

Frank Gioia
Interview by Sue Staats

In one of the reviews of Frank Gioia's memoir collection *The Mercury Man*, the work is described as "slices of life served up skillfully in an authentic and astute, streetwise voice that take us on a journey of remembrance and self-discovery." It was quite wonderful to discover in a Zoom chat that Frank Gioia himself, many years past the young adulthood he describes in the book, is also authentic and astute, charming and open. But one thing bothered me. That name. His name. I'd heard it somewhere. It was really, really familiar.

Then I Googled it.

Edited for length and clarity.

Sue: Frank, you have the same name as a notorious mob boss, who I guess you could call the "other" Frank Gioia. Do you, or did you, have any connection with him? Are you ever confused with him?

Frank: (laughs) Only on Google. But yes, it's my name, and Frankie Boy was a mobster in the Gambino family at about the same time I was coming up as a young kid.

Sue: Are you related to him?

Frank: Not at all, not to my knowledge. When I was a kid, there were very few Gioias in my greater circle. It was not a name that was, you know, out there in Brooklyn. But as I've gotten older, I've noticed more, and even some women have begun to take my name and use it as a first name. It's pronounced "JOY-ah," with the soft G, and means bright or jewel. If you walk around the streets of Italy, the jewelry shops, they use the word all the time to identify their stores.

Sue: The story being read at Stories on Stage Sacramento is from your collection *The Mercury Man*, which is stories from your childhood and from your experience in Vietnam, correct? The story is called "Craps," and I was curious about how old you were at the time of the story, and also if this experience was something you might have had every day in your neighborhood. I also wondered if you'd played craps since.

Frank: That story, "Craps," probably took place while I was 14 or 15 years old. I wrote about a period that started when I was about nine or 10 and went to when I was 24 or 25, so it's really a 15-year period. And it's all memoir. It's all based in fact. We played dice and we gambled. It was something that people did. There are a couple of other stories in my book related to gambling — carts and horse racing. I think it was one of the things that under-educated people who hung (around) in pool rooms and bars did. Myself, I spent the better part of my teen years in a pool room. That's what we did, virtually every day. And people gambled and people played craps and people set up card games and went to the racetrack, and I thought it was all very exciting. Most of the people were a little bit older, but I met some lifelong friends there. Some of the challenges in my life came out of the pool room. But I also learned about certain art forms that I had no idea existed. So, for me, it really was a positive experience — although it challenged my very being.

Sue: What were those art forms?

Frank: I only knew about Doo Wop and the music of the Italian crooners, such as Sinatra and Dean Martin. My friend Rocky introduced me to opera and jazz. I was mesmerized by this music without words.

Sue: Who was the “Mercury Man” of the book title?

Frank: The Mercury Man was my father. He left the family when I was 11, or just short of 12 years old. And from that day forward, my mother never referred to him as “your father” again. He withdrew some money from the bank, bought himself a new car — a 1954 Mercury — and kind of just drove off. And so that's where the name comes from.

Sue: That's a great story, but a sad one, I imagine. Is that story about when he left in the book?

Frank: Yes, there's a story in the book called “The Mercury Man.”

Sue: How and when did assembling this collection of stories come about?

Frank: Well, I spent the better part of the last 50 years in the Berkshire Mountains in western Massachusetts, where it used to be very cold in the winter. And, this is a bit of a guess, but it was maybe half a lifetime ago — I was maybe 40, 45 — some friends and I got together on Saturdays and ate and drank and read stories to each other. It got us out of the house, it got us together. I didn't write at the time, so I read from books I was interested in. At some point, I decided to try to write a story about Vietnam, and I got a lot of support and a lot of good feedback. So, from then on, from time to time, I'd write a piece.

Fast forward and now I'm 65 and retiring. A young friend invited me to attend his acting class and I did, and he encouraged me to keep writing and also to tell those stories in class. That's how it started. And when I put those stories together, I wondered, what could I do with them? They're varied and really short. So, I started going to an open mic, and at an open mic you only get five minutes, which means you really only have about 750 words, right? And another guy heard them and said, “You should write a play. This stuff is just terrific.” So, I did. It's called *14 Holy Martyrs*, which was the name of the grade school I attended as a young boy. It's one act, about an hour long, and in 2016 we did a staged reading of it in Great Barrington, Massachusetts.

The other day I took it out and thought, Gee, I wonder if Jacob Gutiérrez-Montoya (the actor who will be reading Gioia's story and director of development and community partnerships at the B Street Theatre) would be interested in looking at this? I think I'll run off a copy, see if I can get him to take a look at it.

Sue: Good idea. Maybe we'll see it produced in Sacramento! So, it sounds like *The Mercury Man* was a slightly different project. How did that come together?

Frank: When I decided to publish my memoirs, I had been reading my work at a couple of open mics in the Berkshires for the previous 10 years. We were spending some time in Berkeley during the winter of 2020 when I had the idea for a book. Then COVID happened and turned the world upside down. We returned home and, with everything at a standstill, it was easy to focus. I self-published the book later that year and then I saw a publisher's invitation for manuscripts from Bordighera Press in 2022. They accepted it in late 2022 and, without changing anything, published it in their fall catalog in October 2023.

Sue: I'm fascinated by the fact that this collection started as spoken-word pieces. I'm thinking that it accounts for the very intimate talking voice that's in the one story I've read so far. It's like I'm sitting down with a guy and he's spooling this yarn. He's not being literary. He's telling me about his life. Which makes me wonder: *The Mercury Man* is about you as a teen and young man, but it was written well after you retired. So, tell me, what did you do in those 40-plus years in between?

Frank: Well, at 20, I went into the army. I went in the army to try and save my life. I was using heavy drugs and a number of my friends were overdosing and killing themselves. I was in Vietnam for a year and was very fortunate that I came out whole, with the exception of whatever I might have to deal with mentally. Then I did what at the time you were supposed to do: young Italian boy gets married, gets a good job, buys a house on Long Island, has a couple of children and makes the grandparents very happy. But then, around 1967-68, I ran into some friends who had become hippies. And I thought that was really cool. So, I gave up my suits and ties and, with my wife and child, we moved off to the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York. We lived there six or seven years. I became a carpenter, built a house to live in. Around the time my son was three or four, the marriage broke up. It was the '70s and I was single for a number of years, and then I met my current wife. We met on an Amtrak train and we just celebrated the 47th anniversary of our meeting. We each have a son and we've got four grandchildren and my granddaughter has two babies of her own.

Sue: Were you still a carpenter back in the '70s?

Frank: Well, I had become a building contractor. Actually, I've had four or five different careers. They all seemed to last seven or eight years. So, let's see: for a while I ran a retail shop and taught myself to become a leather crafter. We bought an old Victorian farmhouse in the Berkshires and turned it into a bed and breakfast, did that for a while. By then, I was just short of 50 and decided I needed to get a little more settled, make sure I was comfortable as I got older. That was always my word — I wanted to have a "comfortable" life. So, I got a job working for a nonprofit managing real estate. I knew about real estate, had been a carpenter and a building contractor, and they sent me to school to learn finance. And I did that until I was ready to retire.

Sue: Whew. That sounds like several lifetimes! And now I'm curious about why you ended up out here. Your life in the Berkshires sounded ideal. Are you living here?

Frank: Not full time. Right now, we're living in El Dorado County, near Placerville. About two years ago, we were living in the Berkshires and decided we wanted to be closer to our kids and our grandchildren, and they live in Minneapolis and in El Dorado County. So, we sold our Berkshires home, bought a condo near Minneapolis, spend half a year there and the other half here in a cottage on my son's property. We plan our year to catch the grandchildren's birthdays. It's kind of crazy, but it seems to be working out.

Sue: You seem to have caught fire with the Sacramento literary community. I see you have a reading at the Poetry Center soon. Do you have poems also, or will you be telling the stories from your book?

Frank: I tell the stories. I was fortunate to find a writer's workshop for veterans last year and I told the facilitator, Jack Carman, that I liked to read my stories. And he said, you should meet Lara Gularte.

Sue: Oh, that must have opened up everything for you.

Frank: Yeah. Lara, at the time, was poet laureate for El Dorado County and she was very accepting of me and my work and introduced me to a number of people who have been doing a lot for the community for a long time.

Sue: They've really created a literary hub for poetry, somewhat like Stories on Stage Sacramento has become for prose. It's interesting, with your prose being performed so often, you're kind of straddling both worlds.

Frank: I'm very excited to see how my story will be, you know, approached and read by Jacob. I've never seen anyone really read any of my stories. So, this will be exciting for me.

Sue: I was wondering if you were also a little apprehensive.

Frank: Really, no. I feel very confident about what I say in the book. I've embraced my past. And it's been my therapy. And so, I guess I have some tears left. But I've cried a lot over this work. These stories are not easy. And sometimes it's a little difficult to hold it together when I'm reading them myself. But I've been really fortunate. I mean, the audiences have been so supportive. And it's good for me. It's like I had to endure this pain as a younger person in order to express my art as an older person. And that works for me.

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