was able to achieve a similar effect by using blocks of colour placed slightly out of alignment with the illustration outlines. Even the paper selection was made with this intent. I choose and uncoated stock and opted out of using any gloss or plastic coating.

And viola, here it is!