

The Train to Orvieto

Rebecca Novelli

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The Train to Orvieto details a Midwestern ingenue's love for art—as narrated by her daughter—and the folly that sparks a lifetime of regret. Rebecca Novelli's striking novel is an intimate, elegant portrait of an individualist who embraces an expatriate life, and of women's roles in the twentieth century and the passions that guided them.

Distinct sections focus on Willa and her main loves. An impulsive dreamer from 1930s Ohio who moves to Italy to become an artist, Willa commits social errors that brand her as an outsider in the circumspect town of Orvieto. Novelli refreshes the classic subject of a woman who seeks self-discovery abroad, through a dramatic plot that pulls her flawed protagonist from an emotionally withering marriage to an affair that spans across years. Tension builds toward 1968, when Willa's daughter, Fina, discovers the secret that soured her parents' relationship.

Novelli—also a painter—deftly creates scenes in the Marcheschi villa that draw a stark contrast between Willa's failed ambitions and the rustic truth of living in her husband's family home. Willa gradually transforms from a naive, reckless young American to a capable landowner who continually defies expectations. The journey between takes detours and predictable turns yet portrays Willa's disillusionment without judgment for her decisions. For all the book's emphasis on whether women can shape their own fate in a time that favors tradition, its the subtler themes, like that of keeping faith amid darkness, that most stand out.

Few characters exemplify this quality more than Michel Losine, a Jewish gem dealer and widower whose family suffered the brutality of war. Ever the gentleman who has a cool demeanor and is a capable orchestrator of events, his success belies restrained vulnerability. The struggle between his loyalties to the living and the dead add depth to his actions. Fina displays a similar ambiguity, to a lesser degree. Her arc, if sparer and less assured than her mother's, offers an alternative to resignation. Her efforts to pave-over past conflicts reveal a different strength.

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KAREN RIGBY (Winter 2017)

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