



★ Possess the Air: Love, Heroism and the Battle for the Soul of Mussolini's Rome

Taras Grescoe

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Taras Grescoe's artful and detailed *Possess the Air* draws on letters, memoirs, and secondary sources to chronicle twenty years of resistance to Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.

Set in Mussolini's Rome, which lives and breathes thanks to Grescoe's storytelling, the book covers the dictator's disastrous attempts to restore Rome as the capital of a new empire. Rome's streets are enlivened by the characters whom the book profiles and develops, including Mussolini himself—a "short, bald, bow-legged poet"—and his bands of ruthless blackshirts. They're seen gaining power and turning to acts of terror and suppression. Against them, people of conscience emerge, including Americans, young artists, and intellectuals. The book details their growing skepticism and their courageous resistance in the face of prison, torture, and death.

At the book's emotional center is a brilliant young Roman playwright and intellectual, Lauro de Bosis, whose growing antipathy toward all things fascist led him to an audacious plan: a solo night flight over militarized Rome to drop pamphlets urging his fellow Romans to resist Mussolini and work toward a free Italy. De Bosis is the book's romantic hero; his quest supplies a dramatic narrative arc that counterbalances the arc of Italian fascism.

The book's refined prose includes abundant quotes and anecdotes; its is a fresh approach to Mussolini's fascist movement. Alarming parallels emerge to the contemporary rise of populism, autocracy, and racial and religious intolerance. In this regard, *Possess the Air* is, just like de Bosis's leaflets were as they drifted down on the streets of Rome, an inspirational message for all of those who love democracy.

JOE TAYLOR (March / April 2020)

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