



In Other Words

By Jhumpa Lahiri

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National Best Seller

From the best-selling author and Pulitzer Prize winner, a powerful nonfiction debut—an “honest, engaging, and very moving account of a writer searching for herself in words.” —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred)

In Other Words is a revelation. It is at heart a love story—of a long and sometimes difficult courtship, and a passion that verges on obsession: that of a writer for another language. For Jhumpa Lahiri, that love was for Italian, which first captivated and capsized her during a trip to Florence after college. Although Lahiri studied Italian for many years afterward, true mastery always eluded her.

Seeking full immersion, she decides to move to Rome with her family, for “a trial by fire, a sort of baptism” into a new language and world. There, she begins to read, and to write—initially in her journal—solely in Italian. *In Other Words*, an autobiographical work written in Italian, investigates the process of learning to express oneself in another language, and describes the journey of a writer seeking a new voice.

Presented in a dual-language format, this is a wholly original book about exile, linguistic and otherwise, written with an intensity and clarity not seen since Vladimir Nabokov: a startling act of self-reflection and a provocative exploration of belonging and reinvention.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Gorgeous . . . the most unusual of self-portraits. It is fitting that Italy, a nation with no unifying language for centuries, should inspire a writer of Jhumpa Lahiri’s stature to organize her reflections around the concept of exile. Why abandon the English language that made her famous, and move with her family to Rome? Because she was in love . . . Lahiri’s exuberant tone may surprise readers used to the understatement and quiet grace of her acclaimed novels and short stories. *In Other Words* presents the same author with a different voice—a new expressive vein. The [book’s] bilingual format is appropriate: All the personal experiences are connected to linguistic ones, all the linguistic issues refracted through the author’s life. *In Other Words* ends at a crossroads, with Lahiri set to leave Rome and return to America, not knowing what will come of her affair with Italian. Dante’s words [about exile] seem relevant when speaking about *In Other Words*, a book that is everywhere about displacement and the discoveries it can lead to. Lahiri reached out to Italian when English stopped offering her the solitude she craved as a writer; now that she has left Italy we must wait to see where the arrow of exile points her.” —Joseph Luzzi, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Bold, elegant, poignant. *In Other Words* artfully and touchingly paints Lahiri’s journey into a new life. Her joy in working with language emanates from every page; the uncomplicated frankness of her voice allows her to cover a satisfyingly wide range of subjects. She expresses and reframes sentiments about the nature of love, both romantic and maternal, through the lens of her relationship to Italian, and offers fascinating peeks into her world. . . . Even while it resonates with haunting vulnerability, overall the book never feels too densely confessional. As a milestone in Lahiri’s career, *In Other Words* embodies a tremendous feat: the relinquishment of the mastery and comfort of the old, and the complete, unsparing immersion in the new. In what felt to her like a dangerous leap of faith, she lets her insights stand naked and alone, garbed in neither character nor plot—and all the more beautiful and true for their lovely guilelessness. . . . A pleasure to read.” —Emily Zhao, *The Harvard Crimson*

“What separates an artist from a creator is one’s insatiable desire to develop his or her craft, one’s perpetual feelings of dissatisfaction and the willingness to embrace challenges, even if that means reinvention. Lahiri’s new book is an expression of just this.” —Nicholas LaRousse, *Everyday eBook*

“A love letter to language, Lahiri delivers a stunning memoir . . . The journey of a writer seeking a new voice, *In Other Words* is especially a must-read for language nerds—and anyone who writes.” —Melissa Ragsdale, *Bustle*, “12 Women of Color Authors You Need to Know This Year”

“*In Other Words* is about Lahiri’s obsessive desire to learn Italian, and the quest to find an authentic authorial voice. Writing in Italian gave Lahiri a license to be imperfect. Buried ‘under all the mistakes, all the rough spots, is something precious. A new voice, crude but alive,’ she writes . . . Lahiri’s writing in Italian is simpler than her English prose. Just the essential words, feelings and hints of scene remain. It’s not clear if Italian will be the new home for her writing, or if she will eventually resume work in English. Regardless of the language, I know I will want to read it.” —Julie Hakim Azzam, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

“Jhumpa Lahiri is at a crossroads. The Pulitzer Prize-winning fiction writer never fully identified with English, or with Bengali for that matter, leading her to seek a third language . . . Whatever language Lahiri decides to continue working in, her strength as an interpreter and translator between cultures will remain; she possesses the power to universalize the very particular experiences of cultural and linguistic transplants. It allows her to achieve the highest form of art: pieces so transformative a reader cannot help but regard

strangers with greater understanding.” —Anne Kniggendorf, *Kansas City Star*

“Deeply pleasurable. *In Other Words* gives off the intoxication of metamorphosis; it puts one in the company of a beautiful mind engaged in a sustaining and bracing discipline. The reader who takes it up holds an appealing, missal-sized text, with the Italian printed on the left and English on the right. It is Lahiri’s first book of nonfiction, yet it contains two short stories. In introducing one, Lahiri tells us the symbolism of a missing black sweater in the story—it is language. In this diverting way, a reader bobs in the wake of Lahiri’s grand experiment. The cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker notes that ‘language comes so naturally to us that we’re apt to forget what a strange and miraculous gift it is.’ On every page—including the half that monolingualists can’t fathom—Lahiri’s magnificent book reminds us.” —Karen Long, *Los Angeles Times*

“Urgent and raw . . . In her critically praised works of fiction, Lahiri drew on the experience of her parents, who clung to the traditions of India long after coming to the U.S. But her new book reveals how deeply Lahiri has felt displacement and alienation herself, and the thrilling distance she’ll go to make sense of it. The memoir chronicles her obsession with Italian, which leads her to take on the radical experiment of writing this book in a language she’s still trying to master. The process is like a love affair . . . Through this linguistic autobiography, Lahiri appears to forge a new sense of belonging. Using discomfort to shatter her own status quo, she produces a startlingly different voice—still Lahiri’s, but stripped down to its essence.” —Leigh Haber, *O, The Oprah Magazine*

“Dazzling . . . Lahiri’s fascination with the beauty of language now has produced an affecting account, written in Italian, of her effort to master that language . . . She reflects on everything from the challenges of thought and expression in a foreign tongue to the mystery of creativity.” —Harvey Freedenberg, *Shelf Awareness*

“Deeply personal and candid . . . In this brief, meditative memoir Lahiri shares the story of her passion for Italian and how she set out to master it. By unlocking the Italian language, she makes unexpected discoveries about herself as a writer. Lahiri’s many fans will not be surprised to learn that she succeeds in her linguistic undertaking, achieving her usual artistry and delivering an impassioned valentine to the most lyrical of languages.” —Julie Hale, *Book Page*

“Elegant, emotionally resonant . . . *In Other Words* seems most animated by questions of change—specifically, Lahiri’s desire to ‘take another direction’ in her fiction. Immersing herself in Italian for three years was her way of forcing herself to change her relationship to language and storytelling. And it was a dramatic immersion . . . Learning Italian also represents a kind of freedom for Lahiri in terms of her writing career . . . Its in-between, searching qualities hint at new work to come.” —Hannah Gersen, *The Millions*

“Illuminating . . . In her first nonfiction work, her first truly autobiographical writing, Lahiri records her linguistic journey with unblinking honesty. The raw intimacy [in *In Other Words*] offers an illuminating gift with which future titles can and will be read. Being viewed as foreign—in India for not being Indian; in the U.S. for not looking American; in her chosen temporary home for being other—‘no one, anywhere, assumes I speak the languages that are part of me,’ Lahiri wryly observes. Writing is how she makes sense of her life; it gives her both anonymity and identity. Her unwavering determination will never make her an Italian writer, she realizes, but ‘I am, in Italian, a tougher freer writer, who in taking root again, grows in a different way.’” —Terry Hong, *The Christian Science Monitor*

“An immediate classic . . . Written in hard-won Italian and reverberating with the energy of literary experiment, Lahiri’s *In Other Words* announces the birth of a modernist. It describes the transformation of a writer exchanging the patient, polished realism of her first four books for abstraction. It is a pleasure to witness sudden artistic metamorphosis, and Lahiri’s *transizione radicale* from English to Italian creates an urgent aesthetic tenor that contrasts sharply with the author’s hallmark restraint . . . *In Other Words*’s artistic daring rivals its linguistic daring . . . The author’s aesthetic ambitions—as ever—stand apart from the historical particulars of Indian identity. Here, in the spirit of Eliot and Stevens, Joyce and Beckett, Lahiri discovers that ‘unknown words represent a dizzying, fruitful abyss.’ Like her modernist predecessors, she accepts *l’abisso* as the simultaneously generative and paralyzing force behind her art . . . Here is a portrait of the artist wrought from the raw material of exile, capturing rather than attempting to transcend a ‘state of total confusion.’” —Urmila Seshagiri, *Public Books*

“Intimate and powerful . . . Lahiri’s new book may well be a genre unto itself; it recounts a radical shift in the course of her life. *In Other Words* is a travelogue, a diary, a recounting of the author’s flirtation and, finally, all-out love affair with Italian, her third language, after Bengali and English. ‘Writing in another language represents an act of demolition, a new beginning,’ she observes. Sometimes frustration gets the best of her. And yet, the immersion works. The limitations of her Italian free her up to stumble, to experiment, to grow new roots in a new place. Her experience is at once disorienting and ecstatic . . . Throughout, Lahiri’s vulnerability is palpable: each chapter is an open window, a chance to breathe the air of someone else’s heady adventure.” —Maggie Galehouse, *Houston Chronicle*

“Lahiri tackles complex subjects with insight and clarity, in an exploration of what words really mean to a writer . . . On the page, Lahiri appears to be most comfortable outside of her comfort zone—her relentless desire to challenge herself, and her art form, is insatiable . . . *In Other Words* details her struggle to understand her identity in a language that, in spite of her commitment to its form, will forever be foreign to her.” —Baihley Grandison, *Writer’s Digest*

“Lovely and profound . . . The most evocative, unpretentious, astute account of a writing life I have read . . . Lahiri, one of the most intellectually elegant novelists in the world, composed *In Other Words* in Italian. The English translation by Ann Goldstein participates in an exquisite duet across the page with Lahiri’s Italian. Strikingly honest, lyrical, untouched by sentimentality, *In Other Words* chronicles as philosophical and quotidian a courtship with a language as Ovid’s *The Art of Love* does with amore itself . . . Lahiri unabashedly asks and answers big and vexing questions. *In Other Words* is [also] a family story, one dealing with the vicissitudes and unpredictable blessings of relocating husband and children to a different world, with how memories are constructed, with the sense of life as makeshift. For its treatment of such experiences, her memoir belongs on the same shelf as Anthony Doerr’s *Four Seasons in Rome* . . . Whether or not Lahiri chooses to write her future books in Italian, what matters is not linguistic provenance but the quality of the prose. Words like ‘enduring’ and ‘indispensable’ should be saved for only the rarest literary achievements, and the memoir *In Other Words* is one of those.” —Howard Norman, *The Washington Post*

“A revelation of how a writer finds her voice, intertwined with meditations on the estrangement that her identity as the child of Indian immigrants has imposed on her relationship to English . . . Lahiri captures the word-lover’s delight at finding a new world of language. Her renunciation of her prowess in English offers an opportunity for rebirth—the power of hitting up against her own limits. She meticulously charts her second coming of age, and her discovery of a new voice . . . This freedom to abandon everything known and sure, and to begin anew, is the best writing advice out there. A linguistic memoir that actually tells the story of a transformation of identity: in Lahiri’s hands, an invaluable insight into the craft of writing, not as storytelling but as speaking the self into existence.” —Marthine Satris, *San Francisco Chronicle*

“Stunning . . . a poignant, probing odyssey. Over the course of four novels and story collections, Pulitzer Prize-winning Lahiri has written about themes of identity, estrangement and belonging. All the while, the Indian-American author has faced these issues herself. Torn between two worlds, she has felt like an outsider in both. Then the plot thickened: She fell in love with Italy and dreamed of immersing herself in its language and culture. Hers was no Berlitz approach; it was an infatuation that became an obsession. The author has spent a lifetime caught in the clash between her parents’ Old World customs and the American culture that has so rewarded her achievements . . . In the end, Italy proves to be the author’s Switzerland, a place to neutralize tensions that have haunted her for decades. Learning it is an act of rebirth, of rebuilding a fractured self and changing course. *In Other Words* appeals on many levels—as a passion project, cultural document and psychological study. True to the nature of her quest, Lahiri wrote this book in Italian, rough edges and all; it conveys an intimate view of the complicated bonds that exist between language and identity.” —Joan Silverman, *Portland Press Herald*

“Intimate, intriguing . . . Written in a frank, unstudied style, *In Other Words* feels like a conversation in which the author is speaking directly to us . . . The core of the book—and the thing that makes it more than just a writer’s memoir—is the scrupulous, detailed, almost obsessive chronicling of what it’s like to learn a language as an adult. Lahiri brilliantly captures the stages of language acquisition [and] pushes herself much harder and farther than most . . . I was charmed by this project . . . At some level this book is not about the explorer; it is about the territory covered. Plenty of others have learned languages, even as adults, but not too many writers have undertaken to learn a language well enough to write in it. And fewer still—if, indeed, any—have left such a compelling record of what that was like.” —Christina Thompson, *The Boston Globe*

“A bravura book. It will touch every reader young and old, about the pleasure and pain of undertaking a new experience that tests one’s personhood and intellectual mettle.” —Michael D. Langan, *Buffalo News*

“A lexical love affair . . . In this set of reflections on language and identity Lahiri explains how, after finishing her novel *The Lowland*, she decided to read and write entirely in Italian, a language she knew only imperfectly . . . The progress of the book mirrors Lahiri’s growing confidence and skill, her obsession with the language, immersion in it, and the texts become more layered, more linguistically adventurous. Lahiri’s previous narrative canvases have stretched a web of complex, sensitively drawn relationships across continents and cultures, but here the focus is narrowed to the writer herself and a single, passionate, intimate relationship: between her and the Italian language . . . An outsider because of her background, in Italian Lahiri was an outsider again. The place where all writers want to be.” —Jan Dalley, *Financial Times*

“A writer of controlled, lapidary prose takes a risk that pays off, like much of her work, in the telling. Raised by Bengali immigrants, Lahiri decides to throw off the chains of her family’s heritage and her adopted America by writing a book about moving to Rome and learning Italian—in Italian. Lahiri both describes and demonstrates an expat’s push-pull of immersion and alienation, a process through which a novelist known for lyricism is refreshingly reduced to stark simplicity.” —Boris Kachka, *Vulture*, 8 Books You Need to Read this February

“Few people carry an obsession as far as Lahiri has taken her passion for Italian. Her love affair began in 1994, when she bought a pocket dictionary before a trip to Florence. She wrote her doctoral thesis on Italian architecture's influence on English playwrights. But despite taking Italian lessons in the 2000s, she felt as if she were hugging the shore, ‘swimming along the edge of that lake.’ In 2012, she takes the plunge: She and her family move to Rome. Lahiri wrote *In Other Words* in Italian. Her original text and Ann Goldstein's English translation are on facing pages, reinforc[ing] that this is as much a work of poetry as prose . . . The Lahiri in these pages is at a crossroads. *In Other Words* is the portrait of a writer who now yearns to break free.” —Michael Magras, *Minneapolis StarTribune*

“Compelling . . . moving and true, original and evocative . . . *In Other Words* marks a fundamental shift in Lahiri’s career. This memoir chronicles her bold linguistic transformation and the personal and creative renewal that followed . . . *In Other Words* shares many of the themes of Lahiri’s fiction: alienation, uprooting, and assimilating, the difficulties of adapting to a new culture . . . What is most impressive is her commitment to change. In the memoir, we find an author who understands that the best writing does not only change characters on the page, but affects the writer and the reader. Perhaps it is those altering revelations—the ones that move us beyond the comfort of the known—that bring us closer to a cohesive sense of self.” —Hilary Reid, *Brooklyn Rail*

“Lahiri is a master of language. *In Other Words* is her tale of falling in love with Italian. Her account is all passion. She’s so committed to her new tongue that she declined to translate it into English; the job has gone to Ann Goldstein, a fellow Italophile whose translation credits include all seven Elena Ferrante novels; she is lauded as part of the reason the series has been so successful in the U.S. Lahiri’s original Italian runs side by side with Goldstein’s English in this linguistic memoir . . . In Goldstein’s capable hands, the combination of styles evokes simple sophistication . . . A quiet coming of age—both a liberation from the constraints of perfectionism, and a meditation on new beginnings.” —Sarah Begley, *TIME*

“When people say that learning a language is like falling in love, they only seem to remember the honeymoon period. But in her new memoir, Lahiri reminds us that the courtship of a new idiom entails the same jealousy, desire, and heartbreak as the courtship of a new lover. [And] there is a grander project Lahiri has in mind: fashioning a new self out of words . . . Italian gives Lahiri the freedom to err: she can experiment, revel in her new linguistic identity—play. In order to evolve as a writer, the freedom afforded by an alien tongue was necessary—even if, or precisely because, she will inevitably make mistakes. Lahiri trades English for Italian to inaugurate a new phase of her career, for ‘from a creative point of view there is nothing so dangerous as security’ . . . *In Other Words* is a parallel text whose left-hand pages are in Italian and right-hand pages are in English. Two parts of her identity, set in opposition, riven down the center of the book . . . *In Other Words* is Lahiri’s most interesting book.” —Shaj Mathew, *New Republic*

“Exhilarating, elegant . . . meticulously crafted. In her first book of nonfiction, not content to write with her sword hand, English, Jhumpa Lahiri chooses the disorientation, the vulnerability, of speaking, reading, writing and thinking in a language she barely knows but has fallen madly in love with: Italian. During three years in Rome, she embraces linguistic exile—and finds that, writing in Italian, she has ‘the freedom to be imperfect.’ The restraint provides a way to be amazed by language all over again, ultimately producing the same precise, layered metaphors found in her prize-winning fiction. Can returning to a state of perpetual, profound curiosity open a new creative vein? Near the end of the book, Lahiri writes, ‘It’s not possible to become another writer, but it might be possible to become two.’ As readers, we’ll take as many Jhumpa Lahiris as we can get.” —Heather Harpham, *More*

“Incantatory: an adventurous, disciplined, and discovery-laden exercise in linguistic ardor; an unconventional autobiography that has the Dionysian drama of a quest saga and the Apollonian tidiness of a primer. *In Other Words* allows you to witness a beloved, hugely successful scribe give birth to a new, untested, uncertain yet determined authorial self . . . The book’s chapters unfold as a series of thoughtful reflections: her long courtship of Italian; the discoveries she makes and discomforts she feels during her self-imposed exile; her challenging upbringing . . . An intricately structured and gorgeously spun whirligig of a memoir.” —Lisa Shea, *Elle*

“Lovely, frank, fascinating—personal and startling . . . a record of creative and linguistic restlessness, the culmination of an encounter that Lahiri likens to love at first sight . . . Lahiri’s infatuation with Italian

deepened into romantic attachment and then utter devotion . . . *In Other Words* proceeds from [a] freedom and embrace of imperfection, its story [one] of flight, struggle, and regeneration, metamorphosis. Writing in Italian has offered Lahiri a clean slate on which to engage with language, with no room for old hang-ups about what good or virtuous writing is, how great stories work, the best way to capture and deliver the world. There is a kind of clarity, a new and necessary pressure to figure out what one really has—what one absolutely needs—to say. This pressure has carried Lahiri away not just from English but from toward autobiography. She reflects on feeling more protected in Italian, despite being left more exposed—a compelling paradox for any artist. It may not be a coincidence that [Italian] is a language in which pronouns commonly disappear into their verbs; in which a writer might inhabit fully the act of writing, harmonize with it, each transforming the other; in which the doer and the doing become one.” —Michelle Orange, *Bookforum*

“An emotionally risky literary journey. *In Other Words* is a departure. For one thing, it’s a memoir, [and] Lahiri has been famous as a fiction writer since she won the Pulitzer Prize for *Interpreter of Maladies*. Though she has published personal essays, she’s never probed her own creativity and emotional process in such depth or with such bracing candor. Lahiri describes *In Other Words* as the ‘linguistic autobiography’ of a writer seeking a new voice, but it is also a kind of travel book that charts a personal pilgrimage between Italy and America . . . The dichotomy [of English and Italian] turns out, in the course of this brave meditation, to be a love story and a mystery all in one. In that story lies the beginning of all the books that the author has not yet written. As Lahiri describes it, ‘In learning Italian I learned, again, to write.’ —John Burnham Schwartz, *The Wall Street Journal*

“It takes courage for a writer as successful as Lahiri to publish in an acquired language . . . It’s her way of becoming another writer—one with the freedom and latitude that goes with being unskilled and unknown, if only to herself . . . No one would deny that a native speaker has capacities and instincts that the learner flails at, and Lahiri does a lovely job of documenting the effort it takes to get hold of these—or fail to do so. And yet, as she is surely aware, for a writer it is impossible to be truly at home in language. As soon as you stop to consider *how* to say, you have ceased to be natural; you have become, if not foreign, then a little estranged. Writing always arrives late, runs after, falls behind, rearranges what was just put in place. It reveals the restlessness of language itself, in all its shifting multicolored variety.” —Christine Smallwood, *Harper’s*

“In this slim, lyrical nonfiction debut, Pulitzer-winner Lahiri traces the progress of her love affair with the Italian language. Unlike Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov, who also wrote in adopted languages, Lahiri doesn’t leap directly into fiction. Though the book contains a short story, her first order of business is to tell her own story. She writes exquisitely about her experiences with language . . . Her unexpected metamorphosis provides a captivating and insightful lesson in the power of language to transform.” —*Publishers Weekly*, Book of the Week

“Affecting, engaging . . . In a perfectly titled memoir, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist chronicles her efforts to learn and write Italian. Lahiri, who wrote her text in Italian, presents an English translation (by Ann Goldstein) with Italian and English on facing pages. For Lahiri, Italian was her third language—her mother spoke Bengali—and she relates the reasons she felt drawn to Italian, her many difficulties learning it, and her move to Rome to write . . . Although there are paragraphs about vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, Lahiri is more interested in the effects of all of this on her writing and on her identity. Her memoir is also chockablock with memorable comments about writing and language. ‘Why do I write?’ she asks. ‘To investigate the mystery of existence. To get closer to everything that is outside of me.’ An honest, self-deprecating, and very moving account of a writer searching for herself in words.” —*Kirkus* (starred review)

About the Author

JHUMPA LAHIRI is the author of four widely acclaimed works of fiction: *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, *Unaccustomed Earth*, and *The Lowland*. She has received numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize; the PEN/Hemingway Award; the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award; the Premio Gregor von Rezzori; the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature; a 2014 National Humanities Medal, awarded by President Barack Obama; and the Premio Internazionale Viareggio-Versilia, for this book.

ANN GOLDSTEIN is an editor at *The New Yorker*. She has translated works by, among others, Elena Ferrante, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Primo Levi, Giacomo Leopardi, and Alessandro Baricco, and is the editor of *The Complete Works of Primo Levi* in English. She has been the recipient of the PEN Renato Poggioli Translation Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and awards from the Italian Foreign Ministry and from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

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THE CROSSING

I want to cross a small lake. It really is small, and yet the other shore seems too far away, beyond my abilities. I'm aware that the lake is very deep in the middle, and even though I know how to swim I'm afraid of being alone in the water, without any support.

The lake I'm talking about is in a secluded, isolated place. To get there you have to walk a short distance, through a silent wood. On the other side you can see a cottage, the only house on the shore. The lake was formed just after the last ice age, millennia ago. The water is clear but dark, heavier than salt water, with no current. Once you're in, a few yards from the shore, you can no longer see the bottom.

In the morning I observe people coming to the lake, as I do. I watch them cross it in a confident, relaxed manner, stop for some minutes in front of the cottage, then return. I count their arm strokes. I envy them.

For a month I swim around the lake, never going too far out. This is a more significant distance—the circumference compared to the diameter. It takes me more than half an hour to make this circle. Yet I'm always close to the shore. I can stop, I can stand up if I'm tired. It's good exercise, but not very exciting.

Then one morning, near the end of the summer, I meet two friends at the lake. I've decided to make the crossing with them, to finally get to the cottage on the other side. I'm tired of just going along the edge.

I count the strokes. I know that my companions are in the water with me, but I know that each of us is alone. After about a hundred and fifty strokes I'm in the middle, the deepest part. I keep going. After a hundred more I see the bottom again.

I arrive on the other side: I've made it with no trouble. I see the cottage, until now distant, just steps from me. I see the small, faraway silhouettes of my husband, my children. They seem unreachable, but I know they're not. After a crossing, the known shore becomes the opposite side: here becomes there. Charged with energy, I cross the lake again. I'm elated.

For twenty years I studied Italian as if I were swimming along the edge of that lake. Always next to my dominant language, English. Always hugging that shore. It was good exercise. Beneficial for the muscles, for the brain, but not very exciting. If you study a foreign language that way, you won't drown. The other language is always there to support you, to save you. But you can't float without the possibility of drowning, of sinking. To know a new language, to immerse yourself, you have to leave the shore. Without a life vest.

Without depending on solid ground.

A few weeks after crossing the small hidden lake, I make a second crossing, much longer but not at all difficult. It will be the first true departure of my life. On a ship this time, I cross the Atlantic Ocean, to live in Italy.

THE DICTIONARY

The first Italian book I buy is a pocket dictionary, with the definitions in English. It's 1994, and I'm about to go to Florence for the first time, with my sister. I go to a bookshop in Boston with an Italian name: Rizzoli. A stylish, refined bookshop, which is no longer there.

I don't buy a guidebook, even though it's my first trip to Italy, even though I know nothing about Florence. Thanks to a friend of mine, I already have the address of a hotel. I'm a student, I don't have much money. I think a dictionary is more important.

The one I choose has a green plastic cover, indestructible, impermeable. It's light, smaller than my hand. It has more or less the dimensions of a bar of soap. The back cover says that it contains around forty thousand Italian words.

As we're wandering through the Uffizi, amid galleries that are almost deserted, my sister realizes that she's lost her hat. I open the dictionary. I go to the English-Italian part, to find out how to say "hat" in Italian. In some way, certainly incorrect, I tell a guard that we've lost a hat. Miraculously, he understands what I'm saying, and in a short time the hat is recovered.

Every time I've been to Italy in the many years since, I've brought this dictionary with me. I always put it in my purse. I look up words when I'm in the street, when I return to the hotel after an outing, when I try to read an article in the newspaper. It guides me, protects me, explains everything.

It becomes both a map and a compass, and without it I know I'd be lost. It becomes a kind of authoritative parent, without whom I can't go out. I consider it a sacred text, full of secrets, of revelations.

On the first page, at a certain point, I write: "*provare a = cercare di*" (try to = seek to).

That random fragment, that lexical equation, might be a metaphor for the love I feel for Italian. Something that, in the end, is really a stubborn attempt, a continuous trial.

Nearly twenty years after buying my first dictionary, I decide to move to Rome for an extended stay. Before leaving, I ask a friend of mine, who lived in Rome for many years, if an electronic Italian dictionary, like a cell phone app, would be useful, for looking up a word at any moment.

He laughs. He says, "Soon you'll be living inside an Italian dictionary."

He's right. Slowly, after a couple of months in Rome, I realize that I don't check the dictionary so often. When I go out, it tends to stay in my purse, closed. As a result I start leaving it at home. I'm aware of a turning point. A sense of freedom and, at the same time, of loss. Of having grown up, at least a little.

Today I have many other larger, more substantial dictionaries on my desk. Two of them are monolingual,

without a word of English. The cover of the small one seems a little faded by now, a little dirty. The pages are yellowed. Some are coming loose from the binding.

It usually sits on the night table, so that I can easily look up an unknown word while I'm reading. This book allows me to read other books, to open the door of a new language. It accompanies me, even now, when I go on vacation, on trips. It has become a necessity. If, when I leave, I forget to take it with me, I feel slightly uneasy, as if I'd forgotten my toothbrush or a change of socks.

By now this small dictionary seems more like a brother than like a parent. And yet it's still useful to me, it still guides me. It remains full of secrets. This little book will always be bigger than I am.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

In 1994, my sister and I decide to give ourselves a trip to Italy as a present, and we choose Florence. I'm in Boston, studying Renaissance architecture: Brunelleschi's Pazzi Chapel, the Laurentian Library of Michelangelo. We arrive in Florence at dusk, a few days before Christmas. My first walk is in the dark. I'm in an intimate, sober, joyful place. Shops decorated for the season. Narrow, crowded streets, some more like corridors than like streets. There are tourists like my sister and me, but not many. I see the people who have lived here forever. They walk quickly, indifferent to the buildings. They cross the squares without stopping.

I've come for a week, to see the buildings, to admire the squares, the churches. But from the start my relationship with Italy is as auditory as it is visual. Although there aren't many cars, the city is humming. I'm aware of a sound that I like, of conversations, phrases, words that I hear wherever I go. As if the whole city were a theater in which a slightly restless audience is chatting before the show begins.

I hear the excitement of children wishing each other *buon Natale*—merry Christmas—on the street. I hear the tenderness with which, one morning at the hotel, the woman who cleans the room asks me: *Avete dormito bene?* Did you sleep well? When a man behind me on the sidewalk wants to pass, I hear the slight impatience with which he asks: *Permesso?* May I?

I can't answer. I'm not able to have a dialogue. I listen. What I hear, in the shops, in the restaurants, arouses an instantaneous, intense, paradoxical reaction. It's as if Italian were already inside me and, at the same time, completely external. It doesn't seem like a foreign language, although I know it is. It seems strangely familiar. I recognize something, in spite of the fact that I understand almost nothing.

What do I recognize? It's beautiful, certainly, but beauty doesn't enter into it. It seems like a language with which I have to have a relationship. It's like a person met one day by chance, with whom I immediately feel a connection, of whom I feel fond. As if I had known it for years, even though there is still everything to discover. I would be unsatisfied, incomplete, if I didn't learn it. I realize that there is a space inside me to welcome it.

I feel a connection and at the same time a detachment. A closeness and at the same time a distance. What I feel is something physical, inexplicable. It stirs an indiscreet, absurd longing. An exquisite tension. Love at first sight.

I spend the week in Florence very near Dante's house. One day, I visit the small church of Santa Margherita dei Cerchi, where Beatrice's tomb is. The beloved, the poet's inspiration, forever unattainable. An unfulfilled love marked by distance, by silence.

I don't have a real need to know this language. I don't live in Italy, I don't have Italian friends. I have only the desire. Yet ultimately a desire is nothing but a crazy need. As in many passionate relationships, my infatuation will become a devotion, an obsession. There will always be something unbalanced, unrequited. I'm in love, but what I love remains indifferent. The language will never need me.

At the end of the week, having seen many palazzi, many frescoes, I return to America. I bring with me postcards, little gifts, souvenirs of the trip. And yet the clearest, most vivid memory is something immaterial. When I think of Italy, I hear certain words again, certain phrases. I miss them. And missing them pushes me, slowly, to learn the language. I am impelled by desire and, at the same time, hesitant, timid. I ask of Italian, with a slight impatience: *Permesso?* May I?

EXILE

My relationship with Italian takes place in exile, in a state of separation.

Every language belongs to a specific place. It can migrate, it can spread. But usually it's tied to a geographical territory, a country. Italian belongs mainly to Italy, and I live on another continent, where one does not readily encounter it.

I think of Dante, who waited nine years before speaking to Beatrice. I think of Ovid, exiled from Rome to a remote place. To a linguistic outpost, surrounded by alien sounds.

I think of my mother, who writes poems in Bengali, in America. Almost fifty years after moving there, she can't find a book written in her language.

In a sense I'm used to a kind of linguistic exile. My mother tongue, Bengali, is foreign in America. When you live in a country where your own language is considered foreign, you can feel a continuous sense of estrangement. You speak a secret, unknown language, lacking any correspondence to the environment. An absence that creates a distance within you.

In my case there is another distance, another schism. I don't know Bengali perfectly. I don't know how to read it, or even write it. I have an accent, I speak without authority, and so I've always perceived a disjunction between it and me. As a result I consider my mother tongue, paradoxically, a foreign language, too.

As for Italian, the exile has a different aspect. Almost as soon as we met, Italian and I were separated. My yearning seems foolish. And yet I feel it.

How is it possible to feel exiled from a language that isn't mine? That I don't know? Maybe because I'm a writer who doesn't belong

How is it possible to feel exiled from a language that isn't mine? That I don't know? Maybe because I'm a writer who doesn't belong completely to any language.

I buy a book. It's called *Teach Yourself Italian*. An exhortatory title, full of hope and possibility. As if it were possible to learn on your own.

Having studied Latin for many years, I find the first chapters of this textbook fairly easy. I manage to memorize some conjugations, do some exercises. But I don't like the silence, the isolation of the self-teaching process. It seems detached, wrong. As if I were studying a musical instrument without ever playing it.

At the university, I decide to write my doctoral thesis on how Italian architecture influenced English playwrights of the seventeenth century. I wonder why certain playwrights decided to set their tragedies, written in English, in Italian palaces. The thesis will discuss another schism between language and environment. The subject gives me a second reason to study Italian.

I attend elementary courses. My first teacher is a Milanese woman who lives in Boston. I do the homework, I pass the tests. But when, after two years of studying, I try to read Alberto Moravia's novel *La ciociara* (*Two Women*), I barely understand it. I underline almost every word on every page. I am constantly looking in the dictionary.

In the spring of 2000, six years after my trip to Florence, I go to Venice. In addition to the dictionary, I take a notebook, and on the last page I write down phrases that might be useful: *Saprebbe dirmi? Dove si trova? Come si fa per andare?* Could you tell me? Where is? How does one get to? I recall the difference between *buono* and *bello*. I feel prepared. In reality, in Venice I'm barely able to ask for directions on the street, a wake-up call at the hotel. I manage to order in a restaurant and exchange a few words with a saleswoman. Nothing else. Even though I've returned to Italy, I still feel exiled from the language.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Linda Hupp:

Have you spare time for just a day? What do you do when you have more or little spare time? That's why, you can choose the suitable activity regarding spend your time. Any person spent their own spare time to take a stroll, shopping, or went to the Mall. How about open as well as read a book allowed In Other Words? Maybe it is being best activity for you. You understand beside you can spend your time using your favorite's book, you can smarter than before. Do you agree with it has the opinion or you have other opinion?

Judy Finley:

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Virginia Doak:

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Ellen Scherer:

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