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Autobiography & Memoir

Botticelli Blue Skies: An American in Florence
Merrill Joan Gerber
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“There is no possibility on earth that I can go to Italy,” the author begins, and from there unrolls an unusual travel narrative. Perhaps no other modern tourist has traveled so reluctantly, yet written so affectionately. That conflicting reluctance and adventurousness make up the meat of this work, not glowing descriptions of all things Italian.

Initially, Gerber’s husband, a professor scheduled to spend three months teaching in Florence, must coax her into accompanying him. On arrival, her resistance is still evident. Jet-lagged amidst Florentine landmarks, she declares tearfully, if amusingly, “I am not ready to appreciate beauty, I refuse to appreciate beauty, I hate beauty.” However, even her stubbornness cannot efface her interest in all that surrounds herÃ’from the minute social interchanges of the students, to the mysteries of the gas cooker, to the intricacies of her local supermarket. Her days fill with visits to other Italian cities, luncheons at ancient farmhouses, and parties. Through it all, that same interested gaze is turned intelligently on everything she encounters.

Gerber, who teaches creative writing at the California Institute of Technology, is the author of seven novels and four volumes of short stories, including the prize-winning King of the World and The Kingdom of Brooklyn, as well as a memoir. Here, she can be a difficult, unreasonable traveler, occasionally lapsing unapologetically into “ugly Americanisms.” In one chapter, enraged at being stopped at a synagogue door for having a camera, she pushes past brashly: “Ã”Sono americano,’ I say, meaning that I come from a free country, that no one can dictate to me in this way, that I will not be treated like a criminal.” The well-seasoned traveler may wince at this. But comfort comes quickly, with her wry admissions that her behavior may leave something to be desired.

In fact, her memoir is alive, precisely because of her honesty. Like many tourists, her most breathtaking experiences are filtered through lingual uncertainty, sore feet, and gnawing hunger. Even on a rapturous day in Ostia Antica, when she relishes “Botticelli’s blue skies

shimmering in the heavens above," another highlight is a preciously familiar jar of Skippy peanut butter.

It may be this warts-and-all approach that makes her love affair with her temporary home so memorable. While perhaps not the right choice for readers in search of poetic hymns to Italy's wonders, Gerber's humorous, honest, and contradictory voice will make this book a worthwhile adventure for those interested as much in personality as in place.

Julie Dawson Govan