

Q&A with “To Tuscany with Love” author Gail Mencini

Is any part of “To Tuscany with Love” autobiographical?

The events and characters in “To Tuscany with Love” are products of my imagination and the places and people that are real are used fictitiously. I will, however, quote Garrison Keillor on this subject, “Bad things don’t happen to authors; it’s all material.” When a person travels, things happen that are not humorous at the time but later, in the recounting, are often hilarious. The novel is not autobiographical, but have I drawn from my experiences? Absolutely!

You use multiple points of view in the book. Was it difficult to keep the characters, and their voices, separate and distinct?

The characters have strong, unique personalities and I found they liked to grab the reins from their friends and tell their own story. To me, they are so different from each other that alternating voices was not a problem. Keeping track of the passage of time and age of the characters during each period seemed a more tedious, although essential, task. I enjoyed being able to view events from their different perspectives and plot how their friendship was the foundation for their growth as individual characters.

The characters in “To Tuscany with Love” are all interesting in their own way. How did you come up with their personalities?

For all my characters, their personalities are integrally related to their backgrounds and their families. Once I started fleshing out the characters’ names, careers, and what their homes were like growing up, their individual personalities flowed. I purposely plucked them from different regions in the country, with a variety of family dynamics.

I started with an Italian-American, Bella Rossini, which seemed a natural for a story set in Italy, and then my mind flew to two possible suitors with radically different backgrounds – a California athlete, Phillip, and a Southerner with a preacher for a father, Stillman. Rune, a man who grew up in Nebraska and escaped for a fast and loose life in Hollywood, presents an intriguing dichotomy and an element of humor. Having two sisters and a brother myself, I am interested in the dynamics and bonds between siblings, so including a set of twins fed that attraction. My husband is a physician and to show my respect for him, I wanted to include a physician character, although that is where the resemblance stops. Finally, I added Hope, a strong woman from Colorado who lives up to her name, as a tribute to my home state.

Breast cancer plays a part in the novel. Did you have a special reason for including this?

Breast cancer affects one in eight women in the United States. In Colorado, where I live, it is one in seven. Among the women in my neighborhood book club, the ratio is an alarming one in five. I am a breast cancer survivor myself, having undergone a bi-lateral mastectomy with reconstruction in 2009. Early detection is the key to survival. If in any way by writing about people with this disease I can spur someone to do a self-breast exam or get an annual screening mammogram, I will have achieved my goal of helping others fight breast cancer.

“To Tuscany with Love” touches on many themes including lost love, friendship, regret and entering adulthood. Can you tell us more about the message behind your book?

It’s never too late to take stock of one’s work, relationships, and life. What dreams of yours are unfulfilled, and why have they been pushed aside? Sometimes circumstances or economics are the unavoidable roadblock to achieving your dreams.

When things are outside of a person’s control, all one can do is to evaluate how best to deal with these obstacles, and then take action. That was my personal approach when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. The best thing about my cancer was that I realized how many people cared about me and wanted to help. I am not very good at asking for help and, unfortunately, many people are the same. Family and friends are a grossly underrated asset, which is why I centered “To Tuscany with Love” on a group of friends who help each other save, and forgive, themselves.

Q&A WITH GAIL MENCINI CONTINUED

A surprising occurrence is that sometimes we ourselves, like my characters, have become the obstruction to achieving our goals. Passionately investing in your relationships and dreams is the first step to molding yourself into the person you dream of being and in the process, achieving happiness and fulfillment.

Have you visited the Tuscan cities and hill towns you describe in the book? Do you have a favorite place?

I have been fortunate to visit these lovely locales. A large city such as Florence has advantages as a base for your travels: proximity to an airport, ease of public transportation, and an abundance of historical and cultural sites. I have to admit, though, the charming, friendly hill towns of Tuscany stole my heart. When you read “To Tuscany with Love,” I suspect you will figure out which one of these hill towns is my favorite.

Do you have any advice for people traveling to Tuscany for the first time?

A person should define their goals for any trip up front. What are your priorities? Some examples are: seeing as many (historical, religious, or cultural) attractions as possible, sampling the cuisine, relaxation, touring with an athletic focus (biking or hiking), successful traveling with children, or what I term “piazza sitting and watching the world go by.” Determining one’s goals and likes, dislikes, budget, and special needs makes planning a rewarding and enjoyable trip much easier. I like using public transit, especially for a first-time visitor, because you travel shoulder-to-shoulder with the native Italians and are immediately immersed into their everyday life.

Your professional background is mainly in accounting and tax planning. Did you always secretly want to be a writer?

The creative arts were always a passion for me, but once I started reading Mary Stewart novels set in Greece, I was hooked: I longed to write and travel. With my husband’s encouragement and belief in me, I was able to take the overwhelming, terrifying, and thrilling first step of tackling book-length fiction.

How did you learn how to cook gourmet Italian food?

Learning to cook was easy, as I apprenticed under two accomplished and adventurous cooks, my mother and grandmother. I developed my expertise in gourmet Italian cuisine in several ways: gathering tips from my many Italian relatives, wanting to recreate the foods I savored in Italy, and having a shameless love of cookbooks, especially those featuring Italian cuisine—my collection overflows the bookshelf!

Describe the most memorable meal you ate while in Italy.

Picking only one of the many memorable meals is a challenge! My husband and I were in Piedmont and Tuscany during the floods that devastated northern Italy in 2000. Following a turbulent flight from the U.S., we drove through the rain with double shots of espresso and the thought of a hot meal sustaining us. When we finally arrived at our destination, we happily parked our car, requested a recommendation for a ristorante that catered to locals, and walked through the rain to dinner. We greeted our waitress with our rustic Italian and the gracious woman took one look at our weary, jet-lagged faces and suggested she select our food for us. We trusted her, and it was comforting, simple, delicious, and perfect: tomato bruschetta, feather-light tortellini in chicken broth, melt-in-your-mouth pappardelle with a sauce of wild boar and porcini, a house salad of field greens dressed with a light vinaigrette and freshly shaved parmesan cheese, and finally, lemon sorbetto and amaretti cookies. *Magnifico!*

Are you working on another book? Will it take readers on another trip to Italy?

I have another book underway already and am having fun scheming up new dilemmas for my characters. My next book, the second in the *Tuscany* series, takes place primarily in and around a charming Tuscan hill town not visited in *To Tuscany with Love*, so my readers will have the pleasure of new Italian experiences in another small area of Tuscany. One thing I will reveal, though, is that the delightful Tuscan cuisine and wine are certain to play a memorable role in this book!