
*Antonia and her Daughters* is a true story, although the author has changed names and altered the location to another part of Tuscany in order to protect the family’s privacy.

Marlena and her husband Fernando de Blasi have settled into their renovated sixteenth-century ballroom at 34 via del Duomo. Living for almost two years in a disruptive ‘make-do’ (7) fashion has left the author in a reflective mood. A writing deadline for her next book is looming, but she is restless and there is a tension between duty to her publisher and the distractions of life with Fernando. Marlena wants some time by herself fearing that having allowed Fernando to ‘take a lead’ (37) in so much of their life she is losing her hard-won sense of self.

The author decides to find a retreat that will be a place to think as well as write. A friend offers a small stone cottage set in the mountains in a remote area of western Tuscany, a location more ‘Norway than Tuscany’ (40). Fernando isn’t happy about any separation arguing that in nine years of marriage they have ‘never spent a night apart’ (36). To which Marlena responds,

> And during all the nights and days of those nine years we’ve pretty much mapped out our lives according to your needs … for right now I have a need of my own. To stay apart for a time and work. Finish this book. I am not in revolt … Just for a while, I want to stay alone in Biagio’s little house in the woods. (36-37)

Installed in the cottage, Marlena quickly establishes a routine and work on her novel progresses well. Until a surprise invitation to Castelletto to dine with the de Gaspari women comprising Antonia, her daughters, granddaughters and a great granddaughter, in all seven tall, high-bottomed, blue-eyed, beautiful hellions. Marlena almost doesn’t accept, but at the last moment decides to go. She has been curious about the 83-year-old Antonia ever since Biagio mentioned her at the time he offered the cottage. He also expressed a hope that the two women would meet. Antonia’s chilly greeting of ‘Ah l’Americana’ (58) when met in the village the previous day has further piqued that curiosity.

At the dinner, tensions mount as Antonia, well aware that Marlena is at the cottage to write, baits her with jibes about the plethora of books written by non-Italians about Italy and its food culture,. She follows up with further jibes in the hope she will upset the author and force her to leave. Wisely the author chooses not to become defensive.

Next morning Antonia arrives at the cottage before dawn, with a flask of coffee and a collection of wild onions in a bag ‘for Carabaccio’ (99). This delicious rustic Italian version of onion soup was on the previous evening’s dinner menu. ‘Make haste slowly. The light won’t wait, you know’ (128), Antonia urges. Marlena recognises an apology in this invitation to join in a ramble over the nearby hills foraging for the plentiful in-season wild onions, herbs and leaves. They talk as they walk and the author earns points for having her own knife and knowledge about gathering herbs. They stop their gleaning to watch the glorious sunrise and sip coffee ‘no sugar’ (128) as they rest. The friendship begun, it continues to develop as this shared pre-dawn ramble becomes the ritual start to each day.

Antonia is a very complex character with definite ideas and perceptions about modern Italy. She has plenty to say about the children of old families selling properties inherited from family lineages, sometimes of five or six generations, to ‘ex-pats or tourists’ (108).
Underneath all the scorn and irony lies a fear of losing old ways, long-held rites and rituals, folklore, superstitions and beliefs.

‘Xenophobic’ (103) Antonia likens the tourist invasion to another occupation, that of the Germans in wartime Italy. It is for Germans she reserves her most pithy remarks. Clearly she is deeply scarred by her experiences during their wartime occupation, but refuses to expand on the matter when asked why. It’s not until Marlena’s time in the cottage is drawing to a close that Antonia breaks a self-imposed silence, revealing the shocking events that occurred and that continue to influence her present.

Antonia’s story is haunting and has been respectfully crafted in the retelling to reveal the amazing strength and resilience of this elderly, still beautiful woman. At the time of meeting the real Antonia the author was working on another novel, but gradually Antonia’s story captured a place in the author’s mind to become the next novel (326).

Marlena de Blasi’s passion for food is a frequent theme in her writing. It is certainly central in this book, as is another equally frequent theme, that of community. It is illustrated through the coming together of family members to prepare the simple ingredients from which a meal is to be made. It continues through the process of tasting and adding herbs or spices that turn these simple ingredients into a gourmet dish. It is during this process that conversation abounds and little secrets are revealed and food enters the sensual realm, making tastes buds tingle. The inclusion of key recipes at the close of the book continues the experience.

I don’t always like the inclusion of words in language other than English, particularly when it’s not the author’s first language. It can feel contrived. However, in the case of Antonia and Her Daughters, the use of Italian words and phrases adds a touch of exotica. The author mentions, during an argument between herself and Fernando where they are using English, that it is ‘a rare occurrence between us’ (34). Perhaps it is because Italian has become her main language that it feels appropriate, rather than the self-conscious approach that can feel so deliberate. Of course Italian is a necessity for many of the specific ingredients and recipes.

A perceptive listener, the author crafts characters and their surroundings so well that they and their world are brought to life. The people of Castelletto remain in my mind even though the reading is over. I shall revisit them from time to time.

Kay Hart