

Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Andrew Robbins, Graduate Student, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Interviewee: Laura Benedetti, Laura and Gaetano De Sole Professor of Contemporary Italian Culture, Georgetown University

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(Start of Interview)

Andrew: You've spent your life as a literary critic, focusing, in particular, on the representation of motherhood and Italian women writers from the Renaissance to the present. Why did you decide to write the novel? Why a novel rather than an academic work? What gave you the initial inspiration?

Laura: I've spent most of my adult life outside of Italy but, as you said, I've kept very close ties with Italian literature and culture through teaching and conducting research. At some point, a few years ago, I started thinking about the contrast between Italy as a cultural construction—almost as a metonymy for its literature, art, and music—and Italy as a concrete, geographical entity. For a while, I tried to explore this notion with my usual tools, thinking I could perhaps write an article about it. Then I realized that a creative approach suited the topic more naturally, and started writing a novel. *Un paese di carta* follows the stories of three generations of women between Italy and the U.S. and explores themes of displacement, loss, the link between language and identity and between personal and collective history.

Andrew: Which passage is dearest to you? Can you tell us about its genesis?

Laura: I bike to work on the Capital Crescent Trail, a beautiful bike path that in some spots runs next to the Potomac. One foggy morning, I could only catch glimpses of the other bikers before they disappeared in the mist. This gave me the idea of a woman who takes her last walk on the trail, accompanied by the shadows of the people who have been dear to her throughout her life. This woman became Alice, the oldest of the three women in *Un paese di carta*, whose death and last wishes are the driving force of the narration.

Andrew: On pages 48-49 Alice relishes in dinnertime with her granddaughter, creating feasts fit for a princess. Thinking back to Alice's will and how she leaves Jane a recipe for turkey, would you say that Alice uses food as a medium through which to confront the world?

Laura: I don't think Alice is particularly interested in food. The dinners with her granddaughter, Sara, are wonderful and extravagant events, but we don't get to see what they actually eat. The recipe she leaves to her daughter, Jane, is more an invitation to change her approach to life, than a culinary suggestion.

Andrew: What about for any other characters? For example, Sara and Jane share a meal at a Libanese restaurant before Sara leaves for Italy, and Sara’s first question to her mother is whether they can go back there when they return.

Laura: Also, in this case, I would say that the importance of the episode goes beyond the particular food being served. There is something profound about sharing a meal, about facing another human being while dealing with a basic human need and therefore confronting one’s vulnerable condition. Jane and Sara, mother and daughter, do manage to communicate something about their desires and their fears during that meal, and Sara’s request to go back to the same restaurant, more than anything, expresses her wish to repeat that experience, to get to converse with her mother again.

Andrew: It seems that food plays an important role in your novel, perhaps more than you had originally intended. Especially when making the distinctions between Italian and American culture palpable, there is very often a description of what food is being cooked and served in a new scene, painting a picture alongside descriptions of the landscape. Was the ubiquity of food an intentional device? Perhaps, food became a subconscious means through which you represent cultural difference, would this be a fair assessment?

Laura: I am still not sure that food is “ubiquitous” in the novel, although there are indeed passages where Sara’s experience of Italian culture—and, more specifically, of the culture of Abruzzo—is expressed through her discovery of specific kinds of food, from mozzarella to Montepulciano, from pecorino to torrone. Food has, indeed, an incredible evocative power, perhaps because of its ties to both nature and culture. It is natural, not only, because of the ingredients, but also, because, as I said earlier, it satisfies a basic human need. At the same time, culture plays a crucial role in establishing how the ingredients are transformed and how that basic need is fulfilled.

Andrew: You’ve been discussing your novel in various contexts and countries. How has your perception of your own work changed throughout that time? For instance, the title, *Un Paese di Carta*, elicits various interpretations across readers. How has the title changed meaning for you?

Laura: It has been a real privilege to be able to discuss my work with so many attentive and sensitive readers, from Washington to Venice, from New Jersey to Naples. It has given me a new and more complex understanding of the novel, of the links between *Un paese di carta* and my critical work, of the reasons that may have inspired many details and episodes, from the names of the characters to the lunar symbolism that is so prevalent towards the end of the story. The title itself, *Un paese di carta*, turned out to be more problematic than I thought. Alice uses the expression to explain that, although she does not intend to ever go back to Italy, she has found her home in Italian language and culture, her own “paese di carta, eterno e fragile.” This is of course linked to my first idea for the novel, that of Italy as a cultural entity rather than a precise location. But the novel also deals with a recent catastrophe, the 2009 earthquake that killed hundreds of people and devastated L’Aquila and the surrounding villages. Many readers felt that “un paese di carta” referred to Italy’s vulnerability, its fragility in the face of natural and political

disasters—an interpretation that I had not anticipated but has now become part of my own understanding of the title.