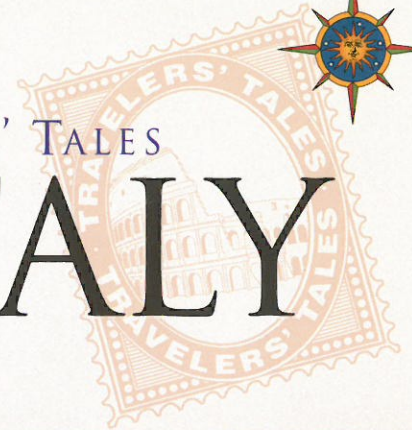


Introduction by JAN MORRIS



TRAVELERS' TALES

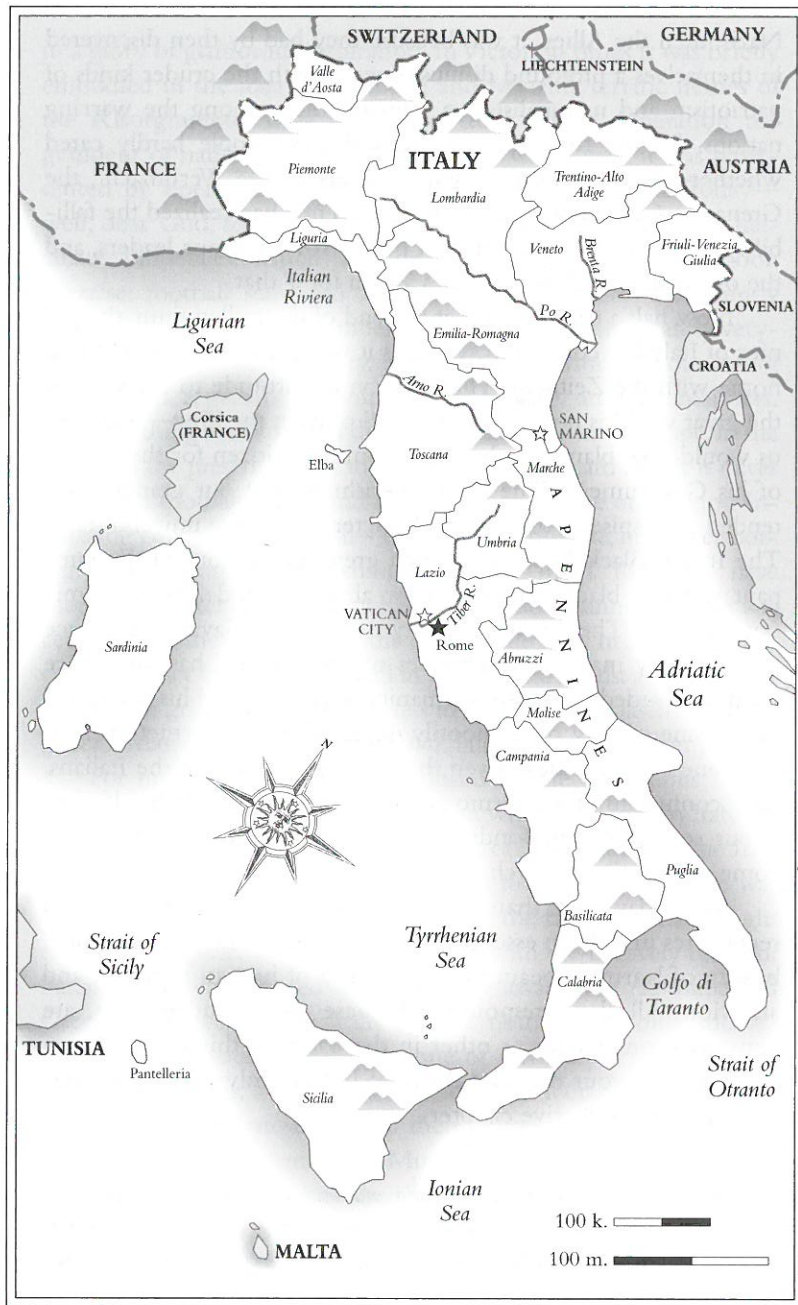
ITALY



TRUE STORIES BY

Tim Parks, Frances Mayes, Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, Luigi Barzini,
Matthew Spender, Stanley Crouch and many more

Edited by Anne Calcagno



Editor's Preface

Before Italy was a journey of discovery it was home to me and thus unremarkable, a place lived in instinctively because my parents had brought me there at the age of four. I remained there until I flew back across the Atlantic to attend college, whereupon I first asked myself: Italy, unremarkable? My family had joined the tentative, though gradually more numerous, Americans who began in the 1960s to work in Italy. They were a significant reversal of the traditional exodus that had made the "Italian journey," that of Italians emigrating to America for work. In the 1960s, it was Italian-Americans, German-Americans, Jewish-Americans, and other Americans who arrived to this complex boot, this historical peninsula, to build subsidiary American companies (and then schools and services) in response to Italy's "economic miracle." I did not understand we had reversed the flow of emigration, but even as a small child I knew we had reached a place still reversed in time, a place where my mother no longer shopped at supermarkets but instead walked to an assortment of stores, such as the *frutteria*, *drogheria*, *tabaccheria*, *farmacia*, or *la latteria* where our milk bottles got refilled from large metal vats. This was milk that every Italian religiously boiled before consumption, and which brought my sister and me to tears when a grandmotherly babysitter refused to let us pour cold milk on our cereal. It was the country wherein my blond, athletic Oregonian mother always in slacks became a spectacle with entire busloads of people staring at us, shocked. Even girls my age only wore dresses, preferably made of blue wool, complemented by white knee socks, which fashion I came to slavishly revere as the standard of beauty.

Though these incidents are thirty-plus years old, Italian milk

still tastes strange to an American child's palate (surely true for my two), and many an Italian girl continues to wear white knee socks and a dark wool dress for important occasions. In these travelers tales you will hear the amazement, surprise, frustration, and delight of travelers who have encountered Italy's time warp. It appears when Thomas Belmonte rounds a street in Naples to spot boys leaning as casually, as gracefully, as Etruscan statues. It re-sounds in James Gardner's walk through the Vatican's Hall of Maps—perhaps true inside all Italian museums—where the peninsula's City-States, agricultures, aqueducts, and flags remain forever ancient, and instantly vivid. Or it strikes us in Theresa Maggio's account of the yearly hand-to-hand slaughter of tuna caught during Favignana's *mattanza*, a ritual enacted today as it was at the start of the last millennium.

Italy is a country layered so densely and multiplicatively, contradicting itself always rather marvelously. I think all travelers go to Italy knowing this, yet it still surprises. We can't help ourselves from purchasing those postcards (why else would they appear for sale year after year?) that reveal a striped kitten sprawled luxuriously on the sunny marble base of an ancient Roman column. We must know how perfectly this *is* Italy; newness and antiquity melded with perfect casualness. We stamp home to our loved ones those ribald postcards of lovers kissing on the steps of a baroque basilica. In this country, the centuries-old *palazzo*, fountain, or church compete with the remarkable beauty and sexual charisma of the quite mortal Italian male or female. Should we study the region's art or the art of its life? As Libby Lubin points out, perhaps every cupola indicates that a woman's breasts (our own, Lucretia Borgia's, or the nursing Virgin Mary's?) are the merry measure of things Italian.

Thinking "Italy," one gathers Etruscan, Greek, Roman, Norman, Arab, German, French, Eritrean, Christian, Judaic history and more. The accounts by this book's travelers reveal so many strata in history, so many oppositions in time and belief. Think of young Romulus and Remus who spar to create Rome, a city which births a diversity of emperors, from the unstable Emperor Nero who

allegedly conspired to burn the city down, to Emperor Marcus Aurelius who expanded the Roman Empire both morally and geographically. In time, Christianity blooms and, with it, important saints: Saint Ambrose, Saint Francis, Saint Agnes, Saint Teresa, and the many others who built churches and belief up and down the boot. Yet by the time Gian Lorenzo Bernini sculpts his magnificent Saint Teresa, her very ecstasy confirms the decadent Baroque. The Church is crumbling. From the rubble, Italy must fight for Unification. In 1870, she wins her definition as a country. In this sense, Italy is newer than the United States. Yet two World Wars were fought on this soil since then, yielding a fragmented Italy of sparing Fascists, Communists, Christian Democrats, Socialists, a country once held hostage by the Red Brigades, and lately resurrected by the ecological "Greens." We have to ask ourselves, which Italy are we talking about when we talk about Italy? The past is gone, but the pieces of time so ably remain.

This layering is what makes Italy so filling, as well as so confusing. Everywhere on aqueduct-fed Roman water mains and fountains the Latin initials S.P.Q.R. still speak, as they did millennia ago: *Senatus Populusque Romanus* ("Belonging to the Roman People"). In this self-same Rome, nearly every bank (of the sort Natalia Galli discovered in Sicily) boasts a bullet-proof, computerized, futuristic, columnar entry.

Italian-Americans like Adria Bernardi, Fred Gardaphe, Don Gecewicz, or Vince Sturla reach Italy seeking their roots, toppling over cobblestones, hiking to festivals, marching with friends, researching street names. Others, like Robert Hellenga or Ivo John Lederer systematically relive critical historical moments: the flood of 1966 or the Allied freeing of Rome. Some travelers remain. Italy becomes home or at least an annual pilgrimage. Lisa St. Aubin de Terán, Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, Frances Mayes, Jan Morris, Tim Parks, Mary Taylor Simeti, and Matt Spender write lyrically of an Italy whose ancient landscape they resurrect into livable homes, keeping the old oil presses and vineyards while encountering new tax laws, maternity wards, schools, foods, holidays. Trey Ellis discovers the heightened visibility of a black man in Italy, while Henry

Alford watches the nomenclature of homosexuality pale through a shared intergenerational communion with Italy. Stanley Crouch highlights Italy's unexpected connection to southern black hospitality and jazz. Gary Paul Nabhan teaches how Italian polenta came from the New World's Native Americans.

Of course, there are those who come to Italy to seek their futures in the shape of a man or woman with whom to fall in love. This is the maddening country wherein magnified bottoms and breasts titillatingly preen on billboards everywhere. Sometimes, right above a sacred altar with a vase of lillies to the Virgin Mary. Italy is where feminists have fought some of their hardest battles. Until 1983, a woman could not impart her Italian citizenship to her child, independent of the nationality of the father. This was the father's right only. Yet, this is the country where a woman does not have to claim "disability" to receive maternity benefits, benefits which are far more generous than our allotted own. Here a woman gets pinched, fondled, whistled at, and followed with enraging blatantness. Yet she is also cajoled, revered, praised, and complimented with magical aplomb, delighted in for being a woman.

There are writers here who will please you, startle you, awaken you to the Italy you know but hopefully also to an Italy you have not yet discovered. Not all the writers are named in this preface, but each is lovingly gathered for your perusal. For my part, I came to Italy as a little girl and, three decades later, returned with my own little girl. What I was offered in love as a child, I watched her receive anew, in kisses, bites of ice cream, and compassion for her small tears and fears. For the Italy that grew me, and the Italy that nourishes all who cherish her embrace, I am ever grateful. These storytellers will tell you why.

—ANNE CALCAGNO

