

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

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

The events and characters in my novels 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 “To Tuscany with Love.” Was it challenging 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 stories. 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. 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 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. 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 your novels. Do you have a particular 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 roadblocks 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 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, 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.

Your novel “It Happened in Tuscany” addresses themes of the tug of war between honor and duty, the irrepressible power of love, and the concept of family. Why did you choose these for your novel?

I hold tremendous respect for the bravery, patriotism, and dedication of the members of the military. These courageous individuals, and the armed service branches they represent, hold dear the virtues of honor and duty. I imagined the torment a conflict between these two principles would create in a moral person. A choice between honor and duty seems an unreconcilable dilemma, and the one I chose to haunt Will and create his internal conflict.

Love surrounds us, and exists in many forms—a parent for their child, a younger generation person for an older family member, between siblings, partners, spouses, lovers, and friends. For many, love is enduring, sometimes for most or all of a lifetime. Love born of traumatic circumstances can happen quickly and is sometimes false love. I combined wartime love with distance and time to create elements of mystery around Will and the young partisan who saved his life.

Today families are structured in many ways, with countless variations. A “family” is formed by blood, legal, supportive, or emotional relationships. Will and Sophie both start with a narrow meaning to the concept of “family.” Their journey together changes their perceptions and definitions.

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 the lovely locales featured in “To Tuscany with Love” and “It Happened in Tuscany.” 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 may guess 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 upfront. What are your priorities? Some examples are: seeing as many (historical, religious, or cultural) attractions as possible, sampling the cuisine, relaxation, touring with an active 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 more manageable. 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 in 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 exciting 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 by gathering tips from my many Italian relatives and my desire to recreate the foods I savored in Italy. I also confess to a shameless love for 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!*

Many of your reader fans long for sequels to your books, yet you chose to write your first two books as stand-alone fiction. Is there any chance you will return to the characters of “To Tuscany with Love” and “It Happened in Tuscany” to write sequels? Why did you choose to create new characters and storylines for each of these novels?

I guess this demonstrates that I am sometimes foolish, unafraid of a challenge, and love to write stories that beckon me. For both of these novels, the plotlines intrigued me. I began dreaming about the characters and then knew I had to tell their story. Will I write sequels to “To Tuscany with Love” and “It Happened in Tuscany?” Never say “never.”