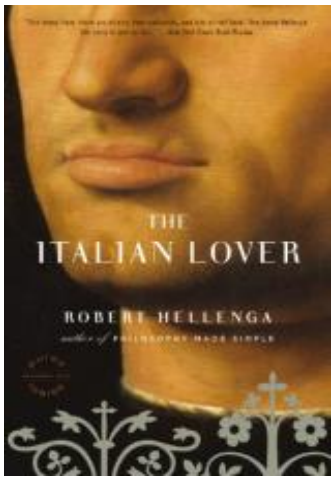
The Italian Lover

by Robert Hellenga



About the Book

Margot Harrington's memoir about her discovery in Florence of a priceless masterwork of Renaissance erotica --- and the misguided love affair it inspired --- is now, 25 years later, being made into a movie. Margot, with the help of her lover, Woody, writes a script that she thinks will validate her life. Of course their script is not used, but never mind --- happy endings are the best endings for movies, as Margot eventually comes to see. At the former convent in Florence where "The Sixteen Pleasures" --- now called "The Italian Lover," --- is being filmed, Margot enters into a drama she never imagined, where her ideas of home, love, art, and aging collide with the imperatives of commerce and the unknowability of other cultures and other people.

Discussion Guide

1. Margot is drawn to Woody while he sings the classic blues song ?Sweet Home Chicago.? Is the thought that her real home might be Chicago, not Florence, painful to Margot? Is Woody struggling with the same conflict? Why or why not? How do their experiences of Italy differ?

2. Art, literature, and film are obviously important to Robert Hellenga and his characters. How do references to **The Iliad** , Audrey Hepburn?s *Roman Holiday*, Tolstoy?s **Anna Karenina**, and other works both enrich and universalize this novel?

3. How is filmmaking shown to be both an art and a business in The Italian Lover? Do you think Margot?s anger at Esther for changing her story of personal liberation into a romantic comedy is justified? What brings Margot eventually to accept the film?s happy ending? Do you think the rewriting and retitling of her book contributes to the fi lm?s success?

4. Food is important in Italy and figures prominently in **The Italian Lover**. How does food help to unite the American and Italian characters on the fi lm set? Michael expresses his continuing love for Beryl with gifts of food. How does he

find peace for himself at a little restaurant in Naples? (What does dolce far niente mean?)

5. While discussing screenplays, Michael tells Guido that ?clichés aren?t the enemy. Intentionality is the enemy. Don?t plan too much. Don?t think too much. Let things happen? (page 253). How does this approach to writing also inform the lives of Hellenga?s characters? Is it important to the sparking of certain affairs in Florence?

6. Marriages and various marital separations are key to **The Italian Lover**. How does the ceremony of the get that Esther undergoes to spiritually divorce her ex-husband lend weight to the institution of marriage? Do you think Woody and Margot made the right decision about not marrying each other?

7. Many of Hellenga?s characters are associated with a formal religion --- Beryl goes to an Episcopalian church in Florence to feel at home; Esther wants a Seder at Passover for a sense of familiarity; Woody?s ex-wife entered a convent to deal with grief. What do Woody and Margot fall back on for meaning and stability in their lives? How do their differing allegiances determine the outcome of their relationship?

8. The first film Michael directed was his only big financial and critical success. Beryl thinks, ?Such a lovely story it had been too. A story about older people falling in love? (page 241). Do you find Hellenga?s portrayals of romantic love between middleaged couples convincing? Did **The Italian Lover** confirm or change your opinion about the possibility of both strong infatuation and deep love throughout a lifetime?

Author Bio

Robert Hellenga was educated at the University of Michigan and Princeton University. He is a professor at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, and the author of the novels THE SIXTEEN PLEASURES, THE FALL OF A SPARROW, BLUES LESSONS, PHILOSOPHY MADE SIMPLE and THE ITALIAN LOVER.

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Publication Date: February 9, 2009
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 368 pages
Publisher: Back Bay Books
ISBN-10: 031611765X
ISBN-13: 9780316117654