

Reading Group and Teachers' Notes

by Llewellyn Johns on

Peter Robb's

Midnight in Sicily

Winner of the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards 1997

Nettie Palmer Prize for Non-Fiction

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INTRODUCTION

Midnight in Sicily is Peter Robb's first book. Towards the end, Clara, a new friend, confronts the narrator about the story he's going to tell. She hopes that his book won't be like an American woman's travel tale several years before. That had a whole chapter called 'Clara's Restaurant' and brought American tourists wanting to touch her. Robb retorts, 'Of course not ... I'm trying to make sense of the Andreotti trial. All quite rebarbative' (p.310). The story of the mafia and ex-prime minister Andreotti, he of the 'moneybox mouth' and 'diaphanous hands', is quite as repellent as Robb suggests. It's hard to read *Midnight in Sicily* without feeling horror.

But *Midnight in Sicily* is unlike any other account of crime I've ever read. One of many new and innovative works of nonfiction, it blurs longstanding literary, scholarly and popular genres: 'a brilliant combination of Italian art, crime, food, history and travel presented with tremendous narrative verve and a wealth of fascinating detail', the cover enthuses.

Pastiches of this sort tend to superficiality. But *Midnight in Sicily* makes a serious point. It raises the idea of multiple perspectives on reality. Truth becomes a construct and never unitary. The question the narrative poses is not 'what is the truth?' but rather 'whose "truth" is uppermost, and why?'

This approach does not make Robb's book easy to read, especially for those who are unfamiliar with Italy's histories and languages. (See the Appendix below for some key dates, events and people in Sicily's and Italy's complex stories. Using it, with Robb's own alphabetical list, 'Some Players' (pp.391-2), may anchor your reading, and encourage you to allow the book to establish its own rewarding pattern of meanings.)

VERSIONS OF HISTORY

We know that the official version of any important event is a public relations exercise and, therefore, liable to distortions. But we discover rarely (or not until long afterwards) precisely where the distortions lie and how distant they make the reality.

The official history of Italy since the Second World War proclaimed the country to be a functioning democracy: in no way was the Italian state compromised; in no way was the Sicilian Cosa Nostra 'a state within the state'.

That a coherent, overall picture of Cosa Nostra had never been articulated was no accident. Interested parties in the media, the judiciary, the church and in parliament had always been ready to muddy the waters, to dismiss the mafia as a literary chimera or communist propaganda or an insult against Sicily. Police practice and judicial practice, the very articles of the law, reflected a belief that the Cosa Nostra didn't exist. (p.73)

The years Peter Robb lived in southern Italy - 1978-1992 - were full of momentous and inexplicable events. A pope died a month after his election, the Vatican bank suffered a huge financial collapse, an internal flight was shot down by an unidentified missile over the Mediterranean, a planned coup d'état plotted by a secret masonic lodge was discovered, Aldo Moro was kidnapped and killed by the Red Brigades, magistrates and police officers investigating corruption were routinely murdered. Of these and other events Robb writes:

... their unfolding enthralled, since nothing was ever explained or resolved. They seemed glimpses of the workings of something larger, something big and hideous that was working itself out in the dark. (p.36)

Returning to Italy in 1995, Peter Robb received a copy of *The True History of Italy*, a huge compilation based on testimony gathered against Andreotti by Gian Carlo Caselli and other prosecuting magistrates. *The True History*, which Robb quotes often, clears up what was obscure, turns into fact what was formerly rumour - 'Governo DC, la Mafia sta li' - 'Christian Democrat Government, the mafia is [in] there'; and CIA and Vatican involvement with organised crime. The author learned that his time in Italy coincided with the years when relations between Andreotti and the Cosa Nostra were firmly established and the nature of the organisation changed dramatically.

MIDNIGHT IN SICILY

If *The True History* represents as close to an objective and collective account of events as possible, *Midnight in Sicily* gives us subjective particularity. By inserting himself in the story, Robb assumes responsibility for his own act of narration, and for the necessary partiality of his point of view. Part of the story being told, he's involved in a way that no third person narrator can be.

STRUCTURE

Pasta con le sarde is a kind of mosaic in which each little piece finds its reason for being there in the final result. (p.120)

Ada Boni's comment on the famous Sicilian dish of sardines and pasta, noted for its strange mixture of ingredients, admirably suits *Midnight in Sicily's* own odd blend. However, it's the popular metaphor of the jigsaw puzzle that sticks in my mind. Thousands of tiny bits, all fitting in. But where? And how?

In the opening chapter, the author spreads the big pieces out in front of us: his own memories; the new friends he makes; cultural elements as disparate as panelle, a local food, the Villa Niscemi, heroin and the Vucciria market; Sicilian personages like painter Renato Guttuso and novelists Lampedusa and Sciascia; English food writer Elizabeth David; Giulio Andreotti, Salvo Lima, mafia boss Totò Riina and the prosecuting magistrates, Falcone and Borsellino. Some pieces are gaudy, some as transparent as light; but most are underwater shapes, hard to place in the frame.

As chapter follows chapter, we come to understand that Robb's story of Sicily has no beginning and no clear progression to an end. Instead, it's all middle. People reappear, events recur in different contexts. By now familiar pieces of the puzzle, they're arranged and rearranged into different formations. And round and round each chapter we readers go, getting nowhere definite, unable to sense a centre.

I think this circling narrative structure is a great part of the book's brilliance. Its repetition produces a giddy sensation, conveying exactly the right sense of surfeit, a rush of blood too much for logic to comprehend.

Yet *Midnight in Sicily* is densely factual, often a welter of dry dates, names, places and events concerning organised crime and government corruption. Robb uses what I call 'close-up' techniques to make this material more immediate and intimate.

First, he's there, in places where significant events happened, tugging the past teasingly into the present. He listens to the mayor of Palermo in the Villa Niscemi, a landmark from *The Leopard*: 'The mafia isn't just a criminal organization ... The Americans brought it. It all goes back to 1943...' (p.49). And, at this point, so does Robb's narrative.

He dines in the Charleston restaurant where Sindona the Vatican financier used to dine: 'Was this the very table where Sindona and Gambino [a mafia man] had sat? I sipped a second marsala and looked gloomily around' (p.135). He lunches with Marta Marzotto, Guttuso's mistress, and speculates on the master's last days.

He takes a bus to the stronghold of Riina's family, Corleone, and even the journey holds a sense of menace. When the driver pulls over to wait for another bus, in order to hand over a carabinieri's suitcase he'd forgotten to deliver in the city, the local passengers get edgy:

The carabinieri's suitcase, you felt, wasn't for these passengers a neutral cargo, but a vaguely charged and dangerous object. A meeting at a country crossroad was a very mafia situation. Nasty things happened at country crossroads. (p.98)

Second, he organises necessary facts around such emblematic objects. In the chapter *A Case of Knives*, the wooden box carved with a 'fierce American eagle' brings into relation Sicily's des-

perately poor rural past, America's 1943 invasion and post-war role, the meal the author shares with his friends, Pasquale's discourse on the table fork, and, inevitably, mafia murder: Kalashnikovs and car bombs came out of the world evoked by those rusty knives in their hand-carved case. Cutting a man's throat, in that world and this, was little more than cutting a sheep's. (p.96)

Emblematic objects - an artefact, a place, a cultural habit - are already invested with importance. Robb, by giving them structural weight in his story, by making them load-bearing, brings what they carry into magnifying focus and urges: look! look! By this sophisticated narrative means, Robb shows how all matters Sicilian interlink, and are bound to the Cosa Nostra.

For all their far-reaching implications, these things, however, remain palpably material. They anchor *Midnight in Sicily* to a sensate world - to the sights, sounds and touch of the market, the tuna kill, the kiss. And wafting over everything, odore di mafia, Sicily's mafia smell.

THE MAFIA, LANGUAGE AND SILENCE

Having read Robb's book, it now seems to me only natural that Italy was the first western country to establish a university chair in semiotics, the science of signs.[1] A reality so mystifying, so opaque, requires constant decoding.

Words are the most obvious signs and *Midnight in Sicily* draws attention to mafia euphemisms. As the author discovered, 'people didn't talk about the mafia in Sicily but they talked a lot about friends' (p.24). 'Friends', 'men of honour', these are code words mafia members use. Deliberately vague, they assume insider knowledge. When one mafia man is introduced to another by a third, the expression is 'è la stessa cosa' - 'he's the same thing as we are'. When a member is fully initiated by a rite of blood, he's a 'made man'. And 'Cosa Nostra' itself means 'our thing', that is, something that's so familial, so deeply experienced no descriptive word is needed.

Novelists Lampedusa and Sciascia appear in *Midnight in Sicily* not so much because of their literary status but because they understood Sicilian power. In *The Leopard* the figure of don Calogero Sedàra, the rich peasant cum senator, epitomises mafia history. In this classic novel Robb finds:

... a sly unspoken analogy running through the story of don Calogero and his political rise through the liberation of Sicily in 1860. It's with the later American liberation of 1943 and those local elements who were rising through Christian Democracy when Lampedusa wrote. (p.145) Leonardo Sciascia's early novels *The Context* (1971) and *One Way or Another* (1974) seem actual premonitions of eventful years to come. Murder - of magistrates, of politicians - and political scandal are his themes, and his stories conclude without revealing any solution to the crimes he describes:

Sciascia started from a problem that looked susceptible of rational solution and moved carefully and logically to a conclusion of total unknowing and enveloping dread. (p.341)

According to Robb, Sciascia is the master of the unsaid, 'the missing fact, the eliminated detail, the unstated relation' (p.344). Robb interestingly compares the Italian reality, about which this politically committed novelist wrote, with Eastern European countries of 'really existing socialism, to which the cold war Italy of limited sovereignty, had more in common culturally than the Italians or their friends like to admit' (p.344-5).

Not only contemporary writers and journalists studied mafia signs. Giovanni Falcone, a leading Sicilian magistrate wrote:

The interpretation of signs ... is one of the principal activities of a 'man of honour' and consequently of the mafia-prosecutor.[2]

A look, a gesture, is always pregnant in Cosa Nostra's world. Consider the kiss that keeps Peter Robb pondering. The boss of bosses, Totò Riina kissed the politician Giulio Andreotti. In a context where shaking hands was a formal alternative, this kiss was interpreted by mafioso Di Maggio as a sign of respect for 'Uncle Giulio':

[1]. This is at the University of Bologna, and was (and I think still is) occupied by Umberto Eco, theoretician and novelist of such signifying tales as *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*.

[2]. Quoted in Alexander Stille, *Excellent Cadavers: The Mafia and the Death of the First Italian Republic*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1995, pp.6-7.

It was exchanged if at all, in 1987. Eight years later it was occupying the finest and most highly paid minds in Italy. A moment of physical intimacy was witnessed, recalled, denied, hypothesized, contextualized, theorized, reconstructed and deconstructed. It had led the legal minds to call on others, anthropologists, psychologists, historians, students of the ways of power and affection. The aim was always the same, to establish, in principle, after the manner of Italian intellectuals, that it could or could not ever have taken place. And thus it did or did not take place in 1987. A lot of history hung on this kiss. (p.68)

[In 1999 an Italian court found the charge linking Andreotti with the Mafia unproven.]

Murder too must be decoded. Bontate and Inzerillo, two mafia men killed within weeks of each other in 1981, marked a milestone in the Cosa Nostra's transformation from a pluralistic organisation of numerous, equally powerful families into a dictatorship under Riina and the Corleonesi. Robb describes the three phases of the 'Riina terror' (pp.112-6).

When Salvo Lima, mafia man, DC politician (la Democrazia cristiana, or DC, is the Christian Democrat party formed by conservative politicians at the end of the Second World War) and member of the European Parliament was killed in 1992, two other DC heavyweights were left untouched:

The friends no longer had any respect for him, it was later explained by Gioacchino Pennino, a Palermo doctor, man of honour and DC politician who became the first political pentito.[3] (p.28)

THE PRESENCE OF THE PERSONAL

Robb writes from the outside in. Working on a broad and immensely complex political and cultural canvas, the author also seeks a personal form for the past. The chapter A Bad Habit ties his time in Naples to Sicilian and national happenings. 'In a way it seemed enchanted, in those days before the drugs and the killings,' he writes (p.191).

Although *Midnight in Sicily* barely dips its toe into intimate, emotional waters, the very fact of writing from the 'I' introduces personal interests, opinions and yearnings. Through many casual asides, the author creates a narratorial self. The tourist venues he selects to write about, the art he searches out, for example, the Boy of Mozio (pp.368-72), all add to our sense of a written self. Then there's a confessional passage:

Naples broke my heart. And yet, as the city always had, it teased, it led you on to dream of more than it would ever deliver, made you remember why you'd thrown away your life to be there and still, for an instant, if you loved it, think it the most marvellous city in the world. In Naples you remembered being happy and never why ... Naples was the only place I'd ever felt at home. (p.213)

[3]. 'Pentito' means penitent or repentant one. It's applied to all those mafiosi who seek reductions in their own sentences in exchange for giving information about the organisation. It doesn't necessarily mean they feel sorry for what they have done, just that for various reasons they've realised the game's up.

FOOD

In *Midnight in Sicily*, food is the most emotionally laden, the most emblematic object of all. It seems to me that it's in these sections that the author reveals most about himself. When Robb claims, in regard to the Vucciria market, that 'you could tell that what really interested Sciascia in all this wasn't the abundance, but its absence, not the food but the hunger' (p.335) he might have been speaking of himself. What's the author of *Midnight in Sicily* hungering for? The intensity of living he experienced in Naples? An unnamed desire? The book creates its own small mystery.

From the first pages, the narrator searches for authentic food – pannelle, the chick pea fritters found only near the Vucciria, pasta con le sarde, swordfish, caponata. He contrasts these Sicilian dishes with the bland, international 'pastel-coloured' fare served up to him and Mayor Orlando at the Villa Niscemi (p.67). He recollects, from the pages of *The Leopard*, a sumptuous but sturdy dinner, whose high point – a local dish, timballo di maccheroni, with its scent of cinnamon and sugar, meat juices, and savoury ingredients – has the guests sighing with relief and pleasure (p.141).

He follows his nose (or rather the Tunisian, Nabil, a discerning shopper he'd observed in the fish market) and discovers the Sant'Andrea where he becomes friends with its proprietors, Pippo and Anna Maria:

Their idea of making a go of their own restaurant in Palermo wasn't just business or even merely gastronomy. The Sant'Andrea was a cultural undertaking ... The cuisine was intrinsic to the politics of the place. (p.276)

Although it's clear that Robb's Sant'Andrea acquaintances are left-wing (Pippo's son, Dario, sporting a Palestinian head-dress, is the earliest clue), the overt politics of the Sant'Andrea are more likely to be cultural.

After ancient buildings are razed or allowed to decay, after the languages of regions slip into disuse, food remains as a vital sign of local life, of collective identity. The Sant'Andrea presents food as earthy goodness, attached to the seasons and to place, and eating as conviviality and trust (where no one is throttled or shot at the end of the feast) – it presents food and eating, in a word, as a sort of truth, the truth of a Sicily still submerged.

The meal the narrator shares with Angelo and Clara and their family at Trapani bears this sense of other nourishment, a dream of simplicity and authenticity briefly realised:

There were enormous country chickens in the oven dishes. These had been done alla cacciatora with potatoes added, and were the main source of the garlic herb and wine aroma which still had my head reeling ... I was abashed by the setting, overcome by this mythic family board ...

I was far too flustered to remember anyone's name except Lola's. Every so often the room darkened and a huge face filled the front window and it was Lola on her hind legs looking in. Or she would knock on the door with her paw. Once the door burst open and Lola and her sidekick rushed in. A peach tree brushed its laden branch against a side window. Backlit by the afternoon sun, the kids' hair looked like golden aureoles. Smoke rose lazily from Clara's cigarette. Some of the visitors left. Then we snapped out of somnolence for ice cream. Jasmine ice cream. Trapani, Clara told me with her ironical smile, is the only place in the world where they

make jasmine ice cream. (pp.279)

At this point Robb digresses into the history of ice cream and the origins of cassata, an ice and a cake, famous Sicilian desserts. 'The nearest I'd come to an argument with Pippo had been about cassata and not politics,' he admits (p.282). A passionate seriousness surrounds food in this culture. A rape case, we're told, is dismissed because of the out-of-season presence of cannoli, a sweet pastry.

These digressions on food and coffee are *Midnight in Sicily's* bon-bons, sweeteners after the taste of so much foulness. They're more appealing diversions, I think, than the author's appreciations of visual art where differing aesthetic opinion may make a reader querulous. (So the grand film maker Visconti has 'the mind of a window dresser', has he?)

However Robb resists the seductions of gastronomic dreams. He doesn't spare food its complicity in Sicily's horror. For authentic fare always bears witness to history, and, in this island's case, to misery:

What you found in the Vucciria and all the markets of the south were the dense, scarred, irregular and deeply coloured fruit of back-breaking labour. (p.19)

The mafia controls the European Parliament's payments for the wasted citrus crop and rural water supplies. And then there's the history of the mattanza or annual tuna kill. In the 1980s the term 'mattanza' was applied to the mafia's blood bath, but the ancient hunt Robb describes is just as gruesome: the great silver fish bloodying the water, trapped in the many-chambered nets, the fishermen 'closed to every emotion by poverty and apathy' (p.273), trapped by a ruthless feudalism; and the historical end of this gross exploitation offering no hope for either.

CONCLUSION

Like some of Guttuso's more imitative paintings, *Midnight in Sicily* composes a fractured cubist picture. Its whole is not whole. Yet we never get the 'whole' history. How can we? Where does history, culture, society begin or end? In this story some mafia men are tried and condemned to prison, whole institutional parties dissolve and others emerge, but when would it be possible to say corruption is over, to proclaim a revitalised Sicily? As the book's last paragraphs affirm, life goes on, densely, in its usual ways.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Robb quotes the painter Guttuso on Sicily: 'you can find dramas, pastorals, idylls, politics, gastronomy, geography, history in the end you can find anything and everything, but you can't find truth' (p.275). Is this true of *Midnight in Sicily* itself? What stance does Peter Robb take towards the mafia story?
2. Is *Midnight in Sicily* simply sophisticated reportage? Or something more? What did you discover from it about Sicily and the mafia?
3. Do you agree that the mafia is a 'multinational business' rather than a Sicilian phenomenon? Why? Why not?
4. 'Like most of the rest of this story, the kiss was a men's affair.' (p.57) Is *Midnight in Sicily* a men's book? Where do women like Letizia Battaglia and Marta Marzotto fit?
5. Leonardo Sciascia, the novelist, regarded Sicily as a metaphor for the modern world. Given Sicily's uniqueness, what do you think Sciascia meant by this statement?
6. 'Australia is wide open.' So stated magistrate Roberto Scarpinato after a visit to Sydney in the 1980s to investigate Cosa Nostra's finances. Do we have systemic corruption in Australia? What evidence has come to light? What rumours?
7. For the Italian citizenry, taking an active stand on organised crime and systemic governmental corruption is the great contemporary issue. What civic stand do we Australians need to make? What are we doing about it?
8. How 'sovereign' is our government? What powers, in this age of globalism, really govern Australia?
9. 'In Palermo the Sant'Andrea was packed every night.' Why do you think Peter Robb closed with this sentence?

APPENDIX

by Joanne Lee Dow

Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea. Its location is central to its history. As our Primary School chant said: 'Big toe Italy / Kicked little Sicily / Right into the middle / Of the Mediterranean Sea'. The Encyclopaedia Britannica notes: 'Sicily's strategic location at the centre of the Mediterranean has made the island a turbulent crossroads of history, a pawn of conquest and empire, and a melting pot for a dozen or more ethnic groups whose warriors or merchants sought its shores virtually since the dawn of recorded history'. *Midnight in Sicily* evocatively uncovers this rich history. This Appendix provides a simple and selective date grid for those of you who find a sequential chart a useful reference.

10,000 BC	Sicily already inhabited, probably by people of Mediterranean origin.
700s	Greeks colonise the west, and Carthage the east, of Sicily.
200s	Roman colonisation. As Rome's first province, Sicily is deforested and its wheat makes it the Republic's granary.
400s AD	Vandals and Ostrogoths colonise Sicily.
500	Byzantine Empire controls Sicily.
800s & 900s	Arab rule and Islamic influence: economic prosperity and intellectual flowering.
1000s-1100s	Norman conquest. A synthesis of Norman and Arab, Christian and Islamic cultures makes Sicily and Naples (the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies) a centre of European civilisation.
1200 ..	France rules Sicily. In 1282 there is a violent revolt – the 'Sicilian Vespers'.
1400 ..	Spanish Habsburgs rule Sicily, which is important in Spain's Mediterranean power base.
1700s	Brief periods during the War of the Spanish Succession when Sicily is assigned to Savoy and Austria. From 1734, the Spanish Bourbons are on the throne of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. The French Revolution in 1789 is followed by France's invasion of Italy.
Early 1800s	Napoleonic wars. Sicily and Naples get caught up in the struggles. The <i>Volcano Lover</i> by Susan Sontag portrays key characters and events of this turbulent period.
1816 ..	The Congress of Vienna restored the Spanish Bourbon rule in Sicily, within Austria's hegemony. The following decades are marked by large emigrations to escape poverty and unemployment, and are the period of the Risorgimento, the movement for the independence of a politically unified Italy. By mid-century, the monarchist nationalists are centred around Cavour in Sardinia, the Republican nationalists around Mazzini and Garibaldi.
1848	In this 'year of revolutions' in Europe, revolts throughout Italy are suppressed by Austrian power.
1860	Garibaldi invades the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and Sicily revolts against

- Bourbon rule.
- 1861 Victor Emmanuel II, King of Sardinia-Piedmont, after a nationwide vote, proclaims the Kingdom of Italy, and is its first King. The Leopard by Giuseppe di Lampedusa offers a wry and revealing account of the social and political tensions in Sicily as the Italian nation-state is born.
- 1882 Italy joins a secret Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Germany. Italy joins the imperialist European quest for colonies, looking especially to the Turkish Ottoman Empire and North Africa.
- 1914 World War I begins. Despite the Triple Alliance, Italy joins the Allies (Britain, France and - until the 1917 Revolution - Russia).
- 1919 Universal manhood suffrage in Italy. Two main parties emerge: on the right, the Popular Party, supported by the Catholic Church; on the left, the Socialist Party.
- 1920s Fascists, led by Mussolini, march on Rome and the King declares Mussolini Premier. By 1925 Mussolini, Il Duce (the leader), is a dictator. In 1929 the Catholic Church signs the Lateran Treaty with Mussolini's government, said to establish 'normal relations' with the Italian state.
- 1930s Mussolini conquers Ethiopia, assists Franco in the Spanish Civil War and forms the Rome-Berlin axis with Hitler. In
- 1939 Italian troops seize Albania.
- 1940 Fascist Italy joins Nazi Germany in the Second World War.
- 1943 Allied troops land in Sicily in July, and by August occupy the whole island, which becomes the springboard for the Allied invasion of Italy. As this proceeds from the south, Italy declares war on Germany, Mussolini is imprisoned, rescued by German paratroopers, flees north and is reinstated there by the Germans. As the Allies move north, civil war breaks out between the pro-German Fascists and the Resistance, many of whom are members of the Communist Party. Allied troops remain in Italy until 1947.
- 1946 Italy votes to become a Republic, partly because the monarchy has been so pro-Fascist. The Republican Government is a Parliamentary Democracy, with a President elected for a seven-year term by Parliament. A Premier, approved by Parliament, heads the Government, and chooses the Cabinet. There are three political parties, the Christian Democrats, the Socialists and the Communists. The Christian Democrats, supported by America and the Vatican during this Cold War period, govern from 1948 on. Between 1962 and 1976, they need the support of the Socialists to keep the large Communist Party out of power. Robb's book explores the role of the mafia in maintaining the Christian Democrats (DC) in power.

FURTHER READING

The Leopard by Giuseppe di Lampedusa. London: Fontana Collins, 1964.

If you haven't read this truly great and beautiful novel, now's the time to do so. If you have, then perhaps it's time for a re-reading in the light of *Midnight in Sicily's* insights. You might also try to see Visconti's film, visually entrancing, despite Robb's condemnation, and with its wonderful performance by Burt Lancaster in the title role.

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil by John Berendt. London: Vintage, 1995.

Perhaps it's just the presence of 'midnight' in both titles that brought Berendt's recent bestseller to mind, but I don't think so. Both works have a trial at their centre, create a sense of a city, baroque in lifestyle, and corrupt to the core.

Italy: The Unfinished Revolution by Matt Frei. London: Mandarin, 1996.

Frei is a Rome-based BBC journalist and the style of his first book reflects a media background. It's pacy, full of quirky facts and sometimes very funny. It puts Cosa Nostra crimes into the national context of tangentopoli, a bribery scandal that dissolved all the major political parties and helped bring about the Berlusconi phenomenon. 'Required reading for every intelligent visitor to Italy', says the blurb. I wholeheartedly agree.

THE NOTEWRITER

Llewellyn Johns studied English and Philosophy at the University of Melbourne. She taught for many years in technical schools and then at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. From 1986 to 1988 she worked as Curriculum Development Officer at the Council of Adult Education. Reading literature counts as one of her greatest pleasures.

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