



# The Madonna of the Mountains

*Elise Valmorbida*

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**The Madonna of the Mountains** Elise Valmorbida

**An epic and inspiring novel about one woman's survival in the hardscrabble Italian countryside, oppressed by both a patriarchal society and by Mussolini's iron-fist rule, but determined to protect her family throughout the war--by any means possible.**

A sweeping saga about womanhood, loyalty, war, religion, family, motherhood, and marriage, *The Madonna of the Mountains* is set in Italy during the 1920s to the 1950s, and follows its heroine, Maria Vittoria, from her girlhood in the austere Italian mountains through her marriage to a young war veteran to the birth of her four children, through the National Fascist Party Rule and ending with a decision that will forever affect her family. Maria must ensure that her family survives the harsh winters of the war, when food is scarce and allegiances are questioned. She can trust no one and fears everyone--her Fascist cousin, the madwoman from her childhood, her watchful neighbors, the Nazis and the Partisans who show up at her door. Over the decades, as Maria's children grow up and away from her, and as her marriage endures its own hardships, the novel takes us into the mind and heart of one woman who must hold her family together with resilience, love, and faith, in a world where the rules are constantly changing.

## The Madonna of the Mountains Details

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Author : Elise Valmorbida

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# From Reader Review The Madonna of the Mountains for online ebook

## Linda says

The past has a suffocating weight of its own. And the future.....air unyet to be breathed.

Maria Vittoria's father takes to the mountain paths in 1923 with only his faithful donkey and a well-worn picture of Maria. He has set out to find her a husband along with a dowry long in the making. Maria continues to sit in the small house in Monastero embroidering nuptial bedding with a needle sharp and piercing. Love doesn't seem to fit in the laws of bartering.

A determined nature finds Maria and Achille Montanari betrothed. They begin married life in a tiny room in his parents' home. Privacy seems to be nudged rudely even by the bleating of farm animals in the next room. But by 1928 the young couple have two children and a small shop in the village of Fassò. What isn't in their plans is the rise of the Fascist Party and the pressing demands of allegiance that find Achille torn between protecting his family and staying alive.

Elise Valmorbida presents a story that evokes the very strength of International Women's Day. Maria Vittoria's voice is one that begins in a soft whisper and escalates to the roar of an Italian waterfall. Maria steps forward into precarious times ill-prepared at first, but gradually taking on a stance from the very marrow of her bones. As war rears its ugly head in the 30's and 40's, we view the impact of Mussolini, Il Duce, and the intense sufferings it brings: Neighbor against neighbor, families with vying allegiances, food rationing, and body-shaking stress of the bombings.

This is why The Madonna of the Mountains spoke so vividly to me. Life never prepares you for what awaits in the coming darkness. And this is the heart-wrenching character of Maria in her early years of naivete. "Not knowing is a kind of happiness".....all before reality opens the door, steps in, and destroys.

The Madonna of the Mountains leaves you with that knowledge as you sit with it for awhile. "Men will do what men do." One has no other alternative but to rise with every devastating event in life. It's what we do. It's who we are. Elise Valmorbida writes with that same passion page after page. That's why, dear readers, this is one of my favorites of 2018. "All her tears have been building up in her belly like water in the deepest well."

I received a copy of this book through NetGalley for an honest review. My thanks to Random House and to the talented Elise Valmorbida for the opportunity.

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## Liz says

I was all prepared to love this book. I had loved Under the Scarlet Sky and was interested in learning more

about Italy during Mussolini's reign. But I just could never get into it. It follows Maria through her marriage at age 25 in 1923 through the early 1950s in the Italian countryside. It was a different time. Women were meant to be subservient. "Men will do what men do... Don't ask him any more of your pointless questions, Maria. Not knowing is a kind of happiness."

Even when something meaningful happens, it's told in such an understated way I had trouble relating. And the characters never became real to me. The writing never spoke to me and it just felt very dry and ponderous, especially when the Madonna would speak to Maria. In addition, I wanted to know more about what was happening during the different time periods, especially as it pertained to WWII and this book didn't give you the bigger picture.

I am definitely in the minority in my opinion of this book, so don't let my opinion sway you if you're considering it.

My thanks to netgalley and Spiegal and Grau for an advance copy of this novel.

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### **Karen says**

I really enjoyed this book.

It's the story of Maria Vittoria, from the mountains in Italy. When the story begins she is 25 and living at home with her parents and siblings and is considered as approaching spinster age.

It begins with her father going off to another town to find a husband for her and follows her life through her own marriage and family. This all takes place beginning in 1925 - 1950, and the majority of it through WWII.

Throughout the book she is devout and prays to her statue of the Madonna of the mountains, and the Madonna speaks to her, knows her mind.

This book is about womanhood, motherhood, and of course survival, since these were war years.

Thank you to NetGalley, and Random House for the ARC!

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### **Rachel says**

What an excellent historical fiction hidden gem. Set in early 20th century Italy, *The Madonna of the Mountains* follows a country girl, Maria Vittoria, through her marriage and birth of four children, chronicling the family's struggles against the backdrop of Fascist Italy during WWII.

This is one of the more convincingly historical novels I've read recently. Valmorbida's characters are all distinctly of the time period; their trials and tribulations and character arcs are all expertly intertwined with the setting. After incidentally reading two other pieces of historical fiction set in Italy in the month of July, both of which were tonally anachronistic to the extreme (though in one case I believe it was intentional on the author's part, but I digress), *The Madonna of the Mountains* was a breath of fresh air. This is a thoroughly convincing account of a country girl hoping against hope that she isn't too old to marry at the age of twenty-five; a young wife struggling to keep her family fed when food rations are scarce; a mother trying to stave

off the dishonor that one of her children has brought to her family. Valmorbida also infuses the narration with northern Italian dialect, and I always love foreign language integration into a novel, but being able to recognize where the dialect deviated from standard Italian was definitely part of the fun for me, and helped anchor me to these characters' culture.

I will emphasize that unlike a lot of my favorite historical fiction, this is above all else a very quiet story. It concerns itself with the day to day of Maria's life, the very very subtle ways in which her attitudes start to shift over time. This is not a WWII novel, and the conflicts are recounted from Maria's very limited perspective (which isn't to say that it isn't well-researched; Valmorbida simply hides her research in the background rather than bringing it front and center). So while I did really, really enjoy this, it did lack a certain emotional punch that I've come to expect from historical family sagas which are steeped in unapologetic melodrama. But if you're looking for something a little more subdued, I wouldn't hesitate to recommend this.

*Thank you to Netgalley, Spiegel & Grau, and Elise Valmorbida for the advanced copy provided in exchange for an honest review.*

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## **Bkwmlee says**

This is the third book I've read so far this year that takes place in Italy – this time around, the setting is in the mountains and later in the countryside, during a tumultuous time period starting not long after the end of the Great War and spanning through the Second World War. It is the story of Maria Vittoria, an ordinary woman who grows up in a respectable, devoutly religious family in the Italian mountains and follows her life through marriage, the birth of her children, and later her struggle for her own survival as well as that of her family during the war. Maria is a fascinating character, but one that I had mixed feelings toward throughout the story. I admired and respected Maria's strength of character and conviction, her fortitude and steadfast devotion to her family, protecting them at all costs and through all means possible, and also her ability to take charge during times of crisis -- yet at times, I could not help feeling frustrated at her stubbornness and strict adherence to oppressive rules and traditions during certain critical moments. I had to constantly remind myself that this was a different time and place – a time of war in a heavily patriarchal society where women had strictly defined roles and the ultimate goal was survival as well as preservation of family and kin. Given the circumstances and the time period in which she lived, Maria fulfilled the expectations placed upon her and then some – first as daughter and sister, later as wife and mother. Of course she was by no means perfect -- she had to make so many tough decisions and though my modern sensibilities made it difficult for me to agree with some of the actions she took, I admired her strength and resolve as well as her unrelenting devotion in making the best of what she had for her family.

At 300+ pages, I wouldn't consider this a particularly long book, yet it covered so much ground in terms of subject matter. The story itself I felt was at times quiet and subtle, as we got to dive deep into Maria's innermost thoughts, especially those projected through the words of the Madonna (the statue she kept devotedly by her side throughout her life). At the same time though, the tumultuous time period against which this story was set – the backdrop of war, political struggle, societal concerns, kinship and family relationships, etc. – also made the story feel epic, a sweeping family saga as the book's summary states. The writing was beautiful and incredibly atmospheric in its description of the mountains and the Italian countryside as well as the various scenes of the family's everyday life (for instance, the section about Amelia's silkworms and the entire silk-making process).

In general, I like to read across different genres and have made a personal goal for myself to read widely and diversely (which I am happy to report has been going extremely well) – with that said though, historical fiction has a special place in my heart and this book is definitely a worthwhile read in that category. I don't know much about the author Elise Valmorbida nor have I read any of her previous works, but after reading this book, I am inclined to change that soon. I definitely recommend picking this one up and letting yourself be transported by this well-written family saga!

*Received ARC from Spiegel & Grau / Random House via NetGalley.*

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## **Jen says**

A story which spans 3 centuries in the countryside of Italy.

Maria, almost on the verge of becoming a spinster, is finally married off at the brittle age of 25. She's a woman who is suppressed in a patriarchal society but stands strong in the challenges she faces. Throughout world war 2 she is a pillar to her family. Rationing where she can and sacrificing herself to save her husband. Smothered by the darkness of war, she remains stoic with the protection of the Madonna always giving her strength.

Marvellously descriptive - the rolling hillsides of the Italian country; the bravery and courage of a woman who was the core of the family. 4??

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## **Cheri says**

The year is 1923, and Maria Vitorria's father is away, he has gone to find a man for her. A husband. Nearing the dangerously advanced age of 25, it is past time Maria was wed. Soon there will be no prospects left, and she will have to rely on her family. Maria isn't worried, she relies on the wisdom of Madonna of the Mountains, and she knows she will have a husband. She's so sure that she's been working, embroidering a sheet for their bed for the wedding night, and when she isn't doing that, she is repeating prayers from *The Christian Bride*, while trying to visualize this man.

In their small village, so many have been lost in World War I that her father has had to travel to other areas, but Maria knows that her father will only accept a man for her into their family if he is worthy to be considered. Her father has his own reputation to consider, as well, and so he returns with a man, Achille, a returned veteran of the war. After a short period of time, Achille and Maria are married.

As this story unfolds, Italy is beginning to show the effects of divided allegiances, splinter groups, leading to more division among the people. Maria and Achille have settled in the plains of Fossò, with Maria's Madonna of the Mountains statue settling in with them. The Madonna is her lifeline, her support and salvation, that which soothes her soul when days are hard, it is who she reaches for when seeking answers, it is the voice she hears when she is uneasy in her soul over things she has done.

Life is full of decisions and life-changing moments. For Maria, she has her Madonna for guidance, and she feels that is enough.

This is a family saga that establishes its home in the place and time, Italy during the time when the powers of fascism were growing, and the privations of war were slowly forcing people, families, to more drastic measures to survive, and it touches on the effects this has on this one family. As tensions around them rise, it is inevitable that it will affect them, but how?

Some of the things that I loved - the little touches, the imagery of the world around them, the descriptions of the sights and sounds, the significance of the number of times the church bells ring, how they ring in a *melancholy* way, I loved reading the words of the Madonna, as she varied from offering words of comfort to giving cautionary warnings, and often, also, to counsel. I loved how determined Maria was to protect her family, even when she struggled with everything they'd sacrificed to make it through their days.

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## **Bianca says**

*The Madonna of the Mountains* has at its centre Maria Vittoria and her life over a twenty five years period. The story is set in Italy, during the interbellum, World War II and post-war.

First and foremost, it's a story of survival and family.

Life is difficult, many are poor, they have too many children to feed. Women are second-class citizens. Men and religion rule.

Getting married is all a young woman aspires to. It's a business transaction of sorts. Love is an afterthought, a luxury. There's duty, bearing and raising children, and the million and one domestic tasks.

Although Maria married late for that era, she knows she's lucky to have five children still alive. She works hard alongside her husband, Achilles, they prosper and have their own grocery store. The war years were difficult, but they survived it.

There were things I liked about this novel, its realism, the characters were well-drawn , especially, Maria. But the novel's flow and pace ebbed and flowed together with my interest and attention. I understood the importance of the Madonna for Maria, but I skimmed over most of the dreams/prayer sections.

*The Madonna of the Mountains* was a simple and very realistically drawn story, where nothing much happened unless you discount marriage, kids, making a living and surviving the war. While I appreciated many parts, the way they were put together didn't quite work for me, I felt detached for the most part.

*I've received this novel via NetGalley, in exchange for an honest review. Many thanks to Random House Publishing Group for the opportunity to read and review this ARC.*

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## Angela M says

4+ stars .

There were so many things I loved about this family saga. I'm drawn to books that are set in Italy in the past. Maybe because of my grandparents who were all born in Italy. I love the intermittent Italian phrases. Though I studied it so long ago I never used it enough over the years to remember much of it, but still the beautiful language touches me. I loved the phrases that I found here, especially in the first parts of the book. I loved the advice, the adages as they reminded me of things my mother would tell us that my grandfather used to say . She always said , "My father used to say ...." I know I'm digressing, but I was moved by these.

This the story of Maria Vittoria who in 1923 was 25, old to be single in that time and waiting for her father to bring back a husband for her . She seems taken with her new husband and vows to be a good wife and mother. She's happy until it becomes clear that Achille is not the man she thought she had married, but this was a different time and place and she takes what comes. The middle parts of the story are about a time of war, of a time and place when women's roles were subservient. Yet, we meet a woman who is strong, emotionally and physically and has the gumption to do what it takes to protect her family with the impending war and the spread of fascism. So often in war stories we get the view from the battles, the bombings and I found this depiction of the impact of the war on the people away from that to feel realistic. Maria is not perfect, but there was much to admire about her as she takes control. Her family was everything to her. In that respect she reminded me so much of my mother.

I loved the intermittent admonitions, advice and sometimes a look to the future that the author depicts as words of the Madonna. I think these are Maria's thoughts on what the Madonna would say to her. She is devout but bears the burden of guilt and these thoughts are her compass in moving forward. I'm not going to relate what happens to Maria and her family after the war. I recommend that you read this and discover it for yourself. A satisfying, well written family saga. Another great read with Diane and Esil. As always, thanks for your perspectives.

I received an advanced copy of this book from Spiegel & Grau/ Random House through NetGalley.

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## Katie says

"Men make the mess, then women have to clear it up."

I loved this. It's a beautifully written book and though its central theme is conflict it's a quiet intimate sensual wise meditative novel which was a joy to read from start to finish.

It begins in 1923. Maria is embroidering a sheet for her dowry chest. At twenty-five she is in danger of remaining a spinster. Her father though has gone off to procure her a husband.

The uneven balance of power between the sexes is always fabulously observed. The one free woman in the village is a mad outcast called Delfina who lives wild and acts as a kind of opposition oracle to the Virgin Mary. Maria's secret life is carried out exclusively through her dialogues with the statue of the Virgin Mary

she owns, the Madonna of the mountains. The males in this novel are almost all bullies. Almost all little boys at heart who don't grow up. And yet their power is almost absolute. Until war arrives. When war breaks out the dictatorship of the male becomes more violent, though, conversely, war also causes the males to lose much of their autonomy. The mess men have made of life allows a loophole for the new generation of women to assert themselves with more authority. This is brilliantly dramatized here with the relationship of Maria with her eldest daughter, Amelia. It's one of the best generational spats I've encountered in literature. We see the influence of history reap its changes within the walls of one family home which is achieved with brilliant artistry.

Thanks to Angela and Esil for putting this gem on the GR radar with their wonderful reviews.

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## **Diane S ? says**

I seem to be traveling to Italy quite often in my reading lately. This takes place in a village in the mountains of Italy and span the years from the 1920s to the 1950s. It centers on the trials and tribulations of one family, with a strong in muscle father Achilles and a strong in character mother, Maria. By centering on one family's fate, we are exposed to the harsh realities those in Italy faced during the war.

Maria, is a wonderful character, raised to let her husband be the supreme ruler of her household, her life is not simple. He doesn't always treat her kindly, but her love for her children and the strong bonds of family, keep her going. Until an unexpected event, make her the temporary head of her household, a time when their business is failing, not enough food items available to stock the shelves of their grocery. She knows she must do everything possible for the survival of her household, and this leads to an act that will haunt her days and nights. The struggle to find food, trapping small birds with putrid olive oil, lizards, anything they can get to eat to help them survive.

This was also a time when neighbor reported on neighbor, when they are caught between the Nazis, the Fascists and the partisans, all wanting food, wanting loyalty. Such difficult times, but Maria tries her hardest to keep her family healthy and intact. This book raises many moral and ethical questions. What would one do to survive, what is one's self worth? Maria faces these questions, maybe not always the supposed right way, but in the only way she can see a life moving forward. She will pay dearly for some of her decisions.

Strong religious faith, Maria carries, has with her at all times a statue of the Virgin Mary, and often feels as if Mary speaks to her directly. Condemnation and warnings, words to keep her on track. Since this was our buddy read of the month for Angela, Esil and I we decided it was Maria's own conscience that is being portrayed, spoken.

We all enjoyed this one, our ratings close to or the same, it was an interesting look at a family dealing with everyday problems but also dealing with the harsher realities of the war years. I didn't feel the ending was as strong as it could be, but I know that this is a journey the authors own family undertook. On the whole a very interesting and well written read.

ARC from Edelweiss.

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## **Jennifer ~ TarHeelReader says**

### **4 steadfast stars to *The Madonna of the Mountains* ?? ?? ?? ??**

The Madonna of the Mountains is an epic story of one woman's life. Maria Vittoria is born in the mountains of Italy. The story follows her early life in the mountains, her marriage, and the births of her four children. During this time the National Fascist Party and Mussolini rule Italy, and Maria's family struggles to survive the harsh war times.

During those tumultuous times, Maria has no idea whom to trust. She is surrounded by snoopy neighbors, Nazis, and a Fascist cousin, and her only goal is to keep her family safe.

Eventually, Maria's children grow and spread their wings, and she is still fighting to preserve her family.

Maria very much epitomizes the quintessential selfless mother who puts her family first ahead of everything else. She is a complex character and one I admired and respected.

There were many nuances to the author's writing, small things that added up to make a wonderful whole. For instance, the Madonna speaking to the devout Maria, guiding her, and beautiful imagery and depictions of the area where Maria lives.

Thank you to Elise Valmorbida, Spiegel & Grau/Random House, and Netgalley for the complimentary copy. The Madonna of the Mountains will be released on June 12, 2018.

My reviews can also be found on my blog: [www.jennifertarheelreader.com](http://www.jennifertarheelreader.com)

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## **Martie Nees Record says**

Genre: Historical Fiction

Publisher: Random House

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Whenever I give a book a five star review, that means, for me, it is an incredible read. I admit that when a book is on a subject I enjoy or something that I can relate to, I usually add in an extra star. After all, this reviewer is only human. In this book, I strongly identify with the characters' culture. Still, this does not take away from the vivid imagery in the superior writing. You will feel as though you are inside the pages and everything is personally touching you. The novel is filled with the feel of Italy, its food, its way of life and its picturesque wonders. As well as the ugly underbelly of peasant living; the author, Elise Valmorbida, explores the moral questions on the uneven balance of power between the sexes in Italian life.

The novel derives much of its weight from its setting: War in Italy during the 1920s to the 1950s. The main female protagonist is the epitome of an unsentimental woman doing whatever it takes to keep her family alive during hardship in unstable times. She and her husband have lived through and survived WWI. Now they must do it again, with four children, during WWII. As the reader knows, at the beginning of the war, Benito Mussolini chose to ally Italy's forces with those of Adolf Hitler. Soon German and Italian armies were battling Allied troops on several fronts. Italian civilians suffered on many levels. Their homes were

bombed, their food sources cut off. Then, one month after Italy surrendered to Allied forces; it declared war on Nazi Germany. And, the Italian people were further bombed and starved and still suffering. “War is hell.”  
? General William T. Sherman.

“Madonna” focuses on the female character’s role. Women seemed the most burnt out by life because they were the most abused. The enemy, whoever they might be at the moment, was beating and raping the females. Their own husbands were often no better, especially in peasant life where it is the norm for men to beat their wives and children, and have affairs. Think the movie “Zorba The Greek,” not an Italian film but so similar in the scene where the village peasants stone to death a woman who was unfaithful to her husband. If you think this casual acceptance of violence against women can be attributed to the period, think again. According to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, “women experience about 4.8 million intimate partner-related physical assaults and rapes every year.” I actually found myself comparing our Italian mother to Tina Turner and her husband Ike. Ike once told the newspapers in 1985. “Yeah, I hit her, but I didn’t hit her more than the average guy beats his wife.” I have read much fiction and nonfiction on violence against women, this novel explains it so well. The reader will observe how mothers taught their daughters that they must be subservient to men. And if they are not, they will be physically punished. Here is another movie for you, “Divorce Italian Style.” The film is a comedy that still screams of a patriarchal society where it is expected that husbands and fathers hit.

All in all, as a reviewer, I appreciate that the author did not portray the mother in a romantic sense. What she did was show wartime horrors and the abuse the women endured in an epic novel. The author’s characters are so real and so gut-wrenching that I was not surprised to learn about the possibility that this is autobiographical. I applaud Valmorbida for such an honest description of Italy’s wonders and shames.

I received this Advance Review Copy (ARC) novel from the publisher at no cost in exchange for an honest review.

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## **Esil says**

The Madonna of the Mountains takes place in Italy from the late 1920s to the early 1950s. The story focuses on Maria, who as a young woman is excited to start her new life with a husband chosen by her family. As the story develops, life is quite harsh for Maria, partially because of her marriage and in large part because of the political climate and WWII.

I really liked Madonna of the Mountains. I thought that one of the real strengths of this book is that the story is unvarnished. Maria is not portrayed as a romantic figure. Her life is harsh, she has to make difficult choices, and she herself can be quite hard and unbending. But her motivations and emotions seem genuine – survival and love for her children are her prime motivators.

The author also does a good job in her portrayal of the times in Italy – complex web of politics within which normal citizens had to carefully navigate their shifting allegiances to survive. As I often say, I don’t always like historical fiction because I often find that it is too romantic or exploitative, but this one definitely

worked for me.

Thank you to Netgalley and the publisher for an opportunity to read an advance copy. And thank you also to my lovely monthly buddy read friends, Angela and Diane, for the opportunity to read this one together. This seems to be one that had all of us interested and engaged.

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### **\*TUDOR^QUEEN\* says**

Thank you to Random House Publishing Group for providing this advance reader copy via NetGalley.

This is an epic story of the life of Maria Vittoria Montanari, who was born in Italy. The book begins in 1923 when she's twenty-five, almost considered past the prime age for marriage. Her father sets out on a mission to find Maria a husband. She's attractive (although not quite as pretty as her younger sister Egidia), strong, and a hard worker. She is embroidering a sheet for her dowry trunk with delicate flowers to use for her marriage bed. She recites prayers from her only book...small, blue and bound in leather..."The Christian Bride". She also has another precious treasure: her Madonna of the Mountains figurine enshrined on a plinth in a glass bell jar. Maria seeks out comfort and guidance throughout her life while in reverent prayer before this statue, and these "conversations" if you will are italicized sporadically during this saga.

Maria and her new husband Achilles move to an Italian village named Fosso and set up their own grocery store. Some of my favorite parts of the book are the wonderful detailed descriptions of how she cooks, cleans and maintains the store. Just prior to her marriage when she's still living in her family home in Monastero, she is washing laundry before dawn. It is a very elaborate process involving numerous trips to retrieve water, two buckets at a time hanging from a pole that she supports across her neck and shoulders. They make their own soap, violet perfume, and use every plant and animal resource without waste.

It was a riveting read how Maria, Achilles and their children lived through the horrific period of World War II. The terror of their store being visited by surly and frightening army factions, enduring food rationing with barely enough to eat, air raids, bombing and illness. I was utterly fascinated by the food sources Maria employed to feed her family such as pigeons, lizards and snails! There was also an exquisitely detailed passage involving the raising of silkworms, a skill one of Maria's daughters learned in a convent which was considered "more valuable than a dowry".

I was briefly disoriented about 30 percent into the book by a rather weird foray into the mind of a local madwoman named Delfina. It seemed like the story had gone off the grid to some extent, but the "fog" quickly passed and this glorious family saga resumed.

This is a superbly crafted story of an attractive, strong, spiritual, and resourceful wife and mother who loved and protected her family through some very trying times.

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