



At the annual Turin book fair, a mile-long display of books under the arcades.

TWEED AND PROSECCO

The Literary Industrial Complex

Italy has more book festivals than it has books

BY ELI GOTTLIEB

READING TIME: 5 MINUTES

It was in Sardinia, at a literary festival called Isola delle Storie, or Island of Stories, when the epiphany hit. The setting was the rather unpromising confines of a local butcher shop. Unpromising only because piles of tongue, chunked horsemeat, delicate parcels of *animelle*, or sweetbreads, and spongy lengths of tripe coiled like garden hose don't normally provide insights into Italy's patent mix of unseriousness and high cultural style. Also, this wasn't Italy but Sardinia, which exists in a proud, somewhat uneasy relationship with the mainland and with the outer world generally.

But the epiphany happened anyway, taking place after I ordered my pork chop. The butcher, thick-fingered, with a large, suety white face and stumps of teeth, raised his cleaver high in the air, paused, and then slowly lowered it to the table. He leaned forward and smiled shyly. A light of refinement came over his features. I was expecting him to remark on my strange Italian accent. But instead he asked calmly, "Is David Foster Wallace really all that good?"

Graceland for Bookworms

Heaven on earth exists for mid-list novelists, and it's an Italian literary festival like this one in the town of Gavoi, whose citizens, aided by a robust influx of visitors, give themselves over for four days to a nearly Elvis-level fan worship of writers and writing. America has nothing comparable. But more to the point—and the epiphany—many festivals like it exist in Italy. In fact, there is currently no European country with more cultural festivals than *il bel paese*, whose economic designation as one of the current "sick men" of Europe would seem disproved by the frequency and fierceness of these public parties, which number close to 1,200 a year. Beginning with Spoleto in the 1960s, the Italian festival industry has enjoyed uninterrupted boom times, and behind today's large, bold-faced book fairs of Mantua and Turin lies an elaborate

patchwork of smaller celebrations devoted to shining a light not only on books but on everything from local lettuce and legumes to psychoanalysis.

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And why not? Such festivals summon pride, provide a pretext for a party, and rain euros on parched local economies. (In Italy, almost all local economies are suffering.) They also lend a cosmopolitan gloss to a country often accused of provincialism. But the literary ones in particular lean up against the sad paradox that Italians read less per capita than any other people of continental Europe. And predictably, according to a 2015 study, they are Europe’s most avid users of smartphones.



None of this, of course, was evident at the festival itself, which had turned Gavoi's winding medieval streets into a veritable Palio of excited readers rushing to and fro in ecstasies of literary speed dating (and authors, in their off-hours, queuing at a local restaurant for the delicious free buffets of local seasoned meats and cheeses and wine). Some readers showed up to watch the square-jawed Paolo Nespoli, Italy's Neil Armstrong and a denizen of the International Space Station, discuss the physical changes wrought by extended time spent in zero G (middle-aged breasts, he explained insouciantly and to a somewhat embarrassed silence, recover their youthful rondure); Rachel Cusk, dressed against the heat in a flowing skirt with a spaghetti-string top, coolly opined that, "at a certain point, the idea of plot itself began to seem to me a kind of pornography."

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I went on at 11 P.M., before a thousand people, in a giant tent cooled by nebulizers that rained down puffs of mist like the nozzles in supermarket produce sections. My interlocutor (book presentations in Italy always have interlocutors) was the charming soul-patched Professor Alessandro Giammei, an Italianist from Bryn Mawr College, and as the hour flew by, I felt myself growing more expansive, predictably, in Italian, than I would have in my own language in front of my fellow citizens. During the book signing afterward I was the recipient of a blast of human warmth such as I'd never received in all my years of presentations in America.

But I didn't let it go to my head. The classic American mistake in Italy is to take Italian enthusiasm personally, not realizing that it's often simply—partly—a cultural reflex. I would need a calculator to tally up how many American friends, visiting me when I lived in Italy, came home excitedly from meeting someone in a local bar and exclaimed to me they'd made a new friend for life, only to end up mystified it didn't pan out. This is not to impugn the Italian character, just to say that for a people fed opera, spectacle, and the brightly plumaged language of Italian from birth, it's a bit easier to “stage” interpersonal excitement than it is for us dour puritans.

Dante's Infernino

This disconnect between fact and appearance operates up and down the scale in Italian society. Take the Italian economy, whose *economia sommersa*, or black market, is close to a third the size of the public, daylight version of hard facts and figures—a state of affairs which makes it fiendishly difficult to predict the country's economic

future in any reliable detail. And let us obey *omertà* and not even speak of that actual version of the deep state known as the Mafia.

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In this light, the country's literary and music festivals are probably best thought of as a 21st-century variant of the ancient Roman tradition of bread and circuses, drawing an elegantly crafted curtain over the nation's precarious cultural/economic affairs. But they have a subtler function as well. In the words of Italian cultural critic Claudio Giunta, "Italians have a collective sense of guilt. They love to eat and talk, but it's dinned into them from birth that they're the inheritors of a great culture and this past weighs on them. These festivals function as alibis of a sort, in which they can literally have their cake and eat it, too."

My epiphany, hatched in the butcher shop and growing more certain over the days of the festival, was simply this: that at a time when Western democracies are tottering like elderly drunkards at last call, there is no country better equipped to cope with the collapse than this land of dissimulation and persistent beauty, whose people are past masters at postponing what James Joyce called "the stern task of living" in favor of having an old-fashioned good time. Italy may be staggering harder than most, but it's also the last place I'd ever count out.

That pork chop, predictably, by the way, was *squisito*.

Eli Gottlieb is a New York-based writer whose most recent novel is Best Boy