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La Bella Lingua: My Love Affair With Italian, The World's Most Enchanting Language



Synopsis

"Italians say that someone who acquires a new language 'possesses' it. In my case, Italian possesses me. With Italian racing like blood through my veins, I do indeed see with different eyes, hear with different ears, and drink in the world with all my senses...." A celebration of the language and culture of Italy, *La Bella Lingua* is the story of how a language shaped a nation, told against the backdrop of one woman's personal quest to speak fluent Italian. For anyone who has been to Italy, the fantasy of living the Italian life is powerfully seductive. But to truly become Italian, one must learn the language. This is how Dianne Hales began her journey. In *La Bella Lingua*, she brings the story of her decades-long experience with "the world's most loved and lovable language" together with explorations of Italy's history, literature, art, music, movies, lifestyle, and food in a true opera amorosa - a labor of her love of Italy. Throughout her first excursion in Italy - with "non parlo Italiano" as her only Italian phrase - Dianne delighted in the beauty of what she saw but craved comprehension of what she heard. And so she chose to inhabit the language. Over more than 25 years she has studied Italian in every way possible: through Berlitz, books, CDs, podcasts, private tutorials and conversation groups, and, most importantly, large blocks of time in Italy. In the process she found that Italian became not just a passion and a pleasure but a passport into Italy's storia and its very soul. She offers charming insights into what makes Italian the most emotionally expressive of languages, from how the "pronto" ("ready!") Italians say when they answer the telephone conveys a sense of something coming alive to how even ordinary things such as a towel (*asciugamano*) or handkerchief (*fazzoletto*) sound better in Italian. She invites readers to join her as she traces the evolution of Italian in the zesty graffiti on the walls of Pompeii, in Dante's incandescent cantos, and in Boccaccio's bawdy Decameron. She portrays how social graces remain woven into the fabric of Italian: Even the chipper "ciao", which does double duty as "hi" and "bye", reflects centuries of *bella figura*. And she exalts the glories of Italy's food and its rich and often uproarious gastronomic language: Italians deftly describe someone uptight as a *baccala* (dried cod), a busybody who noses into everything as a *prezzemolo* (parsley), a worthless or banal movie as a *polpettone* (large meatball). Like Dianne, listeners of *La Bella Lingua* will find themselves *innamorata*, enchanted, by Italian, fascinated by its saga, tantalized by its adventures, addicted to its sound, and ever eager to spend more time in its company.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I expected to be bathed in this lovely expressive language more from a learning point of view than historical, but the history offered insights you may value. Experiencing a language on so many levels obviously added great depth as well as pleasure for the author and I really learned a lot, although I found some parts a bit dry. Although I knew Italian was a collection of dialects crystalized into a national language not all that long ago in spite of the antiquity of the land and people, I didn't realize how that came about, nor the critical steps, texts and people responsible. This book describes it all from the impact of Dante's Inferno to opera. There's a delightful passage about the wonderful librettist, Da Ponte, pairing with Mozart for the three great operas, Le Nozze di Figaro, Don Giovanni and Cosi fan tutte and how Da Ponte not only brought vivid style and language to the operas, but to Columbia University where he became the first professor of the Italian language in America. He was introduced to the college by Clement Moore. Who knew! Tidbits like that enchanted me. Stories of the impact of Marcello Mastroianni were fascinating as well as how Petrarch's sonnets influenced the more structured written Italian as opposed to spoken Italian. I enjoyed learning that Italian is so versatile not through a vast number of basic words, but the vast ability to alter words to mean so many different things through prefixes and suffixes, modifiers, etc. And conversely how it has multiple words for things like face, that convey very different concepts. As a lover of the Italian experience, much of this information delighted me, but some of the history was just that and felt rather tedious.

I loved every minute of reading and thinking about this book. I bought an additional copy to lend to friends, because I want to keep my autographed copy. But a caveat: Dianne and I were both

members of a fiction writing workshop. Dianne was a wonderful reader and great critic, working to make everyone's writing better. And despite her protestations, she wrote an elegant novel that was imbued with all things Italian and created living, breathing characters. I never told her, but I was always jealous of her felicity with the language. I was thrilled when I learned that she wrote *La Bella Lingua*. It has exceeded all my expectations. As a lover of romantic languages and the opera, I would have been happy had the book only been about Dianne's adventures with the language. But it is far more than that. It is a wonderful tapestry woven from well researched history of the Italian peninsula and personal anecdotes, with a charming narrative voice, as though you were having a glass of wine with a good friend who was telling you stories. Dianne creates real, recognizable people, even if they died four hundred years ago. I found myself laughing out loud many times. Dianne manages a mountain of research and wisely divides the book into areas like the history of Europe; art; music; architecture; cuisine; film. and my personal favorite, what we would call swear words. There is so much material, but she deals with it with humor, while always focusing on the human aspect. I learned an amazing amount. Who knew that there was an important female Renaissance poet, for example? I can no longer impress my friends by explaining with *Viva Verdi* meant during and immediately after his lifetime, now that Dianne has explained it.

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