

The Italians Study Guide

The Italians by Luigi Barzini, Jr.

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Plot Summary

The Italians by Luigi Barzini is a brief study of the nature and mores of the Italian people. The book addresses the issues of religion, family, history, honor, art and more, which make up the fabric of the people and the country which have attracted the world's attention for centuries.

The author begins the book by posing options for Italy's fatal charm and the elements that draw countless numbers of people from all over the world to visit each year. Some people come for the sunny weather; some come to be educated, and some come merely to get lost in the sensuousness of her food, music and art. Visitors also range in income levels from starving artists to wealthy people looking for tax shelters. Men, in particular, come to Italy to pursue women who are reputedly more gorgeous than anywhere else.

Increasing numbers of visitors fall in love with Italy and either never leave or return to live soon after their departure. The lure of Italy, according to Barzini, is built on illusion and spectacle. The Italian people love drama and create it whenever and wherever possible in order to make the reality of their actual lives more palatable. This is exhibited in the exaggerated language and gestures of their speech, in the passion for pure, simple food, and the undying sentimentality for heroes and customs and family.

For Italians, the mix of illusion and reality is a precarious balance. Inherently each Italian knows that life is hard and pitiless, and the efforts to create spectacle and illusion are the main tactics to make it easier. The hard life begins at birth and each child receives gestures and rituals to drive away evil spirits which threaten to haunt the child for his entire lifetime.

There are varying techniques for managing through life dependent on the Italian's residence. Those in the industrial Northern part of the country focus on the pursuit of wealth garnered through education, technology and better jobs. Those in the more agrarian South appreciate wealth but find their path through the pursuit of power gleaned from influence from friends, family and other associates. In Sicily, the dynamic of intelligence and manipulation exhibits in the secret criminal group, the Mafia, a convoluted organization stemming from the revered family unit.

The author also explores the structure and interpersonal dynamics of the Italian family complete with the revered masculine children and the awe-inspiring, long-suffering Italian mother. This picture, along with stories of Italian people who characterize some of the traits of Italian life and culture, complete a view of an interesting, alluring country sure to provide drama to lure foreigners for lifetimes to come.



The Peaceful Invasion, The Eternal Pilgrimage, The Fatal Charm of Italy and The Importance of Spectacle

The Peaceful Invasion, The Eternal Pilgrimage, The Fatal Charm of Italy and The Importance of Spectacle Summary and Analysis

The Italians by Luigi Barzini is a brief study of the nature and mores of the Italian people. The book addresses the issues of religion, family, history, honor, art and more, which make up the fabric of the people and the country which have attracted the world's attention for centuries.

Foreign visitors flock to Italy each year in increasing numbers; in the 1950s, as many as twelve million each year; in the 1960s, over twenty million. (Note: The book was published in 1964 and the numbers must be significantly higher now.) The largest number comes from Northern Europe and the United States, but Russia, Africa and Asia are all represented in the deluge of travelers to Italy each year. The tourists are driven by some unknown urge and demonstrate slightly frenzied behavior upon crossing over the border into Italy.

Most visitors engage in the same activities such as drinking vast and indiscriminate quantities of wine, listening to opera and small town bands and attempting to speak Italian, things most would never consider doing in their own home towns. For most men, the sport of pursuing women is primary, and the author admits that most Italian girls and young women are disturbingly beautiful which accounts for much of the male attention. Female visitors also feel that Italian males are irresistible with charms that pay no attention to their particular marital status or circumstances.

Visitors to Italy often return the next year and some make the decision to stay permanently once they fall under the country's irresistible spell. Some of the visitors are more Italian than the residents so deep is their knowledge of the country's geography and culture. Wealthy people come to avoid paying large income taxes and to love more opulently than in their home countries. Artists of all types also flock to Italy to find inspiration and lifestyles that will suit their tastes.

This influx of people in Italy is not new as barbarians and religious pilgrims have found their way here for centuries. Through the Middle Ages, emperors and military leaders have been drawn to the inviting climate and riches found here. Being the seat of the Roman Catholic Church, Italy was also on the route of the crusaders on their way to the Holy Land.



In ancient times, travel was precarious at best, especially for a solitary traveler who was forced to navigate the Italian Alps, bands of robbers, and local wars. Arrival by sea was just as dangerous because of storms, ship's crew mutinies and pirates. Upon arrival, accommodations were nearly impossible to find and road travel was precarious. Nevertheless travelers never stopped coming to Italy.

One of the major reasons for Italian travel was religious pilgrimages to Rome, the seat of the Catholic Church. Even though individuals could easily practice their religion in their own towns, the lure of the spectacle and majesty of visiting this holy city was irresistible for many. In later years, people came to the cities of Venice, Florence, Rome and Naples to study—time spent in Italy was considered an invaluable part of a person's education. Part of that education was the study of Italy's art both man-made and natural. "Of all the countries in the world,' enthusiastically wrote an English author, 'Italy is the most adorned by the arts. Of all the countries in the world, she has the least need of them.'" *The Eternal Pilgrimage*, Page 29

Amidst all this spectacle and beauty, however, live the Italians, viewed by many to be deceitful, poor and dirty and deserving of the corruption and tyrannies which infiltrate their national history. Nevertheless, there still remains an unexplained charm infiltrating the country,, which has lured both peasants and notables for ages. Italy is still a draw for those wishing to indulge in the sensuous activities of art, food and love and possibly nowhere else on earth can these things be found and indulged in with such abandon.

Author Henry James claimed that the pleasure of Italy was inseparably tied to the human element, the people who had practically formed the country's landscape with their own hands over the years. Almost without fail, all who visit and return are drawn to the Italian zest for life, which is an unexplainable quality most envied by those who yearn for it but do not know exactly how to achieve it.

Part of Italy's charm is the people's love of drama and spectacle. Every city and village comes alive each day with the parade of residents going about their lives in animated pleasure. Vendors bark out their wares; waiters provide animated advice, and music floats on the air from all directions. Displays of foods, flowers, fabrics and more are carefully crafted to provide an aesthetic experience to those who merely browse as well as buy.

The scenes are punctuated by both verbal outbursts as well as exaggerated gestures which communicate even more. The author notes a book entitled *La mimica degli antichi investigate nel gestire napoletano* (The Mimicry of Ancient People Interpreted Through the Gestures of Neapolitans), which contains a complete list of all the signs necessary to communicate anything.

The Italian people also seem to do their jobs with relish. They do not necessarily work with efficiency and speed, but they work with pleasure, gratitude and pride.

The lure of Italy is not one element or factor but many, comprised of physical, cultural and personal characteristics. The author notes that most travel literature describes the



sunny climate of Italy to draw travelers; however Italy also experiences its own dreary winters, and people can experience sunny summers in their own countries. So, while weather is a big draw to travelers, there are other qualities which comprise its appeal. A pervasive joie de vivre emanates from the residents and almost from the landscape itself, which takes full advantage of its spectacular coastlines and mountainous border. Colors seem more intense in Italy. Food is simple but well prepared. "The colours are gay: the yellow of the risotto alla milanese, the red of tomato salad or spaghetti with tomato sauce, the green of broccoli, the white of Tuscan beans, the bishop purple of boiled octopus, the gold of fettuccine al doppio are all clean hues, as pure as the colours of flags or children's crayons." *The Fatal Charm of Italy*, Page 52 Art devotees can get lost in the country's treasures for weeks at a time. And religious spectacle and ceremony draw the faithful after ages of reverence. The author paints an engaging picture of the country's allure in this opening section and will provide some background details on the artistry, history and culture as the book progresses.



Illusion and Cagliostro, The Other Face of the Coin, Cola di Rienzo or the Obsession of Antiquity, and Mussolini or the Limitations of Showmanship

Illusion and Cagliostro, The Other Face of the Coin, Cola di Rienzo or the Obsession of Antiquity, and Mussolini or the Limitations of Showmanship Summary and Analysis

The surface of Italian life has many characteristics of a play or show: entertaining, moving, animated and engaging. The people are even more aware of this when they know they are being observed. For example, an Italian mother will care competently for her baby, but when she knows she has an audience, she will exaggeratedly fondle and coo over the child as if he is the center of the universe. This striving for effect is also witnessed in scenes such as the timid smile of a begging child, the majestic façade of a church or the "green glass carafe of red wine on a pink table-cloth near two yellow lemons by the dark blue sea." Illusion and Cagliostro, Page 74

The first purpose of show is to make life acceptable. Raw nature must be landscaped and formed into suitable forms and rituals to hide all that is ugly and unpleasant. Everything is better when it sparkles and has some form of order even if to exhibit fleeting control. The core of Italian belief is that life is catastrophic and its effects cannot be eliminated, only mitigated, so the passion for illusion allows them to glide over life's surface leaving the ugly part as untouched as possible.

Polite lies and flattery are tools of the Italian people in order to perpetuate the necessary illusions. Although almost everyone recognizes these minor deceptions for what they are, they are considered an integral part of social and professional relations. Sometimes the deception is enacted by a whole city such as in the case of Rome which added cardboard building facades built like film sets to impress Adolf Hitler on a visit to the city in 1938.

One of the most prominent proponents of illusion was the author Baldassar Castiglione who wrote *The Book of the Courtier* in 1528 to provide advice on how to behave properly in all situations. Castiglione is a proponent of honor and duty but asserts that a man must use tactics of mild deception at times in order to gain personal and business advantage. For ages it has been the fate of the Italian people to grasp wealth and power so they achieve it through illusions. There are stories of penniless aristocratic families who live meager lives most of the year behind the closed doors of their estates in order to host a huge banquet and ball once each year. For them, the sacrifices are worth the



perception of prosperity they project annually. Foreigners seem to have trouble with this concept because while all is charming in the country it is hard to discern what is truth.

This happens every day in the cases of love where a man acts as if he is irresistibly attracted to a woman who does not know if his actions indicate true feelings or are just an elaborate display to seduce her. This is most famously exhibited by the illustrious lover, Giacomo Casanova, noted for his many amorous conquests. The biggest case of illusion is Saint Peter's Church in Rome, a magnificent structure filled with grand art and architecture. Unfortunately the ordinary person finds he cannot worship amid such grandeur so it does not serve the purpose for which it was originally intended.

A contemporary of Casanova's, Giuseppe Balsamo, who called himself Count Alessandro di Cagliostro, was one of the most famous charlatans of all time. Cagliostro was an occultist who traveled widely and became involved in one of the most notorious criminal situations of the time. Cardinal de Rohan of France believed that Cagliostro could make gold and construct a huge diamond from several tiny stones. Rohan attempts to deceive Marie Antoinette, the Queen of France, in a jewelry scheme and Cagliostro is imprisoned in France for a brief time.

It is believed that there is both Casanova and Cagliostro in every Italian man; hopefully, their legacies do not reach disastrous outcomes. Italians cling to illusions such as those exhibited by Casanova and Cagliostro because real life is too brutal and ugly to be endured without pretense. Italians believe that newborn babies are surrounded by bad and powerful genii (evil spirits) destined to make the life of every Italian miserable. Therefore, it is necessary for each Italian to ward off the presence and the effects of these spirits as best he can.

The first of the evil spirits is poverty as Italy is a very poor country, the poorest in western Europe with the exception of Spain. The agrarian south provides just enough for its residents to stave off starvation, while the residents of the north must exist in industrial slums. The poverty also extends to proud aristocrats who have either just suffered a miserable collapse of their finances or fear they are about to.

The second evil spirit is ignorance; it is estimated that up to thirty per cent of the population is illiterate. The chance for advanced education is minimal and the opportunity to travel to learn is almost nonexistent. Even the most erudite of the society, the university professors, must take on second jobs to buy text books and tools for scientific experiments.

The third evil spirit is injustice. The country is a network of laws which, if enforced diligently, could bring the country to collapse immediately. Most of the country's laws are so ambiguous and contradictory that it is almost impossible for a regular citizen to receive or expect justice in a tangled web of bureaucracy.

The fourth evil spirit is fear which is the offspring of the other three. Fear dominates the lives of Italians who do not expect to conquer it and can hope to not fall victim to their



primary fear—sudden and violent death. Passionate people lead tumultuous lives and unexpected death becomes something to be expected in all strata of Italian society.

The element of make believe is important so that Italians may evade these evil spirits who threaten their daily existence. One person in Italian history is notable for the art of illusion and its negative repercussions: Cola di Rienzo. Cola di Rienzo was born in 1313 to humble parents but became a popular orator and capably organized a revolt through astute powers of showmanship and pageantry. He rises to power, is driven out, and then returned to power before he is killed. The author states this example to show the power of drama and illusion and the extent to which it can grow to both positive and negative effect.

Another example of Italian showmanship gone wrong is the rise to power and ultimate execution of Benito Mussolini. Like di Rienzo, Mussolini was born to humble beginnings but held a firm belief he was destined to bigger things. Mussolini blends his fierce rage with incredible charm in order to rise to the head of the Fascist party in the 1940s. Ultimately Mussolini is executed and the author states, "The explanation of his failure is perhaps that he was not a failure. He lost the war, power, his country, his mistress, his place in history, and his life, but he succeeded in what he had wanted to do since he took power. It was not to make his country safe and prosperous. It was not, obviously, to organize Italy for a modern war and for victory. He had dedicated his life just to putting up a good show, a stirring show. He had managed to do it extremely well." Mussolini or Limitations of Showmanship, Page 145

It is difficult to imagine the depths of despair and ugliness which must propel the Italian people to such lengths of deception to convince themselves and the world that life is palatable. Ironically, their illusion works because millions of tourists are drawn to Italy every year, many of them forsaking their own homes to stay in their newfound home. People of all cultures and nations have developed coping mechanisms to endure fear and hardship, and it is hard to believe that such machinations are required in such a glorious place. But, as the author states, this, too, is part of the art of illusion. The Italians live life at both extremes: filled with fear while being masters of deception. Perhaps it is the fear that drives the need for illusions when most people would assume that the Italians are just simple people who enjoy life and feel lucky to have been born in such a beautiful location on the planet. According to the author, it is a combination of both.



Realism and Guicciardini, The Pursuit of Life, The Power of the Family and How to Succeed

Realism and Guicciardini, The Pursuit of Life, The Power of the Family and How to Succeed Summary and Analysis

Throughout their long history the Italian people have learned that their best defense against corruption, violence, civil wars and revolutions is to keep their mouths shut and mind their own business. The best example of this philosophy is embodied by Italian lawyer, diplomat and historian from Florence, Francesco Guicciardini, who wrote a secret book entitled *I Ricordi*, which gives advice on managing through treacherous times. Guicciardini is a contemporary of another famous Florentine known for ruthless behavior and politics, Niccolo Machiavelli.

Where Machiavelli was too much a dreamer to achieve practical results, Guicciardini was more focused on goals of prospering and wielding power. Guicciardini became a lawyer and went into Papal service in 1515 where he commanded respect with impressive shows of power and pomp. He served as governor and arrested and tortured those who disagreed with Papal decrees. After serving two more popes, Guicciardini returns to Florence and acts as local henchman for the powerful Medici family even though he despises them. Guicciardini retires as an elderly statesman never once betraying his personal beliefs in the service of those whom he detested.

Guicciardini is the role model for separating personal emotions and thoughts in the conduct of reprehensible business. In *I Ricordi* Guicciardini states "No man hates the ambition and avarice of priests more than I do; for these vices, odious in themselves, are most unseemly in men who make a profession of living in contact with God... My position under several Popes has compelled me to desire their aggrandizement for the sake of my own profit..." Realism and Guicciardini, Page 162

Most Italians have no need to read Guicciardini's writing because they seem to be born knowing that minding their own business will serve them in all circumstances throughout life. Free expression is considered to be a luxury granted only to a few saints, heroes and poets. Above all, Italians strive for concrete reasoning and they avoid being made to look foolish at all costs. This is especially true of older Italians who talk about money, work, food and other tangibles while younger people have the luxury of speaking about their dreams, ideals and justice.

Italians, like many other people, must one day realize that life is pitiless and ugly with a constant struggle between hypocrisy and sincerity. There are some unwritten rules that



help Italians navigate through life with as little pain as possible, and most Italians know them instinctively. There are, however, some better-educated Italians who have no need for these rules and can sometimes be perceived as being less Italian than their countrymen.

Most Italians do not understand contemporary capitalism either. They appreciate the outward aspects of it but do not believe it truly exists. They also do not find the rules of capitalism realistic. For example, the saying "Never kick a man when he is down" seems ridiculous to them because that is the time when a person would have the best advantage over someone else. There is one book that reigns supreme in cases of conduct. It is called the *Codice cavalleresco italiano*, Italian Code of Chivalry, which teaches the proper behavior between gentlemen when one is challenged by another.

While all these mechanisms may assist the navigation of social and political waters, the main source of power for all Italians is the family. Within the family lies consolation, help, advice, provisions, loans, weapons, allies and accomplices so that each Italian never faces a battle, big or small, alone. This bastion of security can have many positive facets but also can exhibit negatively in anarchy. Most families attempt to remain as faithful to the perfect family as possible but can extend into extreme behavior if circumstances warrant.

In return for such protection, the family demands absolute loyalty and all wrongs done to the family must be avenged, each member bound to provide for the greater good of the family, even sacrificing personal property and finances if the situation calls for it. The family also demands many male descendants to carry on the name and the heritage so male children are especially anticipated and favored. Children are taught early the dichotomy of the family: behaving with a code of honesty and integrity within the family but reverting to wily, hostile behavior in the outside world which is viewed as the enemy.

Within the family, the males reign supreme and Italian men are noted for their manliness and affected posturing. Males also force women into submission, and the men may have many romantic affairs and their wives have no right to question or object to this behavior. The author cautions against making such broad generalities but does confirm the role of the man as head of the household with the wife in a subordinate role maintaining the home and caring for the children. In fact, Italian mothers take on an almost divine role in the family paralleling the role of Mary the mother of Jesus, a relationship very much revered in Italian culture.

The culture of the family extends into the outside world where protection is necessary, and Italians join groups to fend off other groups and officials. Sometimes membership is not a belligerent action but merely securing the right to be left alone. Sometimes an Italian chooses his own organization to join, but most of the time he is born into a structured group. The largest and oldest organization within Italian society is the Church which also contains many smaller sub groups and factions.

It is always prudent to understand which group a man belongs to so that unintentional offenses are not made. This information is not published publicly but is instinctively



known by peers and residents. There are three elementary rules for survival in Italian society: "One must cultivate one's family, entertain as many useful friends and as few dangerous enemies as one can, and therefore perfect the art of being obliging and simpatico at all times and at all costs. One should always be on the qui vive, watch the horizon for the smallest cloud and people's faces for the smallest variation of mood; one should join a powerful group, sail with a safe convoy; one should beware of History." How to Succeed, Page 226

Going even further from survival to success, there are two major rules to follow. First, a man must choose the right companions. This means that a man must join a powerful organization and then work his way up within its structure. Second, a man must choose the right protector. This means selecting the most appropriate mentor within the organization to nurture and guide. As modes of behavior, a man would be wise to be seen publicly in the company of important men and use the art of flattery to advance his own position.

In this section the author delves even further into the machinations of Italian society. At first glance, the country of Italy seems to be all about art, food and sensual lifestyles. While these are all appealing, they are simply the top layer of Italian society and history because the workings of the society are done at a much lower, and sometimes darker, level. For example, the concept of the family with all its positive connotations of loyalty, love and protection can also rear an ugly head of crafty, manipulative behavior in order to influence and destroy all in the name of the family. Ironically, organizations are well known even though there is no public description or validation of its members. Everything is secret, although everyone knows. There is much that is instinctively understood in Italian society and the rules of gestures speaking volumes come widely into play. There is also an intense code of right and wrong in Italian society, although it is mostly enacted within the family and within the silent organizations. The author also points out the dichotomy of peace-loving, quiet Italians who wish to live God-fearing lives vs. the more bellicose, prominent men who willingly adopt vengeful causes against those who threaten stability as well as the protection of the more silent citizens. This premise will take on more prominence in the next section.



The Problema Del Mezzogiorno, Sicily and the Mafia, Fornovo and After, The Perennial Baroque and Conclusion

The Problema Del Mezzogiorno, Sicily and the Mafia, Fornovo and After, The Perennial Baroque and Conclusion Summary and Analysis

The author states that there are profound differences between the two Italies, the North and the South, which make up the puzzling Problema del Mezzogiorno. All Italians share similar physical characteristics and methods for managing life, but there is a difference between the two geographical regions which has impacted the economies of each for many years and has thwarted the union of the regions just as long. Although they share some similarities, the Northerners believe that the acquisition of wealth is the way to achieve their goals while the Southerners work toward the acquisition of power and influence.

The Northerner believes that wealth is the sure way to insure protection for his family while the Southerner relies on power to achieve the same goals. The actions of Northerners move them closer to their goals through better jobs, the acquisition of land and property and university educations. Southerners, in contrast, appreciate wealth but feel that it is not as important as the appearance of wealth. People of all stations in life in southern Italy from illiterate day workers to nouveau riche members of industries work toward the cultivation of gratitude of friends, fear of enemies, respect of everyone and a good reputation of their families.

To complicate matters even further, there is no definite line separating the two areas, and there is infiltration of those with Southern tendencies living and working in the North and vice versa. But while geographies may blend, the propensity for one or other of the codes of conduct do not waver. There are more visible signs of material advantages in the North, but there is always the danger of spiritual impoverishment and hedonism; whereas, people in Southern Italy live more intense lives relying on their instincts but run the risk of poverty and insecurity.

Southerners would like to live better lives and would prefer that the gap between North and South would diminish. Unfortunately this situation will not improve in the immediate future because much of the capital raised in the South goes to the Northern engineers, contractors and other skilled workers. The North also supplies equipment and most consumer goods to the agrarian South.

The author states the fundamental reason that the South will not narrow the gap between itself and the North is that Southerners think in political, not economic, terms



as opposed to the more adaptable and vigorous Northern economic model. In essence, there is progress in the South, but it is almost negligible in comparison to that made by the North.

Another important faction in the geography of Italy is the island of Sicily where the culture and qualities of the Italian people are magnified with pomp, pageantry and spectacle. The Sicilians are also extremely intelligent people who easily grasp situations and can project outcomes instinctively. Sicilians are also able to avoid written laws and are recognized throughout Italy for this characteristic.

In Sicily, each man's rank is determined by the amount of fear he can generate through the elusive techniques of intimidation practiced by a large number of people known as "the way of the Mafia." Mafia itself has two meanings; one is spelled with a lower case "m" and the other spelled with an upper case "M." The word mafia indicates a state of mind or moral code in the defense of dignity and vengeance prevailing among all Sicilians. Mafia, on the other hand, is the name for the famous illegal organization with a collection of units complete with hierarchies of command all serving its one leader.

The distinction can be hard to discern by outsiders, especially when the term mafioso can be used to mean members of the Mafia and also used to describe a person of prideful bearing. For example, "'What a mafioso horse!' Sicilians will exclaim when seeing a prancing stallion, well-caparisoned, with, with arched neck, dilated nostrils and fiery eyes. They obviously do not mean the horse is a member of a deadly secret society." Sicily and the Mafia, Page 254

The confusion about the Mafia is almost always perpetuated by the organization itself, and almost everyone in Sicily understands the irony that the trouble from which the Mafia protects people is very often created by the Mafia itself. In exchange for protection by the Mafia, people become indebted to the organization and ultimately must pay. Payment is not necessarily in the form of money but sometimes takes the form of business or political needs such as the hiring of an ex-convict, the extension of a loan to a risky customer or sheltering unknown persons for a period of time.

Sicilians prefer to call the Mafia *onorata societa*, or honoured society, and members are called *gli amici degli amici*, the friends of friends. The Mafia members contend that they are not criminals but rather the enemies of criminals who are sometimes forced to commit acts of force in the completion of their duties. The Mafia in Sicily is a highly organized and targeted organization with groups specializing in areas such as citrus groves, cattle, fish markets, construction and more. The specialists manage their areas by fixing prices, arranging contracts and punishing violators when necessary. The heads of these organizations are usually wealthy professional citizens with impeccable manners and ingratiating charm which do not belie the cruelty underneath.

The author describes the humiliation of Italy in the Battle of Fornovo and the aftermath in which Italy's virtues and assets are laid bare and ripe for the picking by other European armies. After this very public humiliation on the world stage, Italy reverts to its protective cover of illusion or *tompe-l'oeil*, an artistic technique crafted to trick the eye.



This leads to the spectacle of the Baroque period, a time of magnificent artistic creativity beginning in 17th century Italy.

Everything during this time period is done for show and splendor, and Rome becomes the center of Baroque life in all of Europe. Sculptors and architects are in great demand, and Rome is filled with many works of the period showcasing religious themes and personalities, a popular topic in any period in Italian history. Baroque theater also becomes popular, and the custom of using masks at celebrations and events today mimics the glorious masks crafted in this colorful and artistic time period.

Behind all this glorious display lies the fear and anxiety of the Italian people who hope that these ostentatious displays would successfully hide their expectations of imminent doom. Everything is created not for intrinsic value but rather for the effect it would create. This creates the perfect environment for wicked behavior, and the Church rises in importance and takes on an intense role in fighting internal and external threats including the heretics who proclaim beliefs in conflict with those of the Church. The Holy Inquisition rises to power during this time and many people are tried, tortured and killed in the name of preserving the Church.

The author believes that the Baroque period did not just spring to life on its own, but rather, it followed a period of oppressive regimentation and totalitarian regimes. The response of the Italian people is in complete keeping with their need for illusion both for themselves and to present an orderly front to the world.

In this section the author delves into the darker underbelly of Italy, which is hidden, at least officially, from the eyes of foreigners, to shed light on the pockets of negative and criminal behavior perpetuated by secret organizations. In such a gloriously bright and beautiful country, an outsider would expect that the inner workings would work in parallel, but the author tells the reader that this is not the case. Two of the most popular movements and organizations in Italian history are the Holy Inquisition and the evolution of the Mafia.

Amazingly, men belonging to the Mafia do not realize that what they're doing is wrong. In their minds, their actions are based on a strong code of right and wrong, and justice must be meted out appropriately. Unfortunately, their concept of right and wrong is most always in direct conflict with official rules, regulations and morals. The underlying core of all Mafia activity, though, is the service to others. The confession of Danilo Dolci states "Whenever somebody asks me to do him a favour, I do it, because Nature made me that way... A man comes and says: 'I have a quarrel with Tizio. Could you please help me settle it?' I call the person mentioned, or I go to see him, according to the case, and make the two men come to an agreement. It is a power I have. I am neither vain nor ambitious. I open my arms wide to all kinds of men. I cannot say no to anybody..." Sicily and the Mafia, Page 266

The author has touched on many aspects of the culture, manners and morals of the Italians, but his overriding message is that the Italian people have become masters of creating bearable facades on their unbearable lives. This is the reason their art, food,

love lives, architecture, etc. are so pleasing. They are often criticized for being superficial or frivolous, but the author contends they are incapable of being anything else.



Characters

The Italians

The Italians are a diverse group of people united as people of all countries are in their common language, food, customs, religion and general way of life. There are differences though in the people in different geographies of the country. The differences between the Northern Italian people and those in the South are based on power and wealth. Those in the more industrial North focus on accumulating wealth to achieve their goals while those in the Southern region rely on a more agrarian economy and the accumulation of respect and power as a means to achieve their goals. As separate as the island which removes them from mainland Italy, reside the Sicilians on the island of Sicily to the west of Italy. The Sicilians are also an agrarian people with fierce loyalty whose lifestyle of loyalty and passion has propagated the tight-knit organization called the Mafia. Throughout the book, the author names a few famous Italians important to the history and culture of the time such as Machiavelli, Mussolini and Casanova. Each of these men took advantage of the times they were living in to rise to fame in the areas of influence, power and romance. Through all Italian people flows the quality of creating illusion exhibited in gestures, language, art, and a complete lifestyle.

Italian Women

Italian women, especially girls and young women, are thought to be especially beautiful and pursued by tourists and residents with the same fervor. Throughout their lives, Italian women assume many roles. Although female children are not as prized as male children, girls are raised to become good wives and mothers, positions of respect in Italian society. As girls and young women, Italian females can expect outrageous flirting and romantic pursuit by men in Italy as well as from foreigners. As wives, Italian women are relegated to positions of subservience and are expected to serve their husbands but not to anticipate much other than physical support. It is widely known that Italian men do not hide their romantic interludes with other women, and their wives are expected to remain silent about their husbands' indiscretions. Conversely, if an Italian wife should enter into a romantic affair, both she and her lover can expect the wrath of the woman's husband. Italian wives are revered for their roles as mothers, and the mother role has a significant place in Italian society spiritually and emotionally even if the women are ostracized in financial and political areas.

Baldassar Castiglione

Baldassar Castiglione was an Italian author who, in 1528, wrote *The Book of the Courtier* which provides advice on how to behave properly in all situations.



Giacomo Casanova

Giacomo Casanova was an eighteenth century Venetian author and adventurer whose charms and illusions with women earned him the title of the world's greatest lover.

Alessandro di Cagliostro

Alessandro di Cagliostro was one of the most famous charlatans of all time. Cagliostro was an occultist who traveled widely and became involved in the affair of the necklace, a crime involving Marie Antoinette, the Queen of France and Cardinal de Rohan, a ruthless man seeking the queen's favor.

Cola di Rienzo

Cola di Rienzo is born in 1313 to humble parents but became a popular orator and capably organized a revolt through astute powers of showmanship and pageantry. He rises to power, is driven out and then returned to power before he is killed.

The Family

The family is the core of Italian life and each Italian owes his protection from the outside world to the benevolence of the family.

Sicilians

The people of the island of Sicily to the west of Italy embody all the qualities of the Italian people but on a more exaggerated scale.

The Mafia

The Mafia is a secret organization originating in Sicily as an extension of protective machinations that resort to criminal activity when deemed necessary.

Mafioso

Mafiosi are members of the Mafia organization.



Objects/Places

Wine

Wine is an important beverage in Italy and is made from fermented grape juice.

Rome

Rome is the capital city of Italy situated on the Tiber River in the mid-central region of the country.

The Vatican

The Vatican is located within the city of Rome and is the home of the Pope who heads the Roman Catholic Church.

Florence

Florence is the capital city of the Italian region of Tuscany in the upper middle region of the country.

Milan

Milan is Italy's largest city and is located in the country's industrial Northern region.

Naples

Naples is located on the west coast of Italy and is known for its arts and culture.

La Mimica Degli Antichi Investigate nel Gestire Napoletano

La mimica degli antichi investigate nel gestire napoletano (The Mimicry of Ancient People Interpreted Through the Gestures of Neapolitans) is a book which contains a complete list of all the signs necessary to communicate anything nonverbally in Italy.

Genii

Genii are powerful, evil spirits which find every newborn Italian and whose presence and ill effects must be fought against for the duration of each Italian's life.



I Ricordi

I Ricordi is the book written by Renaissance statesman and author, Francesco Guicciardini, which provides information on how to survive in treacherous times.

Codice cavalleresco italiano, Italian Code of Chivalry

Codice cavalleresco italiano, Italian Code of Chivalry, which teaches the proper behavior between gentlemen when one is challenged by another.

Problema del Mezzogiorno

The Problema del Mezzogiorno is the conflicting natures and economies of the people of Northern Italy and those of Southern Italy.

The Baroque Era

The Baroque Era began in 17th century Italy and demonstrated outrageous and exaggerated artistic works in the areas of drama, painting, literature, music and more.

The Holy Inquisition

The Holy Inquisition rises to power during the Baroque period and many people are tried, tortured and killed in the name of preserving the Church.



Themes

Illusion

Illusion is a major theme throughout the book as the author presents it as the foundation for Italian life. Illusion is part of the fatal charm that draws thousands of people to visit the country each year. The Italian people perpetuate an image that they want the world to see as being a country filled with romance, sunshine, excellent food, music, art and more. On the surface, life in Italy is all these things, but Italian natives know that life can be cruel and pitiless so they must create illusion in order to make life more palatable. The art of illusion is practiced every day and has been mastered by some notable people in Italian history—Casanova, the consummate lover; Machiavelli, the devious philosopher and diplomat; and Mussolini, the cruel politician and military figure. Each of these men—and many others—perfected the craft of illusion to sway and manipulate and ultimately present a picture of life as they would prefer it. It is easy for reality to hide in this beautiful country, and it does so in places such as glorious landscapes, breathtaking art and the high drama of religious artifices and places of worship. At the time this book was written in 1964, it was probably still possible to maintain the illusion of illusion, but with the advent of technology, coupled with more vigorous education about the country and its people, the spectacle of illusion and drama may be still be quite alluring but with a more informed eye.

Family

The family is the core organization of Italian life and is the center point of all relationships. The author writes that the family is the first source of power. "Scholars have always recognized the Italian family as the only fundamental institution in the country, a spontaneous creation of the national genius, adapted through the centuries to changing conditions, the real foundation of whichever social order prevails. In fact, the law, the State and society function only if they do not directly interfere with the family's supreme interests" *The Power of the Family*, Page 190. All the elements of a traditional family are present: loyalty, consolation, loans, allies, etc., but the family has an undercurrent which has a negative side, too. Family honor and reputation reign supreme, and if a family member is disrespected or besmirched, the family machine heads into action to right the wrong, activity which could even have criminal repercussions. The secret criminal group, the Mafia, is an extension of the family in its single-minded purpose of protection of those who are incapable of helping themselves and an organization through which wrongs are set right. The males are considered to be the most important figure in the family, but the women are respected, especially mothers whose roles are revered, and they assume an unspoken power and control over all the members of the family.

Romance

Most of the fatal charm of Italy which draws countless numbers to the country each year to visit—and some to live—is its sense of romance. The possibility of sensuous rendezvous with handsome and beautiful Italians is one of the most popularly-anticipated scenarios in the dreams of most visitors to Italy. It is widely known and accepted that Italian men are very aggressive in their pursuit of women of all ages, and although it may be considered a negative stereotype, it is an interesting element of time spent in Italy. Romance, however, is not restricted to amorous pursuits and encounters. The entire country is awash in glorious scenery, spectacular food, magnificent music and dramatic architecture. Each of these elements provides delights for the senses so that even the ordinary becomes extraordinary—a plate of spaghetti is not quite the same in an Italian café as it is in one's home dining room. Music seems more melodic, colors more authentic and pronounced, and answers to basic questions seem to roll lyrically off the tongue. Overall, people come to Italy to indulge their senses and lose themselves at least for a little while, and that is the ultimate definition of romance in any country.

Style

Perspective

This nonfiction book is written in the first person narrative perspective. This means that the person relating the events and content is the author himself and he delivers his views and relates events according to his own perception of them. The author does not supply any insight into the motives, feelings or actions of any other people—other than that gleaned from historical documents—and can only relate instances about these people from his own point of view. When there are conversations detailed, the author can simply relate what the other person says, and although the author may guess at the other person's thoughts, he cannot say with certainty if he is correct. Because the nature of the book is a nonfiction account of a people and its culture, there is little room for any other points of view. This relaying of personal thoughts is punctuated at times by the retelling of events or incidents to add some depth to the book, though everything is still from the author's own experiences and perspective. While this technique can be viewed as limiting, the author is able to provide much credible detail as both the author and the narrator in this nonfiction work.

Tone

The book is written in a semi-formal tone, which adds to the author's credibility and provides an educational concept to the work. The author was a noted journalist and author so his style is structured and measured as opposed to the informal cadence of a less formal piece. As an Italian, the author is proud of his country and its people, and this respect and love is exhibited in a piece that could have taken the route of a dusty textbook. Instead, the author exemplifies the Italian gift of animated language to showcase certain examples and also his enthusiasm for Italy, past and present. It seems as if the book was the subject of rigid editing as the piece can be a choppy read in some places, but overall the author's infatuation with all things Italian clearly shows through. There is some humor in the book, but it is a wry wit which will appeal to sophisticated readers and devotees of smart, worldly writing. Overall, the author speaks in an intelligent voice with the net of European reserve reining him in as was common at the time this piece was written in 1964.

Structure

The book is structured into sixteen chapters and a conclusion. Each chapter has a very straightforward title which indicates the content of the upcoming material. In the first four chapters, the author describes the vibrancy of Italy and the fatal charm that lures visitors and tourists by increasing numbers each year. The following four chapters provide more detail on the concept of illusion, the overriding characteristic of Italian life. The next section delves a little deeper into Italian life—both everyday facets as well as strategic

objectives and tactics for success. In the last section, the author provides overarching descriptions and general life patterns and history of the three different regions of the country. Throughout the book, the author inserts excerpts from books and letters to help illustrate his points, a tactic which is especially helpful to the reader in understanding some of the ancient historical points and concepts. The book follows a format of modified sequential events as it touches on major events in Italy's history and how they support and define the country.



Quotes

"There are sultry days in July and August when the cities, emptied by the natives, are almost completely taken over by the swarms of dusty and perspiring foreigners. During the siesta hour, when even the carriage horses sleep under their straw hats, the relentless tourists finally slow down. They bivouac everywhere. They recline on park benches, kerbstones, the stone brims of fountains, or ancient ruins. They place their heads over their crossed arms on café tables for a siesta among the empty bottles, the dirty napkins, and the recently purchased souvenirs. They then really look like a tired and bedraggled army after a fatiguing battle, who have occupied a city abandoned by their fleeing enemy. They have conquered. The place is theirs." *The Peaceful Invasion*, Page 3

"Immortal and mortal foreigners, armed and unarmed, alone and in vast numbers, have sought a Saturnian interlude in Italy as far back as men can remember." *The Eternal Pilgrimage*, Page 14

"What then is this fatal spell of Italy? Sometimes it seems almost possible to measure it exactly—just as the scientist measures the refraction of light in water by observing the angle at which a stick appears bent in it—by comparing the difference between a traveler's enraptured recollection of his personal experiences and more sober and objective accounts of the same events." *The Fatal Charm of Italy*, Page 41

"Is Italy love? Or is Italy, as some say, art? Like the Italian scene, art, too, can be intoxicating, can transform people, can transport them far from themselves, can be delightfully aphrodisiac. 'Art,' says Walter Pater, with words which could be applied equally to Italy and to love, 'gives nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass.' But can an ancient country, a peninsula stretching from the Alps to the Mediterranean, filled with fifty million busy people and their historical problems, be seriously compared to a delicate sentiment, to a primeval urge, or to the highest flowering of the human spirit? Can geography be mixed up with psychology or with aesthetics?" *The Fatal Charm of Italy*, Page 55

"Everything is displayed everywhere, in dramatic and artistic disorder. Flowered cotton material is unrolled from its board and thrown at the observer as if in anger. Spaghetti in sheaves are tied at the waist with white, red, and green patriotic ribbons. Fiaschi of wine or olive oil are decorated with medals like war heroes. In the butchers' windows, pale calves' heads, with eyes closed and lips curled in secret merriment, hold a lemon or a carnation between their teeth in death-defying insouciance. Even a hernia truss, shown in the window of an orthopaedist's shop, bedecked with little flags and colourful ribbons, becomes a gay and desirable object." *The Importance of Spectacle*, Page 59

"Polite lies and flattery can be utilitarian on occasion but, most of the time, must be honestly classified among the devices disinterestedly designed to make life decorous



and agreeable. They are the lubricants that make human relations run more smoothly. Flattery somehow makes the wariest of men feel bigger, more confident, and therefore more indulgent, generous and magnanimous." *Illusion and Cagliostro*, Page 77

"Behind the turbulent and picturesque agitation of Italy, behind the amiable, festive, and touching spectacle, behind the skillful performances, real life is something else. It can be sordid, tragic, and pitiless. It is often an anguished, sometimes a mortally dangerous game. It is always difficult. The cradle of every newly-born baby is surrounded by a number of evil and all-powerful genii, determined to make his existence a miserable one. He must try to ward them off and to defeat them, if he can, when he grows up. His is a desperate job, with only a few and feeble good influences to help him." *The Other Face of the Coin*, Page 101

"The problem the people faced under Fascism was as old as Italy: how to survive and possibly prosper in the midst of corruption, civil wars, revolutions and foreign invasions, under bloody tyrants and their greedy courtiers, without the protection of the law. Most of the methods evolved by the Italians are unsatisfactory. They are partial solutions at best. A few individuals manage to prosper in a decaying world, but the better they fare the worse the world becomes. And yet what is a man to do? He cannot change his countrymen. He cannot choose the times he is born in. He is powerless to deflect the tides of history. He can only try to defend himself from their blind violence, keep his mouth shut and mind his own business." *Realism and Guicciardini*, Page 157

"A moment of revelation comes, it must be admitted, practically to everybody and not to Italians alone. A day comes when men of all nations understand that life can be pitiless and ugly. Each has his own way of reaching maturity. Some need the imperceptible passing of the years. It takes but a tiny incident for others; like the shaking of a kaleidoscope it precipitates an abrupt change of the picture. Or it may be a great event that awakens him: he sees his country defeated and humiliated, and his leaders revealed as loathsome fiends or irresponsible imbeciles; he discovers that some of the principles he was taught as eternal were but empty words and that he himself was but a puppet in the hands of cynical realists." *The Pursuit of Life*, Page 176

"There is, however, this fundamental difference between the Italians and most other people who use the family as their private lifeboat in the stormy seas of anarchy. Anarchy in Italy is not simply a way of life, a spontaneous condition of society, a natural development: it is also the deliberate product of man's will, the fruit of his choice; it has been assiduously cultivated and strengthened down the centuries. The strength of the family is not only, therefore, the bulwark against disorder, but, at the same time, one of its principal causes." *The Power of the Family*, Page 191

"On the negative side, these are the things one must avoid: one should never be too conspicuous, daring, confident, explicit, trusting, credulous; one should not officially



embrace definite opinions, nor be out of step with the crowd. Above all, one should remember at all times that conflicts are not decided on the basis of the law, abstract considerations of justice or the relative merit of the contestants, but most frequently by a pure confrontation of power. Might is not only very often right, but might is often the equivalent of beauty, culture, intelligence and charm as well. No harm will come to the man who diligently does all these things. No harm but, of course nothing really good either." *How to Succeed*, Page 227

"Everywhere in Italy life is more or less slowed down by the exuberant intelligence of the inhabitants: in Sicily it is practically paralyzed by it. The intelligence of the Sicilians is so exorbitant, in fact, that some of it had always to be exported. Their capacity to grasp situations with lightning speed, invent a way out of intricate tangles, gauge exactly the relative power of contending parties, weave wonderfully complex intrigues, coldly control their smallest acts, emotions and words, but, when it is safe, abandon themselves to generous enthusiasms, their capacity to do all these things is such that they often bewilder Italians as easily as continental foreigners from the north of Europe." *Sicily and the Mafia*, Page 252

"What happened to Italy is what usually happens to old ladies who were once famous beauties. Just as they relinquish only reluctantly the gestures, curls, witticisms and fashions of their sunset years, Italy still clings to the manners and ideals of the two centuries which followed the coronation of Charles V. This must be kept in mind by anybody trying to understand anything about this confusing country, past events, current developments, are movements, political evolutions, or by anyone wanting to peer into the clouded crystal-ball of the future. He must not allow himself to be deceived (so many things in Italy are perfect *trompe-l'oeil*). He must look beneath the surface. He will then discover that Italian reality is generally still a Baroque reality." *The Perennial Baroque*, Page 299

Topics for Discussion

Compare and contrast your perceptions of Italy you held before reading this book and your views now.

Would you like to visit Italy someday? Why or why not?

If you have visited Italy or Sicily, how do your memories compare with the images Barzini presents in this book?

If you were to take a month-long trip to Italy, what would you include in your journey and why?

If you could talk to Italian residents of all social strata, what would you want to know about their lives?

How do you think Italy has changed in the time since this book was written in 1964?

The Mafia began as a secret organization in Sicily, but its presence is not quite so secret anymore. Discuss the evolution of the Sicilian Mafia and how its presence has extended around the globe.

What are some common stereotypes of Italian people? Do you think they are fair or unfair? Do you have any Italian friends who are offended or pleased by the cultural stereotypes?