

Frances Mayes Interview: *Every Day in Tuscany*

1.) Q: *Every Day in Tuscany* is your third book set in the small town of Cortona. What attracts you to the memoir form?

FM: I love the immediacy of present tense writing. Italy equals happiness to me and I like the challenge of writing about that state of being. In the books of poetry I wrote before my Italian life began, I was exploring the dark side—and that went on for many years. Yeats says that when he changed his syntax he changed his world. When I changed my world, my genre quickly shifted. This was a big surprise and gift.

2.) Q: Since *Under the Tuscan Sun* you've written two photo-texts, a novel, and a book of travel essays. So, you don't exactly stick to a genre. Why is that?

FM: Instinct. And I don't like to fall into habits of writing. After all, I'm trying to entertain myself in these books! My novel *Swan* is set in Georgia, where I grew up. I'd long wanted to steep myself in that *place* again. And *A Year in the World* allowed me to stay in places where I'd dreamed of living. There is a thread: all my writing involves that Southern obsession—a sense of place.

3.) Q: In *Every Day in Tuscany* you are shocked to encounter a side of Italian life you'd not seen before when you received a frightening threat due to your stance on a controversial local issue. Is this because you wore rose-colored glasses?

FM: [laughs] I always wear those, Versace if possible. No, seriously, I don't romanticize Italy—if only I had the words to do justice to life there. This incident you refer to did shake me to the foundation. The roots of it always were present; I just never had known because I'd never publicly challenged anything, had never needed to.

4.) Q: How were you able to pick up and move on after this event?

FM: I hope I've written the answer in the book. What do you do after anything ugly happens? Pick up, move on. I think my relationship to the place deepened but it's complex. After a betrayal, you may be wiser but you don't necessarily *want* that wisdom.

5.) Q: What are the greatest joys you experience in your Tuscan life?

FM: First, that it always seems new. Second, that I know I'll never, ever reach a point where I'll say, *Now I know Italy*. I love the light and the sound of bells. Then there's a whole crowd of peak pleasures: friends, food, art, wine, striking out in the Fiat and traveling thirty miles where I'm sure to find a new landscape, pasta, cheese, piazza, dialect, and fresco. Oh, and listening to stories, especially from the old Italians.

6.) Q: And in America?

FM: My family and friends. The rich, fecund smell of the South, its balmy—sometimes almost congealed--air. The jolt of contemporary art and architecture. Southern beaches seem sublime to me, as do the little towns with towering trees and front porches. The South is looped in my DNA so the metabolic connection feels right and profound.

7.) Q: You've written that although your house in Tuscany is not a dream house by magazine standards, it is "like a house in a dream." What does that mean to you?

FM: Your secret dream house will correspond to your inner fantasy of what life might be. When I found Bramasole, I'd looked in several parts of Tuscany over a period of two years, bumping over rough roads to find collapsed houses overlooking raw quarries, or almost windowless houses guarded by nests of snakes and a thousand blackberry brambles. Two attracted me strongly—a roofless house with a tower built by the Knights Templar, and a sweet farmhouse in a ring of chestnut trees. Both were owned by contessas who balked the moment they realized someone might really want to buy the old family plots. One, through her tears, doubled the price on the spot. Then I encountered Bramasole. Be prepared for your dream house to look totally unlike anything you imagined you wanted. Recognizing the house is a mysterious and immediate moment, like falling in love at first sight. I stepped out of the car here, looked up, and said, "This is it."

8.) Q: What is it like to live in two cultures, the American South and Tuscany?

FM: The yellow shoes, the particular spatula, the reference book—when you want them—will be at the other house. The journey to and fro is a drastic commute. I have missed my friends' daughters' weddings, an aunt's illness, and I constantly miss my daughter and grandson. Mail goes astray in both places. Otherwise, touch iron, touch wood, living in each place, especially when one of them is foreign and new, throws the other into high relief. The political foibles, the table, style, everyday life—the contrasts make me take nothing for granted. This is a great boon when sometimes we come to a point of knowing, perhaps too well, how to do what we do, how to live as we live. I love the contrast of living here and living in the South. And, oddly, there are so many similarities—hospitality, manners, tolerance of eccentrics, even the sense of time being long and forgiving.

9.) Q: I've heard that foreigners are never *really* accepted when they settle in European countries. Is that correct?

FM: Well, I can speak only of Italy and NO, that's absurd. It was a shock to find that we made friends before we spoke much Italian. My mother always said that attraction is based on smell; perhaps she was right. Maria Rita at the *frutta e verdura* was giving me a hug before I could talk to her. A neighbor asked us to dinner right away. We dreaded going—long awkward silences with only the sound of chewing in the air. "Ask us later, please, because we don't speak well," we got out in Italian. He looked incredulous, his eyebrows shot up and he said, "You eat, don't you?" And that is the way it has gone for us. Other ex-pats around us have plenty of Italian friends, too. The key is to learn the language. If you don't, your new friends will become bored while you cast around for the correct indirect object pronoun.

10.) Q: What are your favorite recipes in this book?

FM: All! One of the most interesting is the duck breasts from Il Postale's chef. It may not seem Italian but actually the spice mixture is typical of Renaissance cuisine. Be

careful not to overcook the spice mixture, as I did the first time I tried it. Nothing burns hotter than sugar and mine turned solid as it cooled. Note that “slightly caramelize” in the recipe and make sure it’s a sauce not instant quartz crystals! Another favorite is Ed’s kale and sausage soup, a rainy day masterpiece.

11.) Q: What’s your next project?

FM: I’m in that delicious period of contemplation. Another novel? A cookbook? A Southern memoir? In the kitchen, it’s fun to have all the burners going at once and maybe that’s a good model for writing.