

THE DAUGHTER OF SIENA

by Marina Fiorato

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A Conversation with Marina Fiorato

This is your third novel set in Italy. Your first, *The Glassblower of Murano*, took place in Venice; *The Botticelli Secret*, Tuscany; and this one, Siena. What led you to this city? And why did you want to write about it?

Do You Know?

There used to be twenty-three contrade instead of seventeen. In the sixteenth century, the contrade of the Viper, Strongsword, Cock, Oak-Tree, Lion, and Bear were suppressed for sedition and violence.

Siena is a fascinating city, which, before this novel, I'd only visited in passing. What's interesting about it is that when you actually stay there and get to know it, rather than visit on a day trip, you realize that it is a complete little world of its own—a microcosm of a larger society and the world outside. *The Daughter of Siena* reflects all the political and social tensions that were going on in the city, in Italy, and in society at large. It deals with tensions between classes and tensions between royalty and republic, as well as love between man and woman, parent and child, horse and rider, and love for one's city. The unique way that Siena is organized—small city wards known as *contrade* with their animal symbols and fierce loyalties—means that each area behaves as a little nation, with alliances giving way to wars and then periods of peace. And all of these tensions come to a head twice a year, at the famous Palio horse race.

How, if at all, was the process of writing *The Daughter of Siena* different from your other novels? Did you do a lot of research about the Palio? And, in crafting your story, did you stick to historical fact? Or did you take artistic liberties?

I did a lot of research into the Palio in particular and horses in general. Although I visited Siena, of course, I also did a lot of research into horses in the United Kingdom, not in an intellectual sense, but in a hands-on way. I got to know my neighbor's



ponies, went to horse races, and learned much more about these fascinating creatures. The research for this book was therefore much more practical than before: I got my hands dirty in the stable! As far as fact versus fiction goes, I always try to be historically accurate, broadly speaking. But as I'm writing a work of fiction, rather than a historical tract, sometimes I will bend the truth in the cause of a good story, or dramatize certain events.

Your depictions of the Palio horse races are heart pounding. What about riding horses or attending horse races inspired you?

One of the things that struck me about the Palio and horse races that I attended in the United Kingdom was the fact that you could actually feel the thunder of the race in your chest as the runners go past. This single sensation, that it's a physical experience for the watchers, gave me the most insight into the excitement of the race. Of course, if you add into the mix that you may have put a bet on a horse, or that you might care very deeply about one of the riders as Pia and Violante do, it becomes a financial, mental, and emotional experience too. It's completely holistic. I used to ride as a child, and still do when I get the chance. I'm drawn to it because it's so essentially historical. Whatever the modern changes in tack or saddlery the fact is that riding—the relationship between horse and rider—has gone unchanged for thousands of years. That connection with the past is very beguiling to me.

How much—or how little—are you like Pia? Did you find inspiration for her character, or her story, anywhere in your own life?

*About the
Author*

Do You Know?

*Riccardo Bruni
was named
after Richard
Brown, Marina's
brother-in-law,
who's a keen
horseman and
racehorse owner.*

Well, I certainly wasn't sold into an arranged marriage and I've never suffered in the ways she has! But I admire—and aspire to achieve—her spirit, and hope that I would show the same ingenuity and “gumption” in circumventing her circumstances. She can be quite impulsive though, whereas I'm a bit more calculating!

You once wrote that “when [you] open a historical novel [you're] taking a trip to a different land.” Do you do a lot of traveling? Do you have any fantasy vacations in mind that you'd like to take? Or places you'd like to visit . . . and write about someday?

I do a fair bit of traveling for research that gives me the pleasure of going to Italy about twice a year. This year I also went to Zagreb for a literary conference and look forward to going back to Croatia this summer, this time to the coast. But my next book is partly set in Istanbul so I'm slowly edging to points farther east—the relationship between Byzantium and Venice has always fascinated me and I'm looking forward to discovering more about it.



Marina Fiorato
Marina with her children, Conrad and Ruby,
at Venice's Palazzo del Popolo



The Palio at Siena

An Essay by Aldous Huxley

We took our places in one of the stands opposite the Palazzo Comunale. Our side of the piazza was already in the shade; but the sun still shone on the palace and its tall slender tower, making their rosy brickwork glow as though by inward fire. An immense concourse of people filled the square and all the tiers of seats round it. There were people in every window, even on the roofs. At the Derby, on boat-race days, at Wembley I have seen larger crowds; but never, I think, so many people confined within so small a space. The sound of a gunshot broke through the noise of voices; and at the signal a company of mounted carabinieri rode into the piazza, driving the loungers who still thronged the track before them. They were in full dress uniform, black and red, with silver trimmings; cocked hats on their heads and swords in their hands. On their handsome little horses, they looked like a squadron of smart Napoleonic cavalry. . . .

[T]he Palio is just a show; having no “meaning” in particular, but by the mere fact of being traditional and still alive, signifying infinitely more than the dead-born English affairs for all their Parkerian blank verse and their dramatic re-evocations. For these pages and men-at-arms and bannermen come straight out of the Pinturicchian past. Their clothes are those designed for their ancestors, copied faithfully, once in a generation, in the same colors and the same rich materials. They walk, not in cotton or flannelette, but in silks and furs and velvets. And the colors were matched, the clothes originally cut by men whose taste was the faultless taste of the early Renaissance. . . .

The Palio is probably the most dangerous flat-race in

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Do You Know?

*The entire Palio
race takes only
seventy seconds.*

the world. And it is made the more dangerous by the excessive patriotism of the rival *contrade*. For the winner of the race as he reins in his horse after passing the post, is set upon by the supporters of the other *contrade* (who all think that their horse should have won), with so real and earnest a fury that the carabinieri must always intervene to protect man and beast from lynching. Our places were at a point some two or three hundred yards beyond the post, so that we had an excellent view of the battle waged round the winning horse, as he slackened speed. Scarcely was the post passed when the crowd broke its ranks and rushed out into the course. Still cantering, the horse came up the track. A gang of young men ran in pursuit, waving sticks and shouting. And with them, their Napoleonic coat tails streaming in the wind of their own speed, their cocked hats bobbing, and brandishing swords in their white-gloved hands, ran the rescuing carabinieri. There was a brief struggle round the now stationary horse, the young men were repulsed, and surrounded by cocked hats, followed by a crowd of supporters from its native *contrada*, the beast was led off in triumph.

Excerpted from *Along the Road: Notes and Essays of a Tourist* © 1925



Marina Fiorato

The Palazzo



Recommended Reading

The Flambards Trilogy, K. M. Peyton

Starting at the beginning . . . my interest in horses really began with this series. The trilogy is actually for young adults, but it is a wonderful trio of books about English heiress Christina Parsons growing up just before and during World War I. In the first book, the orphaned Christina moves to the eponymous *Flambards*, a crumbling mansion that is home to the all-male, horse-mad Russell family. The scenes where the groom, Dick, teaches Christina to ride are beautifully written and insightful. In the third book, *Flambards in Summer*, the newly-widowed Christina returns to the house and makes it live again through the stables. She buys a damaged warhorse, Argus Pheasant, whom she rehabilitates, and through him, heals herself.

Airs Above the Ground, Mary Stewart

A wonderful adventure novel about the world of the peerless Lipizzaner stallions. Vanessa March travels to Austria as a chaperone for a young friend and is soon embroiled in a world of espionage that seems to somehow involve her absent husband. This novel benefits from the wonderful settings of Tyrolean villages and Gothic castles, a good dollop of romance, spies, missing jewels, a traveling circus, and, at the center of it all, a mythical horse who is not quite what he seems.

Summer's Lease, John Mortimer

No horses in this one but this is a great novel stuffed with the wit of John Mortimer. An English family take a villa near Siena for the summer holiday. While there they are forced to examine their own family relationships, thrown into sharp relief by the presence of mischievous patriarch Haverford Downs. They mix with their eccentric neighbors, battle with the intractable Italian plumbing, and take a trip into Siena to

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Behind the Novel

*Do You Know?
Horses can win
the Palio with-
out a rider. This
is called riding
scosso.*

watch the Palio. At the heart of this social comedy in this matchless setting is a mystery: who is their secretive landlord, and where on earth is he?

Riders, Jilly Cooper

Light as air but shamelessly engaging, Jilly Cooper's novel about the world of show jumping deals with the rivalry between orphaned Gypsy Jake Lovell and privileged sprig of nobility Rupert Campbell-Black.

The two men compete for precedence on the show-jumping circuit and for the love of the same woman. Underneath the froth is some razor-sharp social commentary about England in the 80s as well as incredibly detailed knowledge of the horse world.

The Raphael Affair, Iain Pears

Art-theft officer Flavia di Stefano becomes embroiled in the mystery of a recovered painting that may or may not be a lost Raphael. In the process she becomes drawn to English art dealer Jonathan Argyll; but is he the real thing or a common thief?

Including some fascinating insights into the art world, *The Raphael Affair* culminates in Siena itself, involving a nail-biting denouement on the tower of the Palazzo Pubblico.

Enquiry, Dick Francis

It's hard to single out one novel from the master of racehorse writing, but *Enquiry* is one of my favorites. Jockey Kelly Hughes is labeled a cheat by a Steward's enquiry and the racing establishment seems to be trying to shut him out. It is up to him to take matters into his own hands and clear his name, revealing a seam of corruption that is deeper and more pervasive than he could ever have imagined. Francis's novel gives great insight into the rules and regulations of the British racing scene.



Reading Group Questions

1. Siena is a small city in which local loyalties are what matter most. How easy do you think it would have been to keep secrets in a place like that? You may wish to discuss your own hometowns—and/or scandals within your communities—as well.
2. Pia is valuable to her father only as a bargaining tool. How does she assert her own independence? In what ways is she a “woman ahead of her time?” What does that definition mean to you?
3. Riccardo, the son of an ostler, behaves with instinctive grace. Discuss nobility in the context of the story. How is it personified?
4. Do you think Riccardo was right to reject his inheritance? Why? And: What would *you* have done?
5. Pia wears Cleopatra’s coin around her neck. What is the significance of this charm? What other important artifacts, symbols, or talismans can be found in the book—and what do they mean to the beholder?
6. Discuss the role of the church in the story. How does it influence each of the characters in terms of belief and behavior?
7. To what extent has Violante become reconciled to her husband’s homosexuality by the end of the book? How would this story play out in a modern setting?
8. What changes Violante from a passive woman to a woman of bravery and determination? Again, take a moment to envision her in the world today. Would she be considered a feminist? Would *she* consider herself one?

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9. How have Gian Gastone's expectations corrupted his character? Also, does this make him a more *interesting* character, in terms of your reading experience?
10. There is an absence of mothers in the story but many fathers throughout. Do we, as readers, judge the fathers' actions more or less harshly because of this gender imbalance? You may also wish to imagine the roles of some of the missing mothers in this novel. How might their offspring have turned out if they had been around?
11. How does the art and architecture of the city support Violante as a ruler? How is the city of Siena a character in and of itself?
12. Discuss the equine "characters"—the donkey, Berio, Leocorno—in this novel. How does the author bring them to life for the reader? Moreover, how do they reflect the struggles of their human counterparts?