

MATTANZA

Love and Death in the Sea of Sicily.

By Theresa Maggio.

Perseus, \$25.

Depicted in 4,000-year-old cave paintings, their image stamped on Phoenician coins, written about by Aristotle and prized by modern-day Japanese gourmets (who will pay more than \$100 a pound for it), the giant bluefin tuna is a fish with a mystical aura. In 1986, Theresa Maggio lost her heart to the bluefin and to the fishermen of Favignana, an island off Sicily, who every spring enter into battle with these leviathans. For more than 10 years, Maggio, a former science writer for the Los Alamos National Scientific Laboratory, observed and participated in the Favignana *tonnara*, the ritual trapping of the bluefin that swim through the Strait of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean in order to spawn. The elaborate snare, a complicated arrangement of barrier nets weighed down by anchors across the tunas' migration path, has been built in the same fashion ever since the Stone Age. The *tonnara* culminates in the *mattanza*, the bloody rite during which the bluefin are killed and lifted from the Chamber of Death, the trap's final room. Maggio's riveting and thorough account of a dying practice — tuna snares used to be all over the Mediterranean but today there are only a handful left — not only beautifully and compassionately documents an arcane way of life and death but gives us an intimate and detailed portrait of her own experiences as an American woman on a small island steeped in custom and tradition.

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