



Midnight in Sicily

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Off the southern coast of Italy lies Sicily, home to an ancient culture that with its stark landscapes, glorious coastlines, and extraordinary treasure troves of art and archeology has seduced travellers for centuries. But at the heart of the island's rare beauty is a network of violence and corruption that reaches into every corner of Sicilian life: La Cosa Nostra, the Mafia. In an intoxicating mix of crime, travel, and food writing, Peter Robb, a writer who lived in Southern Italy for fourteen years, sets out to understand both the historic roots of the Mafia and its central place in contemporary Italian politics. And whether he's touting the gustatory strength of Neapolitan espresso, unveiling the Arabic origins of pasta, or unraveling the criminal history of a bandit, Robb seductively brings Sicilian culture to life.

Midnight in Sicily Details

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Author : Peter Robb

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Barksdale Penick says

It took me a while to get to the pace of this book, which starts with a line such as "I returned to Naples after a ten year absence..." So it is that sort of book, with political and social observations of a narrator who is part of the tale. But as it went on, I was able to pay less attention to the narrator and focus on the extraordinary breadth of his coverage of Sicily, and to a lesser degree, Naples. Some of the tales were a bit on the side of *The Lives of Rich and Famous People*, but for the most part it went straight to the horrors of the mafia in the late 20th century. And Robb does seem to work in all of the major literary and artistic figures that I heard about anywhere else in Sicily. Once I got started I enjoyed this slice of a brutal era not so long ago.

WarpDrive says

This book is a pretty comprehensive account of the development, changing nature and widespread influence of the main groups of organized criminality in Italy (Mafia with origins in Sicily, and Camorra in Naples) after WWII. Much of the history is taken from firsthand accounts and documentation, some of it used in famous Mafia trials.

A bit disjointed and occasionally tedious to read - the complex intertwining and overlapping of organized criminality, foreign powers interests, terrorism, cultural factors, politics and widespread corruption at all level of civil society, so characteristic of the modern history of Italy, is maddeningly complex at best of times: unfortunately the author tends, at times, to provide a too-close perspective of this intricate morass, indulging into the minute details and listing all principal actors in relation to the many plots (and subplots, and sub-sub-plos) that even the best magistrates in Italy failed to untangle.

It must also be said that the author tends to get worryingly close to expressing some form of respect towards this phenomenon – almost justifying it in the light of the history of poverty, oppression and foreign domination that feature in so much of the history of Southern Italy, and Sicily in particular. The criticism of the phenomenon of the Mafia feels almost half-hearted – the author might have spent more space in highlighting the terrible economical and social costs of the presence of the organized criminality in Italy, rather than devoting several pages on food or Guttuso's lovers, or Marta Marzotto.

On the other hand, some parts are extremely interesting, and the author manages to highlight with great effect the intimate relationship and deep links between organized criminality and the upper echelons of Italian politics, including the government itself and the prime minister himself.

The case of Giulio Andreotti is an example well explained by the author, with overwhelming and detailed evidence.

I also like how the author did not refrain from highlighting the heavy responsibilities of the US authorities in WWII, when they supported the re-establishment of the Mafia structure in Sicily, in exchange for support in their occupation of the island - the famous Mafia boss Calogero Vizzini ("the boss of all bosses") was even made Honorary Colonel in the US Army.

The author is also very clear in detailing the many political interests that colluded in the murder of Aldo Moro, one of the darkest moments in modern Italian history: Aldo Moro knew too much about the relationship between the governing party, the mafia, the business world, and he made the big mistake of promoting a compromise with the Communist party – so all affected parties (Italian and foreign) could not wait to see him killed by the Red Brigades.

I also appreciated that the author refrains from expressing personal opinions, impressions or generic statements, relying heavily, instead, on actual proofs and documentary evidence. And the picture that emerges is shocking and dis-heartening even for a reader already intimate with many events of recent Italian history. A grim reading experience indeed.

I am pleasantly surprised by the author's knowledge of Italian culture and history, something quite rare with non-Italian authors. His first-hand accounts of his visits to some inland Sicilian villages, and of the historical quarters of Naples, are beautiful. He also captures some peculiar aspects of the Italian mindset with really insightful perspectives.

But even this author does not really get fully into the heart of the problem: it is not just about a particular politician (such as Andreotti) or a particular political party (Democrazia Cristiana), or a particular region (Sicily): the problem is about a widespread culture of corruption, dishonesty and “omerta” (a typically Southern Italian concept, virtually untranslatable, whose meaning is: “conspiracy of silence” or “refusal to cooperate with the authorities, even if victims of crime”), which touches ALL levels of the Italian society, including the common people evading taxes, the Church authorities, the industrialists, local and central politicians, public servants, magistrates, police etc. This is still a country where Mafia bosses funerals represent them as heroes, and where you wonder if the "Godfather" movie is still applicable:

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-....>

And it is a mistake to identify the Mafia organization with just what is visible in prisons or in the streets – the borders between organized criminality and the rest of society have become so blurred that in some cases it is almost impossible to distinguish between a corrupt politician and a “mafioso”, and distinguishing between dirty money and legitimate businesses. The inconvenient truth is that the organized criminality would not have had such success, had it not found a fertile soil in the Italian society. Still now there are recurrent scandals and cases of corruption in Italy, and just a few days ago a massive amount of explosive has been found by the police - explosive targeted at killing a magistrate who was investigating the activities of the Camorra.

This makes the amazing sacrifice, that the few honest Italian magistrates and politicians have made by paying with their own lives for their courageous fight, all the more poignant and heroic. Heroes who were in so many cases progressively ostracized and isolated by the very authorities that they were supposed to represent, until the organized criminality could kill them without too much fuss.

Fortunately, there is still an important part of civil society that refuses to give up. The hope is that it will finally prevail and transform Italy into a truly European and independent country.

To conclude: this is a reasonably good book, recommended to all readers interested in the recent history of organized criminality in Italy, even if it must be said that prior knowledge of the political history of post WWII Italy would definitely help in the appreciation of this book. 3 stars.

Tundra says

This is a complex and fascinating read that weaves together Camorra, Cosa Nostra, Mafia and the politics of post war Italy. At times I felt overwhelmed by the complexity of the topic but as I continued to read I found the threads coming together to create a complete picture of this period in history. I really enjoyed the travelogue components that included history, culture and the food of Naples and Sicily, along with the interviews and descriptions with some significant spectators to the unfolding events. After recently reading the Neapolitan series by Ferrante I now feel I have a much better understanding of the scene in Naples, and perhaps also her reasoning for remaining anonymous and writing a fictional account. These were clearly

times when it was dangerous to be identified and speak your mind.

Simon says

The title promises a broader and more rounded view of Sicily than what we actually get. Instead of a balanced overview of many aspects of the history of the island, we get an awful lot of Cosa Nostra, with the occasional short chapter, or even just a few paragraphs, on a particular typical recipe or representative work of art, and then it's back to the mafia stuff again. Which is fine, if that's what you're interested in. Personally I found myself skimming over some of the interminable and hopelessly convoluted descriptions of the internal power struggles, in order to get to the political angle involving Andreotti, or the personal stories like that of Marta Marzotto.

Robb is obviously intelligent and knowledgeable, although he leans a little too heavily on one particular source: the legal dossier titled The True History of Italy, and I sometimes felt that he got bogged down in trying to present too much information rather than communicating some key facts more clearly. Then again, when it comes to Sicily it seems that very little is clear or uncomplicated.

Juliusz says

Bardzo dziwna mieszanka księki podróźniczej i dokumentalnej. Temat ciekawy, ale podany w niezbyt przystępnym sposob - opisy sycylijskich miasteczek i wsi miesza? si? tu z list? nazwisk i dat; kulinarne zachwyty nad regionalnymi specja?ami podane s? pomi?dzy suchymi faktami dotycz?cymi zale?no?ciami mi?dzy mafi? i politykami.

Sally Edsall says

This book is one of the very best I have read on an aspect of Italian life and politics.(The other is Christ Stopped At Eboli) I am going to read it again, as some of the detail is fading from memory. Robb, a long-term ex-pat writes seriously about the underbelly of Italian life, but also conveys his love and respect for the country, its traditions and food especially!

When visiting my husbands relatives in Sicily, I found the undercurrents there present - men with rifles and wolf-dogs standing in country lanes at dusk, protecting their orange trees, for example. My cousins not naming the menace, but referring to it obliquely, shrugging their shoulders....my uncle working two jobs, the first as a respected paramedic in an ambulance service, but earning enough for a basic existence only, but with the promise of a state pension. The second job in the afternoon in order to afford the types of consumer goods and housing that the now advanced Italian nation takes for granted. Much has changed since WW2, since the mass emigrations from a broken country. But much also remains the same and Robb gets to the heart of it beautifully.

Michael Finocchiaro says

I was lucky to find this book in Sicily on the tiny English section of the Mandatori bookshop in Ragusa Ibla a few summers ago. It is an excellent read about the author's love of sicilian culture and food with the

backdrop of the mafia's complete control of the island up to the assassinations of the anti-mafia judges Borsellino and Falconi. I learned an immense amount of things about Sicily thanks to this book. It is also thanks to Robb that I discovered and later read and LOVED *Il Gepardo*, the great masterpiece of Lampedusa (and the incredible film as well). Another fascinating anecdote explained the connection between Lucky Luciano and the US Government that facilitated the Allied invasion of Sicily and laid the groundwork for a deeper incrustation of Cosa Nostra in the US after the war. A definite must for those curious about Sicily and about the Sicilian mafia.

Brendan Monroe says

Appreciation... and disappointment. These are the feelings I'm left with after finishing "Midnight in Sicily". I'm appreciative that Robb is willing to dig down into an area of Italian life that so many - particularly Italians - are reluctant to, but I can't help feeling a pang of disappointment (several, actually) that the result is so lackluster and unenthusiastic. Having just finished Alexander Stille's "Excellent Cadavers" (which was indeed excellent) the contrast couldn't be sharper. We lived with the individuals Stille reported on, got a visceral look at the inner workings of La Cosa Nostra. Robb, by contrast, seems like he hasn't quite figured out what he wants to be talking about at all. "Midnight in Sicily" is 80 percent mafia, the other 20 percent a smattering of things like coffee, sculpting, the elderly, photography, etc. If Robb wanted to write a book about the mafia he should have committed to doing so wholeheartedly. Instead what we're left with is an account of political thugs like Giulio Andreotti (Italy's former Prime Minister) and then 5 pages on children visiting a museum in Palermo and being told by their guide of the beauty of a particular sculpture's buttocks. What? If you want to talk about the mafia, you can't do so halfheartedly. What I thought I was getting with "Midnight in Sicily" was an overview of Sicily itself. Equal parts mafia, cuisine, people, culture, and history. Instead it's almost all mafia with the rest crammed in as filler for god knows what reason.

Ironically, the book's best chapter isn't about Sicily at all, but about Napoli. There are two or three very intriguing pages about the history and culture of Neapolitan coffee (the best in the world) and then a few on the Neapolitan mafia, the Camorra. What this is doing in a book called "Midnight in Sicily" I don't know... perhaps it should have been called "Midnight in the former Kingdom of the Two Sicilies" as that would have no doubt made for a much more intriguing book.

Is a 3-star book worth your time? Not when there are so many 5-star books out there that deal with the mafia, Italian history, culture, and cuisine so much better. I wish I'd stopped reading after the chapter on Naples - somewhere midway through the book. At least then Robb and I could have parted ways on a sweet, rather than a bitter, note - much like a Neapolitan Caffè.

Nina Ive says

This is an excellent insight into Sicilian life. I read this as 'research' just before I went to live there in 2000. The family I lived with were amazed of the things I knew about because I had read about them prior. Go to Sicily... it's wonderful!

Raf Linmans says

Interessante en aangenaam leesbare mix van de Siciliaanse elementen die ook in de titel opduiken: kunst,

geschiedenis, keuken en cultuur, gedrenkt in een (ge)weldadige maffiasaus. Nog enkele pagina's culturele weetjes extra en een beetje minder maffia+politiek zou dit boek helemaal geweldig maken.

Lisa says

A look at the post-war rise of Cosa Nostra and its intertwining with Italian politics (what with most of the Government's ministers apparently being either a part of or closely tied with the group), this was an interesting although sometimes confusing book.

A complex subject at the best of times, the vast array of names (whether they be the many organisations like the Demochristians, the Red Brigades and the Cosa Nostra, the criminals and the politicians - who are often one and the same, the prosecutors or the people met by the author either during his past or along this journey) along with a habit of jumping around chronologically and wandering geographically sometimes left me a little befuddled as to who, when and where I was reading about.

I'm not entirely sure that the book's byline (On Art, Food, History, Travel and the Cosa Nostra) really fit, as the parts that weren't about the Cosa Nostra mostly took on the form of brief tangents or reporting of what Robb ate when he met such and such a person, and didn't really bring anything particularly illuminating to the subject. The book may have even been more successful at getting across the huge amount of information delivered on the Cosa Nostra had these little distractions not been included.

Mostly I was left with a vague sense of how corrupt it seems Italian politics are, that ex-Prime Minister Andreotti was extremely dodgy (to say the least - Berlusconi seems a choirboy in comparison) and that I need to look elsewhere if I want to read about Sicilian food.

This is all probably starting to sound as if I didn't enjoy this book. I did - it's just more of a buffet than a fulfilling meal.

Also posted at Randomly Reading and Ranting

Charles says

The thing that is great about this book is the language. The topic is a bit grim, but the language is just enchanting.

You can just start anywhere and read onward from there.

Nick Lincoln says

One of my favourite books, I've just re-read it for the third time (I've got an appalling memory, so it almost reads like new each time if I allow enough time to pass).

Robb weaves Sicilian history, the Mafia, food, culture, politics and intrigue into a heady brew. None of these

themes are explored in real depth, so if you want a recipe book or a detailed history of Cosa Nostra then look elsewhere.

If you have an existing knowledge of the Sicilian Mafia and of general Italian history since 1945 then this book is a treat, adding as it does a context for those incredibly turbulent decades through to, well, through to the present.

Throughout it all is the cancerous presence of Giulio Andreotti, the slipperiest, most Machiavellian western politician of recent times. In fact, of all time, perhaps. A man who built his power base within the DC through his "friends" in Sicily and who was up to neck in "it".

There's a fair bit on art and culture in the book. As someone whose cultural hinterland stops at a couple of Edward Hopper prints slung up on the lounge wall these can be tiresome - but they can also be skipped through.

Well worth a read.

Bernadine says

A fascinating insight into Sicily and the Cosa Nostra, particularly the political influence of Andreotti. The extreme violence of the 1970's and 80s reads like fiction.

I was fortunate enough to see Litizia Battaglia's work exhibited in Taormina, Sicily (times have changed in Sicily after all!) and those images along with Robb's writing really bring home the terrifying violence and power of the Mafia in Sicily .

Jennifer says

I am trying to get a trip to Sicily organized for April. I thought this would help set the scene, though I am more interested in the volcanoes and food than the mafia. Anyone read it?

Agonizing structure--so disjointed. It isn't holding my attention, too many mafiosi. I've put it in the loo--but I think it means I've given up.
