



# THE ITALIAN PARTY

by Christina Lynch

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## *A Conversation with Christina Lynch*

### ***How and why did you start working on this book?***

I finished grad school in the summer of 2013, which in my mind marked the transition from being a television writer to being a fiction writer, though I continue to this day to work on scripts. I had co-written the two Magnus Flyte novels and written a lot of short fiction for grad school, but I was eager to dive into a longer solo work. I knew I wanted to write about Italy, but I didn't want to write a memoir. I also wanted to try to capture what it might have been like for my parents to move to South America in the 1950s, though they were no longer around to tell me about that experience. I started doing some research about Italy in the 1950s, and the novel took shape in my mind pretty quickly, though at the same time I was hired to teach college, so the actual writing took a while.

### ***What kind of experience has writing your book been for you (fun, exciting, agonizing...)?***

I love losing myself in a project, so it was wonderful. I read endlessly about Italy, about the CIA, about herbs in Maremma, about urban planning in Siena in the postwar period (more interesting than you might think). At the college library I read *Life* and *Look* from the summer of 1956. Online I bookmarked more sites than I care to admit, including the CIA's. And of course I had to sift through my memories and photos and relive my own years in Tuscany, finding perfect backdrops for Scottie and Michael's adventures. Then naturally I had to go back to Siena and do some more research...



The first file name for the project was “Castle of the Black Horses,” which wasn’t really a serious title, but it sounded so romantic that it kept me coming back to it. Then for a long time it was called *Vita Americana*, then at last it became *The Italian Party*, which captured both the fun of being in Italy in the ‘50s, but also the Communist Party, which is the focus of Michael’s mission.

In terms of the writing, finding the best way to reveal Scottie and Michael’s secrets was perhaps the hardest decision to make.

***Tell us anything about you as a working writer that you think might be interesting or unusual:***

I’m unusual among working writers in that I’ve been a foreign correspondent, a television writer on sitcoms and dramas, and now a novelist. Another odd aspect of my career is how much collaborative writing I’ve done—in television and in the Magnus Flyte novels. I enjoy writing alone and with a partner.

I’m also a writer who enjoys mentoring other writers—I teach, I’m the faculty advisor for the literary magazine at my college, I work with WriteGirl in L.A., and I do some book coaching. Helping others with their work polishes my own skills.

***What was the inspiration for this novel?***

I was fortunate to live and work in Italy for seven years in my twenties. In writing this book I wanted to capture what I felt as a young woman arriving there, eager to immerse myself in a new culture and

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language, but I also wanted to explore America's influence on Italy, for better and for worse.

I chose 1956 (thirty-one years before I arrived there) because that year the U.S.'s interest in Italy went much deeper than where to find the best gelato. Italy was a glamorous playground for American tourists and movie stars, but it was also the linchpin of the Cold War—a country on the verge of democratically electing a Communist government. The CIA was trying very hard to stop that from happening, and I wondered what it would feel like to be the person who had to carry out those orders.

I gave Scottie and Michael problems that would have made life very complicated for them in 1956: he's gay and working for the government; she's carrying a child as a result of what we would see today as a sexual assault. There have been many sun-drenched love stories set in Italy—I wanted to write about the underside of a seemingly perfect 1950s marriage, and its transformation into something else, something more true and more modern. I wanted people to find themselves cheering for a very unconventional happy ending.

I also intentionally made Scottie and Michael very naïve about the U.S. and their mission there, so that we could see them have to confront some hard truths along the way.

Though I didn't know it at the time, the true first round of research was done when I lived in Italy from 1987 to 1994. I worked for *Women's Wear Daily* and *W* in Milan, interviewing fashion designers and attending the shows, but also writing many, many stories about food, travel, and the



business of fashion. Then I moved to a country inn half way between Florence and Siena. There I lived and worked with Italians who didn't speak English, so that was a big leap forward linguistically and culturally—I even took driver's ed and got my first driver's license in the town where Boccaccio was born. I bought a horse and rode all over Tuscany and got involved with competitive long-distance riding. The people I met on those rides populate the novel.

After I started writing the novel I went back to Italy in the summer of 2014 with some friends and my stepmother to do research. First I visited friends in Milan who were wonderfully helpful—they loaded me down with books on Italy in the 1950s and we hashed out a lot of political history. Then we stayed outside Montalcino with some old friends of mine who have a vineyard there. They were having a heat wave, and day after day I dragged my poor stepmother all over Siena in hundred-degree heat and hundred-percent humidity, stopping to take notes and photos all along the way. She was a trouper, and she was rewarded with abundant quantities of gelato, piccacio e pepe, and Brunello. My favorite night on that trip was a dinner party outside among the fireflies, one long candlelit table for about 50 of us (guests, farmworkers, villagers) amidst the ancient buildings of my friends' castle. At a certain point the Cardellini del Fontanino, a group of folksingers from Monte Amiata, who were seated here and there among us, spontaneously began to sing. It was utterly magical.

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*Who are your favorite authors?*

Here's a start: Graham Greene, Nancy Mitford, Vladimir Nabokov, P. G. Wodehouse, Italo Calvino, S. J. Perelman, Evelyn Waugh, Mikhail Bulgakov, Harper Lee, Jim Shepard, Dorothy Parker, Paul Beatty, Sherman Alexie, Flannery O'Connor, Marguerite Henry, Tim Parks, Pam Houston, Kurt Vonnegut, Toni Morrison, William Shakespeare, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Barbara Kingsolver, Kazuo Ishiguro, Francesca Duranti, David Sedaris, Jeannette Walls . . . If you can spot a pattern, tell me.



## *Recommended Reading*

At the end of the Acknowledgments I've included a list of works that helped me ground *The Italian Party* in history. If you are interested in the CIA or Italy in the 1950s, take a look at those. Here are some additional titles that you might enjoy that share a mood, a setting, or a sensibility with *The Italian Party*:

***Our Man in Havana***

Graham Greene

***The Talented Mr. Ripley***

Patricia Highsmith

***To Catch a Thief***, film

***The Sixteen Pleasures***

Robert Hellenga

***Italian Neighbors***

Tim Parks

***Summer's Lease***

John Mortimer

***La Dolce Vita***, film

***La Bella Figura***

Beppe Severgnini

***My Brilliant Friend***

Elena Ferrante

***Beautiful Ruins***

Jess Walter

***Roman Holiday***, film

***Miss Garnet's Angel***

Sally Vickers

***The House on Moon Lake***

Francesca Duranti

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## Reading Group Questions

### About the novel:

1. This book has been called “sneaky” for how it seems to be a comedy, yet explores more serious issues as well. Did it live up to your expectations, surprise you, or something else?
2. What effect does it have on you as a reader when you experience the story from more than one point of view, as in this book where you get both Scottie and Michael’s thoughts?
3. People like to put books into “genres,” but some books resist categories. In your view, is this a spy story, a love story, a missing person story, a coming-of-age story, or something else?
4. This novel could be considered part of a genre called “comedies of remarriage,” which includes films like *The Awful Truth* and *The Philadelphia Story*. How is the end of the novel both a happy ending and not a happy ending?

### About the characters:

5. How did your view of Michael change as the story progressed? Scottie?
6. Scottie and Michael were too young to participate in World War II, yet it had an effect on them to grow up during those years. How are they children of both the ‘40s and ‘50s?
7. Who is Sebastian loyal to? Which side is he on? Why?
8. What role do animals play in the novel?

### About the time period:

9. Did it surprise you to learn that it was against the law to be gay if you were a government employee in the 1950s?





10. The 1950s can be seen as a cultural response to World War II. What events in this novel link those two eras? How was the mood of the '50s a reaction to the war years?
11. What was appealing to post-war Italians about American products and the American way of life?
12. Most Cold War stories take a very clear side in that struggle. What side does this novel take?
13. The Cold War was a time of deep paranoia about loyalty. How is that conveyed in this novel?
14. How does it change your view of Italy to know that the U.S. had such a direct impact on its elected leaders for fifty years?

**About parallels to the present:**

15. Scottie and Michael were not completely honest with each other before their marriage. Can you imagine this happening today?
16. This novel was conceived and written before the news that Russia tried to interfere with the U.S. election of 2016. How did that present-day story affect your perception of Michael's mission to interfere in Siena's election?
17. The novel was written before the "Me, Too" movement and our current cultural conversation about sexual harassment and sexual abuse. How would Scottie's experience at Vassar be different today?
18. What do you think happens to Scottie and Michael as the 1960s arrive? They would be in their late 80s now—would they have stayed married?

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