



## La Bella Figura: A Field Guide to the Italian Mind

*Beppe Severgnini , Giles Watson (Translator)*

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**Join the bestselling author of *Ciao, America!* on a lively tour of modern Italy that takes you behind the seductive face it puts on for visitors—*la bella figura*—and highlights its maddening, paradoxical true self.**

You won't need luggage for this hypothetical and hilarious trip into the hearts and minds of Beppe Severgnini's fellow Italians. In fact, Beppe would prefer if you left behind the baggage his crafty and elegant countrymen have smuggled into your subconscious. To get to his *Italia*, you'll need to forget about your idealized notions of Italy. Although *La Bella Figura* will take you to legendary cities and scenic regions, your real destinations are the places where Italians are at their best, worst, and most authentic:

**The highway:** in America, a red light has only one possible interpretation—Stop! An Italian red light doesn't warn or order you as much as provide an invitation for reflection.

**The airport:** where Italians prove that one of their virtues (an appreciation for beauty) is really a vice. Who cares if the beautiful girls hawking cell phones in airport kiosks stick you with an outdated model? That's the price of gazing upon perfection.

**The small town:** which demonstrates the Italian genius for pleasant living: "a congenial barber . . . a well-stocked newsstand . . . professionally made coffee and a proper pizza; bell towers we can recognize in the distance, and people with a kind word and a smile for everyone."

The chaos of the roads, the anarchy of the office, the theatrical spirit of the hypermarkets, and garrulous train journeys; the sensory reassurance of a church and the importance of the beach; the solitude of the soccer stadium and the crowded Italian bedroom; the vertical fixations of the apartment building and the horizontal democracy of the eat-in kitchen. As you venture to these and many other locations rooted in the Italian psyche, you realize that Beppe has become your Dante and shown you a country that "has too much style to be hell" but is "too disorderly to be heaven."

Ten days, thirty places. From north to south. From food to politics. From saintliness to sexuality. This ironic, methodical, and sentimental examination will help you understand why Italy—as Beppe says—"can have you fuming and then purring in the space of a hundred meters or ten minutes."

## La Bella Figura: A Field Guide to the Italian Mind Details

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### Emerline LA says

C?m gi?c gi?ng nh? n?i chuy?n ?i?n tho?i v?i m?t ng?i Ý. Anh ta ?i kh?p n?c Ý, d?ng l?i ?oi ch? ?? ng?m m?t qu?ng tr?ng ?ng ?uc hay b?i bi?n r?c n?ng h?, v?a k? nh?ng c?nh tr?c m?t v?a li?n t?c binh lu?n v? nh?ng chuy?n ng?y x?a ng?y x?a và v? v?n d?y m? r? má t? nh?ng th? v?n v?t nh?t ??n b?n t?nh n?c Ý - cái l?i t? duy ?ã ng?m vào máu anh chàng. Anh ta ?ua c?t v?i m?i th?, t? Machiavelli ??n ?ng th? t?ng ??ng th?i, t? b?nh vi?n ??n nhà th?,b?ng m?t gi?ng tr?o ph?ng ?áng y?u. Và mình l?ng nghe, nh? m?t k? ngo?i ??o.

Sách ??c r?t d? ch?u, các ph?n, m?c ch?ng m?y li?n k?t nên có th? gi? m?t trang b?t kì và c? th? ??c. Ng?u h?ng, nh? ??u óc ng?i Ý.

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### Megan Baxter says

A fascinating look into Italian culture. Severgnini details the complexity of the Italian mind, from its attraction to all things beautiful, to its suspicion and personal interpretation of top-down authority (hence the "red lights are suggestions" thing).

Being an American completely in love with Italy (rolling amber hills, strong architecture, astounding artistic genius), I found myself rethinking my view of this country. Now, my view is not shadowed, but it isn't idealistic either. I can now look at Italy more as *Italia*, which has its share of political strife, an erratic history of genius and disaster, arguments between North and South, and yet maintains a welcoming National character and a devotion to itself that rivals other great nations.

*While a lot of Americans view Italy as quaint and idealistic, according to Severgnini, the national feeling is actually "complicated, angry, buried beneath rhetoric, sarcastic and camouflaged in cynicism. But it exists, and can even be gracious...Still there are many Italians who yearn for a better country, but no longer seem to be able to dream the dream." Yet he remains hopeful, which relieves me. As unpredictable as it can be, his Italy is still "a special place, and it's sad to watch it struggle."*

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### Elizabeth Tangora says

If the author was narrating this book to you over dinner or drinks, I imagine it would be a charming way of passing the time. Or if it was just a travel column published once a week I'd probably be a fan. But lumped into a book the twee observations about Italians just seem to go on forever. The paragraphs all have the same rhythm to them and by the 30th time I'd read about how "Italians are (adjective) and (adjective), but also (contradiction) and (contradiction)!" my eyes just rolled back into my head out of sheer boredom. I wouldn't call the overall tone of the book smug, but it was definitely so pleased with all the clever observances it had that it would throw them all at the reader, whether they made any sense or not, in addition to the times Italian

behavior was compared to American behavior I've never observed. The author is probably great fun to talk to, but the book needed a much more severe editor.

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### Mark says

I really enjoyed Severgnini's smart-ass sense of humor and wit. He's an Italian David Sedaris. He makes fun of and adores Italians at the same time, meanwhile pointing out all their contradictions, anxieties and passions in very Italian, self-effacing way. He says of Italians that they make fun of everything because they respect nothing, and he is not different. Like a comedian/anthropologist he dissects everything from the modern Italian family structure to the meaning of the Vespa and the telefonino (cell phone) to car language -- "a short toot of the horn means 'Hi!' a long one 'I hate you' and flashing lights means 'I'm after you!'"

He explains the difference between our concept of Italy and the Italian concept of Italia, if there is a unifying one. "Your Italy and our Italia are not the same thing. Italy is a soft drug peddled in predictable packages, such as hills in the sunset, olive groves, lemon trees, white wine, and raven-haired girls. Italia, on the other hand, is a maze. It's alluring, but complicated. In Italia, you can go round and round in circles for years. Which of course is great fun." Italia is alive, hard to understand and fascinating in its contradictions and sensibilities. Italy is steeped in a romantic notion of the past, it is a museum.

I recommend the book to anyone who is interested in Italy or Italians.

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### S?n Ph??c says

Tôi c? ngh? r?ng mình s? thích cu?n này l?m l?m. Tác gi? s? d?ng ?? các bi?t pháp t? li?t kê, so sánh và ??c bi?t là r?t nhi?u trích d?n, có ??ng ý l?n không ??ng ý. Ngay c? cách d?n d?t v?n ?? b?ng chuy?n du l?ch vòng quanh n??c Ý trong vòng m??i ngày c?ng ?ã th? hi?n vi?c vi?t cu?n sách c?a tác gi? là có ch? ??nh, ch? không ph?i tùy h?ng nh? nhi?u ng??i. ?o?n ??u khá hài h??c và d? ch?u, s?n sàng cho \*\*\* li?n, nh?ng v? sau thì h?i ng?y. Ph?i ch?ng vì tôi ?ã ??c quá d?n d?p hay vì h?i gi? v?n mù t?t v? Ý nên không hi?u h?t nh?ng gì tác gi? nói? (Mà c?ng có th? là c? hai l?m ch?). D?u sao thì ?ây c?ng là m?t cu?n sách có th? ??c qua m?t l?n ngay c? khi b?n không h? có ý ??nh ??n Ý.

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### Brittany says

Well, I was hoping to learn a lot about Italy from this book; but I did something that I rarely do...I put it down before I got to the end. While I learned a couple of possibly useful tidbits, like the table fee at restaurants and the fact that pedestrians are more like target practice for drivers, overall I felt like this was written with SWEEPING generalizations. And the generalizations weren't limited to the Italians, they were also applied to Americans, Britains, Germans, etc. Since I'm trying to gain some insight into Italy before an upcoming trip, I thought it best to find a more practical source of information than this. I will say that Beppe does have a sarcastic sense of humor from time to time that I quite enjoyed; it just wasn't enough to keep me interested.

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## Julie says

The premise of the book was intriguing: learn about Italy from an Italian's point of view. However, it was only when I read in the last pages of the book (after the conclusion of the story) that this book was a number 1 seller in Italy (and not America) that I realized why the book didn't absolutely grab me. The author is humorous and clearly well educated on his subject. Unfortunately for me (an Italian enthusiast, even), many of the references were too obscure. The tales jumped all over the place with little or no segue. For as detailed as he described many of the scenes, I couldn't get a clear vision of what Beppe was showing me. For as funny as he tried to be, I didn't understand all the jokes. There were two places in the book that really drew me in, and that was because I had actually experienced them before. As evidenced by the book's popularity in Italy, I think Beppe Severgnini is great at telling a story to the people who already know it, but lacks in the ability to properly include those of us he is trying to educate.

I found the summary of the book in the form of the epilogue to be sufficient and better suited to tell the story than the previous 209 pages. If you want to know more about Italia, I'd recommend starting with the epilogue to this book. If you're further intrigued by some of the statements there, go ahead and start from the beginning.

That said, I might consider picking up his other book, Ciao America! to see if I can relate better to that story and give his promising writing style another chance.

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## Rochelle says

I read this book on the plane to Italy, having already been there twice, I was hoping to gain further insight into the Italian psyche. I chose the wrong book. Mr. Severgnini did a disservice to his own people by keeping his observations facile and boring. I would not recommend this book to anyone. My advice -- if you want to learn about Italians, go to Italy and make friends with a local -- spend the \$25 bucks buying them a pastry and a cafe' latte over some good conversation.

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## Kira says

"Forse questo sentimento nazionale è tradizione, forse è abitudine, forse è solo una pausa che si concede chi ha litigato troppo. Probabilmente, mescolato al resto contiene un po' di rimpianto: perché sappiamo, in fondo, che le nostre virtù sono inimitabili, mentre i difetti sarebbero correggibili. Basta volerli correggere. Basta convincersi che la testa degli italiani è un gioiello, non un alibi."

Leggendo i molti commenti negativi e legittimi dei lettori stranieri, suppongo il libro di Severgnini sia più adatto agli italiani. Non perché non concordo con le critiche ma perché non le capisco, così come loro non hanno capito l'autore. Forse dovrebbero farsi dare delle ripetizioni per riempire le lacune. Non hanno colto il vero spirito del libro, non hanno assaporato veramente l'atmosfera italiana, non l'hanno percepita quando sono stati in Italia, se ci sono stati.

Da brava italiana ho apprezzato questo divertente viaggio in compagnia di Beppe condito con sana ironia, piacevole analisi sociologica e un pizzico di sentimentalismo nazionale che a volte vogliamo nascondere troppo.

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## **Michael Goldman says**

While I learned that as an overthinker who flies by the seat of his pants when travelling, I may relate more to Italians than Americans, I think that's about all I learned.

Through a combination of strange prose and incomprehensible tangents, Beppe gets me more lost about his vision of Italy than a twisty Roman street. I set out to read the book to try to understand the country I'm about to visit and was left almost not wanting to visit it at all.

There were a few helpful tips (i.e. don't cross the road at walk signals, Italians don't necessarily respect red lights) but I think it's honestly written for Italians who already understand Italy and want to reflect on it, laugh at it (occasionally I did), and say, "hey, that's me." It's sort of worthless for foreigners - and I often got the impression that was not even the audience (despite the title).

This novel is in such sad shape that I actually learned more from the epilogue summarizing it from an American's viewpoint than I did from the rest of the book. I would have been better off making a photocopy of those pages to take to Italy and not wasting two weeks that could have been spent reading travel books (hint, hint, an Italian wouldn't mind breaking copyright for that purpose).

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## **Kathy says**

Neither very enlightening nor very funny, this book does NOT do what it says on the tin. Yes, it's written in an easy and lightweight style, but it seemed to me to be empty of anything really revelatory or thought-provoking about its subject. Although it is framed as a 'journey' through Italy, it does little to evoke or describe the differences in temperament or landscape in the regions of the country. This book was full of the kinds of generalisation about Italy that I might have expected from a non-native, but seemed pretty unforgivable from an Italian writer. For anyone who wants to understand the complexities of Italy in a much more informed and nuanced way, I would recommend giving this little book a miss and trying Tobias Jones's "The Dark Heart of Italy".

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## **Khalid Ismail says**

This book never met my expectation and curiosity. I bought it to read about the Italian culture and tradition and how life is like in Italy. I figured out that the book is very far off what I thought it would be. How the Italians park their cars, traffic in the roads, how they shop in malls, blah blah blah !!!  
I didn't read the whole book. I stopped reading it after finishing the first half of it.

And definitely I won't read it again...it is a waste of papers and time.

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## **Kayla Chapman says**

After living in Italy for a year, reading this book brought back memories and also explained a few hidden ideas in the Italian mind. Severini is hilarious in his description of his homeland but also acknowledges age-old problems that fill the country. I wouldn't recommend reading this book before your first trip to Italy

because it will distort your view and may cause you to be hyper-critical. Read after you've been there a while or after you've left so you can laugh a bit. This book is filled with stereotypes and often generalizes Italians which obviously isn't true

Overall, entertaining and mostly true.

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## Ryan says

Not so much a travel guide as a sociological exploration, this book is packed with fascinating insights and telling weaknesses. The author, an Italian that has worked as an English journalist at The Economist and other venues, explains the difference between Italy and Italia - the former being an imaginative invention of the English later adopted by the Americans, and the latter being the real thing. But, don't worry about remembering which is which, because after explaining both the difference and its importance, he then proceeds to refer to both ideas with the uniform moniker "Italy" for the rest of the text.

Still, it was thrilling, as an American living in Italy, to see an Italian author write "Italians prefer good looks to good answers," "we like nice gestures so much we prefer them to good behavior" and "In Italy rules are not obeyed as elsewhere"! Oh, beautiful and soothing it is to see that it's not just me sensing these realities!!!

On that last one he elaborates: "We think it's an insult to our intelligence to comply with regulation. Obedience is boring. We want to think about it. We want to decide whether a particular law applies to our specific case. In that place, at that time." He cites this in regards to traffic laws, taxes, religion - you see everybody, I have not been making this up!!

There are many fascinating tidbits to be gleaned, such as a fascinating 2page history of the Vespa, the history of the word "ciao" and the fact that in the last 50 years the population of Italy has "risen by nine million but the number of available bedrooms has shot up from thirty-five million to one hundred and twenty-million."

Severgnini made me quite glad by pointing out a distinctive characteristic of nearly all the Italian literature I've read and tried to read: "The average American novelist will write, 'She went to the window and said...'. An Italian writer will dedicate a page to the complex psychological process that prompted the character first to go to the window and then to open her mouth." And, my bet is he's talking about the NON fiction!! And, it would be funnier if he were exaggerating.

Then there's a characteristic of Italian journalism that he actually himself demonstrates when with very little pretense he writes, "Some people have even tried to play down the awful scene in the Champions League derby match with AC Milan, which was suspended live on television to the entire world in a deluge of rockets and bottles." ...the awful scene??? What awful scene!?! Like most Italian journalists I find here, he doesn't actually tell what happened, he just gives his opinion about what happened. Sure, soccer is a big part of Italian culture, but not for 100% of Italians (that's Italy, not Italia) and much more relevantly, it would seem that the book that uses "we" to mean Italians and "you" to mean the reader would be intended for non-Italians who would have to be at least a little bit less likely to know what on earth he is talking about if he doesn't tell us what on earth he is talking about!

And it's the same in spoke communication as well: "Speaking abstrusely is, for many, a source of pride...It doesn't matter if the listener or the reader understands nothing." But, you are to be very impressed by the fancy words they are using and the strikingly obscure subjects they mention.

Most useful and interesting to me were his spectacular clarification of the success of Silvio Berlusconi in

Italy, his debunking of the dual legends of the luxurious Naples and slack jawed Neapolitians, and his the incredibly extensive list of cultural observations and affirmations that I fit only a small glimpse of here.

I found many of the ideas not mentioned here to be either grossly-self delusional or typically glazed over, but that there was enough honesty and insight to more than counterbalance that, as in that this has become the most interesting cultural examination of Italy that I have yet come across. The reason I give the book 5 stars and the reason that I will be recommending it to many of my friends is because of his effective and ringing claim that "If Italy doesn't leave you bewildered, it means it has conned you."

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## Tommy says

See the original review here: <http://justanotherbooknerd.tumblr.com...>

I think it's about time I take a break from fiction don't you? Now, I am going to have to come clean here, my family have owned a property in Italy for many years and I have been going out there for a long time before that too. So what would make me want to read a book about a place I am already in love with despite the quite clearly obvious reason that I am already in love with it?

Well the answer is simple really, it's Italy from the eyes of an Italian. You can go to your local book shop and spend hours looking through all the 'Tuscany through my eyes' type books written by Englishmen and Americans. To be honest it's rather rare for an Italian to go 'you know what, I'm tired of all this crap you write, here is an honest account of Italy.'

This book is that rarity, it's the answer to a call for an honest insight into the way that Italians view their Italy. The book starts with one simple mantra. 'Your Italy and my Italia are not the same thing.'

To be honest we can all relate to that point. The amount of things I hear about the English, only to sit there and reflect that it is utter nonsense is staggering. Do I say anything about it? Of course not, I'm English.

What we have here is an honest account of Italy that often had me nodding my head along in agreement and more often than not laughing out loud at it's downright silliness. Severgnini doesn't pull any punches either, he appears to be rather insightful into the ways of many cultures, often drawing fairly accurate comparisons to his own Italia.

Severgnini takes us through ten days in Italy, starting at the airport and moving through Milano, Napoli and Roma. He even comes quite close to where my family are in Casole D'elsa, which personally was quite a nice touch for me.

Throughout these ten days and your interactions with the Italian people you are going to gain an insight into just what is going through their minds when they see you, when they do the things they are doing or more often than not when they sit down doing not much at all.

Ordering a cappuccino after 11am? I don't think you shall ever dare to do so again after reading this book. Like I said, a lot of this stuff I already knew so it was hilarious to read someone talking about it all so frankly and honestly. Before it had always seemed to be like a set of unwritten rules that the entire populous simply adhered to. Now however we have a witty, comical, insightful book with which we can use to completely disregard said rules (a common Italian trait).

If you're interested in Italy or are planning a holiday there then this is probably going to be one of the best books that you could read in order to prepare yourself for the experience.

Of course you could always wing it, but I assure you, the Italians will judge you!

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