

Reader's Guide

1. The subtitle of this book is *My Love Affair with Italian, the World's Most Enchanting Language*. In what ways does Dianne Hales's relationship with Italian qualify as a romantic one? What does her use of this term imply about her feelings for Italy's language and culture?
2. In the first chapter, Hales describes how she looked for *Domani Mattina* to help retrieve her lost suitcase in Milan. Her quest for "Mr. Tomorrow Morning" motivated her to start studying Italian. Have you had similar linguistic stumbles in your travels? What kind of experiences did they lead to?
3. Hales traces Italian's history back thousands of years to the *volgare*, the street Latin of ancient Rome, which gave rise to all the Romance languages. In other countries, the dialect of the most powerful city evolved into the national language. Why didn't that happen in Italy? What were the consequences?
4. On pages 20 to 27 Hales gives examples of the wit, vitality, and versatility of Italian words. Do you have any favorites? What does the playfulness of Italian terms tell you about the language?

5. Hales says she resisted reading Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Can you understand why? Did her comparison of this epic poem to the *Harry Potter* series or to a Hollywood movie change the way you think of it? Why does Dante mean so much to Italians?
6. L'Accademia della Crusca (the Academy of the Bran), described on pages 113–121, is certainly not a conventional linguistic society. What does its creation say about Italians' views of food and of language? Can you understand why Hales was so moved to visit La Crusca and to see a first edition of *Il Vocabolario*?
7. *Bella figura* is one of the most complex aspects of Italian life. Hales came to appreciate it fully when she visited a dying professor. Did her chapter on "How Italian Civilized the West" provide any new insights as to why appearance and social grace matter so much to Italians?
8. Most people associate the great Renaissance masters Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo only with works of art. Did learning about their writing and their love of words add to your appreciation of these artists?
9. Hales contends that opera could not have emerged in any country other than Italy. What do you think are the Italian qualities that contributed to this musical genre? Were you aware of the role Verdi's operas played in the campaign to unify the Italian nation? Why do you think his music had such an impact?
10. Italian food and language, Hales says, "meld together as smoothly as *cacio sui maccheroni* (cheese on macaroni)." Discuss the colorful ways that Italians use gastronomic terms in everyday conversation. What did learning the history of such universal favorites as pasta and pizza add to your appreciation of these dishes?
11. In "So Many Ways to Say I Love You," Hales searches for the reasons for Italians' love of *amore* in their stories. Were you surprised

to find that many Italian love stories end tragically—including the true story of Casanova's life? Why do you think this is so? Hales comes to share the Italian appreciation for romantic gestures. Do you think this explains her behavior with the older gentleman in Venice?

12. "Movies," Hales says, "taught Italians how to be Italian." Why does she make this assertion? Do you agree? Were you aware of the use of dubbing in movies shown in Italy? Why do you think dubbing is much less popular in the United States?
13. Some of the oldest and most colorful Italian terms are *le parolacce* (bad or naughty words). How do they differ from obscenities in other languages? Do you agree with the author of the book *Parolacce* that civilizations couldn't exist without vulgarities and curses? In your opinion, have Italians elevated swearing to an unconventional art form?
14. The Romans and their descendants, a linguist observed, thrice conquered the world: once in government, once in religion, and once in art. To this trio of triumphs, he added a fourth: language. By the end of her book, Hales comes to agree. Do you understand why she "wholeheartedly agrees that Italian is indeed the language of humanity—and therefore everyone's mother tongue"?
15. Despite her many years studying the language, Hales still finds herself struggling to understand everyday Italian. Her tutor tells her that's the difference between "learning Italian and living Italian." What do you think she means? Is it possible to "live" a second language? What would it require?
16. Although it ranks nineteenth as a spoken language (in numbers of speakers), Italian has become the fourth most studied language in the world. After reading *La Bella Lingua*, can you understand its appeal?