

# IMPERFECT PAIRINGS

A NOVEL

**By Jackie Townsend**  
**AUTHOR Q&A**

**1. What inspired you to write this novel?**

I am sixteen years married to an Italian who came to the U.S. for university and stayed. I got tired hearing all the oohs and ahs, “Oh you’re married to an Italian, how wonderful!” It’s so much more complex than that, and I wanted to dispel the notion of the romantic Italian love story, but in a real and true way, which means also dispelling the romanticism of relationships. This is a couple dealing with real issues and real life, and learning to love each other even more in the midst of all that. It took me much longer than Jamie though, to truly open myself up to my Italian family. Part of my writing the book, is homage to that, and them.

**2. What aspect of the writing did you find particularly challenging?**

My writing is very subtle, deadpan style. I want my readers to think and feel between the lines, in the quiet places. In as such, bringing out the romance proved difficult. At heart, I am deeply romantic. Like in the movie, *Water for Chocolate*, I believe that love can be transferred via the care and preparation that goes into making a meal. Except flowers. My husband has never once given me flowers. Flowers die. The day he gives me flowers, is the day I know something is wrong. These kinds of things kept surfacing themselves in the character of Jamie. Knowing when to let them surface, getting the balance right, was difficult.

**3. The novel vividly portrays the complex relationship of a married couple.****How much of the novel is based on your own experience?**

My own experience being married to a foreigner has left me fascinated with the parallels between cultural differences and marital differences. Entering a foreign country can be like entering a relationship. To get to know someone, to understand them, you need to cross the border into their country, the country of their mind and soul. To understand them is like learning a foreign language. And even if you do eventually learn it, it will never be your native tongue. Which leaves the question, “Is it possible to ever really know the person you love?”

**4. The character Jamie, at one point in the novel, reaches her “glass ceiling.”****What advice would you give to someone trying to break through?**

I’ve been out of the corporate world for ten years now. So I can only speak to the time when I was there. I didn’t feel like any doors were closed to me. No ceilings. No breaking through. I got along well with my bosses and associates, men with differing quirks and styles. The issue became having to behave in ways that wasn’t the soul of who I was: fearless, hardened, blindly confident, an expert on whatever subject I was advising. It’s a lot of work to portray a cool collected front 24/7, the amount of time you are in front of the client in the consulting business. It got to be exhausting. Business wants, needs women. It’s getting them to stay, to want to break through that can often be the issue.

**5. How did wine become the thread of the book? How did you do your research?**

My husband’s family lives outside Turin, not far from the Barolo region. We often go there on day trips on our visits to Italy. I love the way Italians treat wine, casually, like a member of the family, an old friend. They are loyal to their friends. They might take a drive down to a local vintner and fill a jug because that’s what they’ve been doing for years. They might not tell you his name or location, because they don’t want the word to get out. The bottles often don’t have labels.

Wine is a relationship. It requires love and care and tending to if it’s going to survive and grow, and, still, you don’t know what that wine will ultimately be, how it will taste. It became the perfect metaphor for the book.

In Barolo we visited the small winery of Bartolo Mascarello, the vintner famous for his uncompromising methods, his refusal to cower to commercial demands. He sticks to the ways of his ancestors, his heart. He's dead now, but my husband and I chatted with his daughter while she poured us a sampling of her father's wines. It was a very intimate experience, and somewhat intimidating. Thankfully my husband spoke the language. She was very gracious and kind, as are most vintners, once you get them into conversation. They most always have interesting stories. Luca's character is, in part, based on Bartolo Mascarello.

*Passion on the Vine*, a memoir by Sergio Esposito, the owner of Italian Wine Merchants, is a lovely exploration of the wines of his Italian homeland, and his relationship with Italy in general, having immigrated to the States with his parents as a small child. Also, *The Mystique of Barolo* by Maurizio Rosso and Chris Meier, gets at the heart and soul of the Barolo region, its vintners, history, and methods. It's a beautiful, coffee table-like book (though expensive), with gorgeous pictorial images to go along with the descriptions.

**6. What makes your book different from those out there that also talk about the Italian experience?**

It goes beyond the cultural stereotypes of an American woman in Italy. Two examples of this are *Eat, Pray, Love*, and *La Bella Tuscan*. Both are wonderful books. My book is neither.

Regarding the first, in Rome, Elizabeth Gilbert wanders around on the outside looking in. Jamie, in *Imperfect Pairings*, flounders about on the inside looking out. Gilbert spends her time in Rome scouring back alleys for the best restaurants. Jamie never eats out in Italy except once because meals in Italy are eaten at home with the family. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner, no exceptions. One p.m. for lunch, eight p.m. for dinner. Why go out to eat, when the food and company is so fabulous at home?

Gilbert gets all the stereotypical nuance right—endearing, quirky—like the young men outside the bakery shop eating fresh *cornetti* instead of being at some bar getting wasted; the football fanaticism; the accents and gestures, the PIZZA.

BUT Italy and its people are so much more than those things.

*Imperfect Pairings* is no escape to “La Bella Tuscany” either. The crumbling villa, the educated American woman, the handsome Italian man, the beautiful countryside, this is where the similarities end.

**7. Do you think Italian Americans will identify with the book? How?**

Italians get tired of their stereotypes. I was in Italy when Woody Allen’s film, “To Rome with Love,” was released. I love Woody Allen, but my cousins were very disappointed by the film, and they told me so. I went and saw it while I was there. My husband and I were the only ones in the theater. I, too, was rather appalled by it. See my blog post for a more in depth analysis of why, <http://bit.ly/J5bbkB>. Suffice it to say that Italians are people, not stereotypes. It takes a long time for Jamie, the main character in *Imperfect Pairings*, to understand this.

**8. Did you travel to all the places you write about in the book? Can you recommend an itinerary?**

I don’t think you can write about pizza, until you’ve gone to Napoli and tasted a pizza. I spent a week that I will never forget alone in Napoli (Giorgio is right; there is no place like Napoli), with a side trip to Vico Equense, which I chose for Giovanni’s paternal grandfather’s summer escape because of its obscurity on the otherwise coveted, gorgeous Amalfi coastline.

I gave no name to the hill town where Villa Ruffoli resides. It’s an amalgamation of all the hill towns that sit at the base on the Alps in the Langhe region of Piedmont, in the north of Italy, near Turin. A great insiders tip is to spend a weekend in La Morra during the Mangialonga festival, a “4km Non-Competitive Enogastronomic Hike along the Wine Pathway of La Morra.” <http://bit.ly/14H3Nan> You’ll wander through verdant vineyards tasting wine and eating the region’s sumptuous delicacies. I can’t think of a better way to spend the afternoon.

**9. What are your favorite novels and/or movies about marriage? About Italy and love?**

*Revolutionary Road* is a book not for the faint of heart. Richard Yates’s novel is upending, and devastating, as love and marriage can be.

*Scenes from a Marriage*, a film by Ingmar Bergman, is about six hours long. It feels like a lifetime has passed by the time you’re finished watching it, and then you’ll sit there thinking about it long, long after.

Natalia Ginsberg is my favorite Italian author. She wrote some lovely autobiographical novels in the sixties that portray real, everyday Italian life, sconece the stereotypes. (*The City and the House*, 1987, and *Family Sayings*, 1967)

Five Italian films that define love, for me anyway, are discussed in my blog post: <http://bit.ly/VfqiPN>

Other Italian films not to miss, both recent and old:

*Bicycle Thief* <http://bit.ly/GDUKoG>

*Habemus Papam* (We Have a Pope) <http://bit.ly/JoALjh>

*Big Night* <http://bit.ly/VKxyBK>

*Passione* <http://bit.ly/XUfOTj>

*Benvenuti Al Sud* (Welcome to the South) <http://bit.ly/Y7b4uM>

#### **10. What projects are you currently working on?**

I've completed a first draft of my third book, *I've Loved You So Long*. It's about two half sisters, one Italian, one American, who don't know they are related.

I'm also considering a sequel to *Imperfect Pairings*. There are still some things unresolved, like what happens to Giovanni's father, and whether or not Giovanni will, in fact, go searching for him. And Jamie and Giovanni will, no doubt, need to revisit the issue of children.