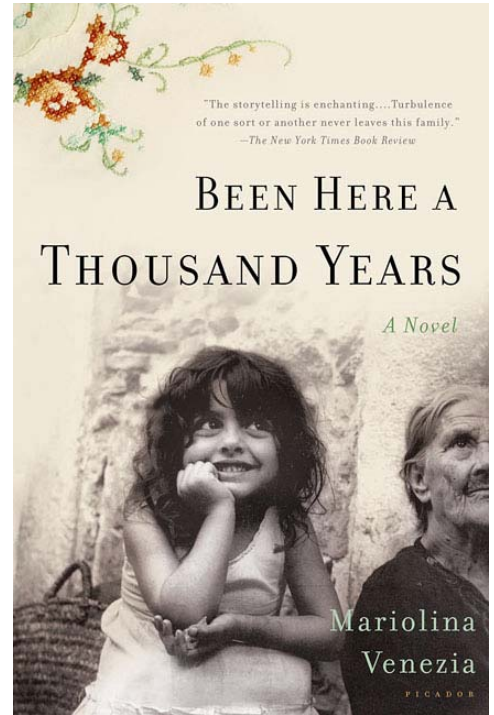


READING GROUP GUIDE

Been Here a Thousand Years A Novel

by **Mariolina Venezia**

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Been Here a Thousand Years* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Been Here a Thousand Years*.

About the Book

In a tiny, ancient Italian hill town, where the land gives little and money and food are scarce, Don Francesco Falcone is a man to be reckoned with: rich, powerful, restless, intransigent. When he meets another force of nature, Concetta, a penniless but indestructible farmworker, the stage is set for the creation of an exceptional family: generations of strong, complicated boys and, especially, girls. The battles among them are many as they live through historical upheaval and private passions.

Their stories are told by Gioia, the last of the line, a woman of our times who fights tirelessly against convention. She is the product of a family of memorable women who know how to survive, and also how to make something fantastical and rich out of their lives: with their hands they create delicate and complex embroideries, while their minds embroider endless, elaborate stories.

In this sweeping, unforgettable novel, Mariolina Venezia portrays five generations of the Falcone family. Through their complicated, funny, tragic, and astonishing stories, Venezia also recounts a century and a half of Italy's tumultuous history. *Been Here a Thousand Years* is a testament to the Falcone family, and also to the vibrant, irrational, irresistible country that produced it.

About the Author

Mariolina Venezia has published several poetry collections and has written for television and film. Her debut novel, *Been Here a Thousand Years*, was awarded the 2007 Campiello Prize for fiction. She was born in 1961 in Matera, the Italian province in which her novel is set.

Discussion Questions

1. The novel begins with a handwritten family tree and a cryptic conversation between Concetta and her great-granddaughter, Gioia. Do you find family trees to be helpful when books span generations such as this one does? Is Concetta's family tree particularly helpful or unhelpful due to the way that it is introduced through dialogue?
2. Each chapter of the novel begins with an Italian verse. Do you feel that these verses introduce each chapter well? Why or why not?
3. The author often uses food as a metaphor: "Everything would begin to rise like bread dough under a kitchen towel" (p. 8); "her body small and round, shapely and dark as a grape" (p. 19); "Unlike her sister—who was like an overripe apple—Albina was like those small, tart apples that give you goose bumps but make you want another" (p. 56). Do you find these metaphors especially evocative and do they particularly aid in the author's establishment of setting?
4. Don Francesco and Concetta have an unusual relationship: Don Francesco threatens to throw Concetta out on the street until she bears him a son. Concetta suffers Don Francesco's tantrums because she feels pity—and eventually love—for the man she has born so many daughters. Does their relationship change for the better or worse following their daughter Costanza's betrayal? How does this change differ from the change in Alba and Rocco's relationship following their own daughter's betrayal?
5. What role do you think the early coddling of Oreste played in his eventual demise? Do you think Don Francesco's only son was deserving of his final humiliation?

6. The volatile nature of Italian politics is deeply felt in the Falcone family. Discuss the tragedies that befall the family as a result of the political climate (Don Francesco's murder, Colino's self-inflicted loss of hearing, Gioia's flight from home, etc.) and whether or not anything positive ever comes from the family's political involvement.
7. How does Lucrezia's early treatment of her son Rocco shape his future? Discuss how Rocco's education and isolation leads to a gulf between him and his family. Does Alba's upbringing and education subject her to a similar fate?
8. Does religion or superstition play a more powerful role in the lives of the people of Grottole? Does Lucrezia's questionable encounter with the man who "cures" Rocco's muteness support your answer? Discuss other occasions in the novel where religion and superstition collide or co-exist.
9. Gioia escapes the physical confines of Grottole, but does this bring her the freedom she is searching for? Compare Gioia's life in Paris to her fantasy of the life she could have led in Italy.
10. Where do you think she would have been happier?
11. Why do you think the violent loss of Gioia's virginity—and her mixed feelings of shame and pleasure during the event—spur her to flee Grottole? Does she carry those mixed feelings throughout the rest of her life?
12. The novel is composed of the many intricate overlapping stories of the Falcone family and their spouses. Which of these stories/characters appealed to you the most and why?
13. The final paragraphs of the novel alternate between Don Francesco's final wishes for his family and Gioia's sad realization, over a century later, that these dreams have not come to pass. Discuss how this ending made you feel. Does Gioia's return to Grottole suggest hope for the future or has the Falcone line finally come to an end?

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