

NAPLES DECLARED: A Walk Around the Bay
By Benjamin Taylor
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Contact:
Katie Grinch
Publicity Manager
212-366-2574
Katie.Grinch@us.penguin.com

A Conversation with BENJAMIN TAYLOR About NAPLES DECLARED

1. What led you to write this book?

Naples had been on my mind for years, and I'd noticed that there are about a hundred books on Rome, Florence or Venice for every one on Naples. So I decided that was the shelf I wanted to add to.

2. How did you research it? How much time have you spent in Naples?

I've got too much respect for real scholars to call what I did "research." Browsing and wandering were what I did. The book is the fruit of eleven visits to the Bay, over the course of sixteen years.

3. Why did you choose walking, specifically, as your primary means of making your way around Naples and its environs?

Walking cities are the only ones I have much feeling for: New York, Chicago, Paris, London, Rome, Venice, Barcelona, etc. In her great little book on Rome, Elizabeth Bowen says the city only came clear to her from walking, and that each time she got into a taxi she got confused again. She speaks of a knowledge that comes up from the shoe leather. I let her be my guide, and Naples has been for me a shoe leather-destroying experience.

4. You write that there are two prevailing, contrary myths about Naples and its people. What are they? And why do you say that neither of them is really true?

That it's a place of happy light-hearted, singing primitives, is the one. That it's a sinkhole of iniquity, is the other. Both are obvious lies.

5. You observe that there is “a living interdependence between Christian and pagan emotions” in Naples, with the pagan sensibility going back to the city’s Greek origins. What are a few of the ways in which it can be seen in daily life?

In a basement of one of the churches of the old city, a spontaneous altar to a dead girl of the neighborhood is venerated. She's not a saint. She's just a new god of the parish. That's how paganism works, after all. New gods are always aborning. It pleases me to see polytheism in action, whatever the disguise it goes under.

6. You call Naples “Europe’s most extraordinary hybrid,” because of its long history of conquest and occupation by many different nations and civilizations. Which ones do you explore in the greatest depth? What were their legacies?

The golden ages are four: under Romans of the late republic and the empire; under Frederick the Second, in the thirteenth century, under Robert the Wise in the fourteenth when Giotto, Petrarch, Boccaccio – the flower of the age – came to his court; and finally, during the reign of the first Bourbon, Charles, in which so many extraordinary building projects – Teatro San Carlo, the opera house, for example – were carried out.

7. You devote a lot of attention to the city’s architecture, although it is not as celebrated as that of Rome or Florence or Venice, for example. What are some of the city’s most significant monuments and features, and what do they reveal about its history and culture?

What predominates, among the churches, is Spanish Baroque, a reflection of the more than two hundred years of Spanish viceroys reigning there. Frankly, it's not to my taste. My preference is for the late medieval churches in a stripped-down Gothic favored here in Angevin times: Santa Chiara is the most conspicuous and the one I write about. And for two Renaissance masterworks, carried out under the Angvins in the second half of the fifteenth century: Sant'Anna dei Lombardi, recently restored in part, and San Giovanni a Carbonara. I deal with both at some length in the book. In the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, the Bourbons were great builders as I say. The royal palace at Caserta – modeled after Versailles and the Escoriale – is owed to them. Under the Borboni, Naples regained its status as a European capital.

8. Who are some of the most colorful figures from the long history of Naples, which stretches back some twenty-five centuries?

Among the great visitors: Cicero, Caesar Augustus, Tiberius, Pliny the Elder, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Federico II, Giotto, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Mozart, Goethe, Leopardi, Graham Greene, Elsa Morante, Alberto Moravia, Saul Bellow, Shirley Hazzard. Only a sampling, but it will give you the idea.

9. Why did Naples go into twilight in the latter part of the nineteenth century?

In 1860, the Bourbon monarchy fell and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was incorporated into a united Italy under the House of Savoy. This was a loss of prestige and relevance. The very old distinction between Italian South and Italian North, which in fact dates from as long ago as Charlemagne, crystallized into a sense of northern grownups and southern children.

10. The island of Capri was once a summer home to Roman emperors – the “Hamptons of its day,” as you put it – and it has remained an exquisite resort ever since. One of its more famous literary residents was the English writer Norman Douglas, who was a close friend of Graham Greene. You say Douglas “fathered forth the sensibility of English travel writing,” paving the way for the likes of Jan Morris, Bruce Chatwin, and Pico Iyer. How so?

Flying wit, a sensibility at once historical and fastened to the particulars of present experience, an instinct for who to talk to, for the personality that reveals what’s hidden in the scene – these are some of the qualities that Douglas handed on to his progeny.

11. Speaking of travel writers, who are your favorites?

I’ve lately been reading Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor, who died last year at ninety-six, and as a young man walked clear across Europe, from the Hook of Holland to Constantinople, and recorded the first two thirds of the journey in two masterpieces, *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water*. And what a war record! He lived for two years in the mountains of Crete, organizing local resistance to the Nazis. Some on the left score him for an alleged involvement with activities detrimental to the communist Greek resistance. You probably know that George Orwell used to have such detractors, too. Fermor will outlive his critics as surely as Orwell outlived his.

12. Naples suffered terribly during World War II, especially as the city’s residents fought to expel the retreating German army. What happened during the last four days of the German occupation?

The men, women and children of Naples carried out the first successful urban insurrection against the Nazi war machine. *Le Quattro Giornate*, a glorious and improbable moment of World War II history, though quite in line with the improbability of most things Neapolitan.

13. For centuries, right down to the present day, Naples has experienced corruption, brutality, and highly publicized assassinations at the hands of organized crime, or the Camorra. What is the state of the struggle against criminal rackets today?

The Camorra is not a clan but a nexus of hundreds of criminal families. Cut off one head and two grow back. Their poisoning of the legitimate economy, their control of public officials, their vast networks of silent enablers and loyalists – all these make the Camorra quite impossible to root out. About a third of the South’s GDP is Camorrist.

14. How is Naples weathering the present-day Italian and European financial troubles? Or do those events have any real effect on this ancient and enduring city?

Italy is in terrible shape, as you know. The economic sword of Damocles hanging over the nation does not discriminate between North and South, though of course there's so much less wealth to lose in the South, exempting the incomprehensible wealth of the criminal rackets, who'll do splendidly whatever happens to their country (and they do not care what happens to their country). I suppose you could say that the North is now getting a taste of the immemorial southern bewilderment and pessimism.

15. Did you have an ideal reader in mind as you wrote this book?

As a matter of fact, I did. I imagined myself at the dinner table in Fort Worth, in the house where I grew up, telling my parents everything I'd seen and done and learned and felt on the Bay.