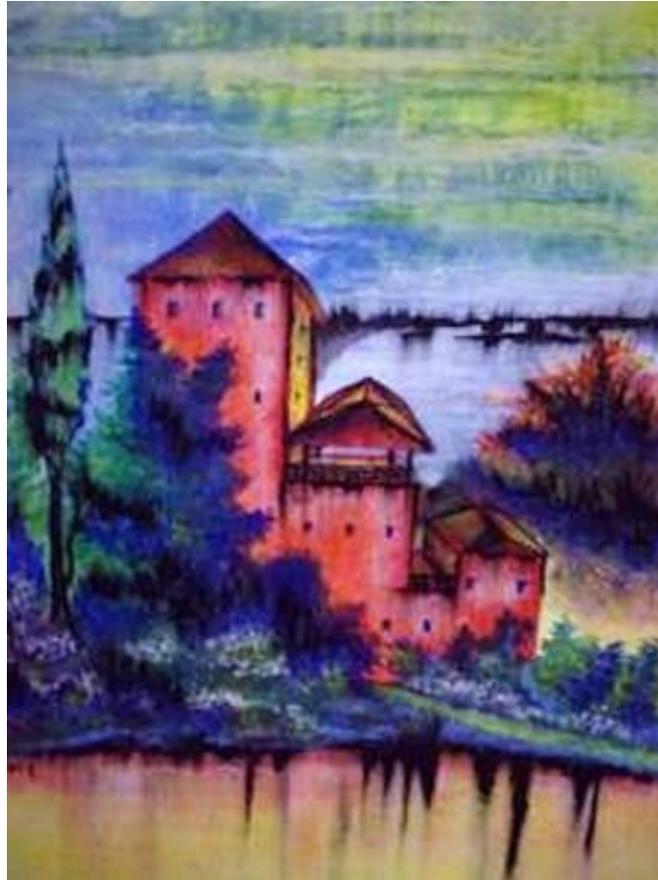


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Come in...and be captivated...



"The Farm" by Hermes Hernandez

This issue we interview Frances Mayes of *Under the Tuscan Sun*, *Bella Tuscany* and *A Year in the World*. To me, she is the consummate guide and teacher as I write of in my interview- why do I feel this way?

One of the concepts Mayes teaches us is that the word focus comes from the Latin for 'fireplace'. "...In Italian, it's 'focolare'- the center of the home where we cook and eat and talk, all of which gives focus, a clarity to life. Without our food we fall apart."

I've always felt this way about the family-centered table. Choose who you have dinner with, enjoy one another and savor the food.

Mayes is also an artist of the eye- "*When it rains or when the light changes, the facade of the house turns gold, sienna, ochre; a previous paint job shows through in rosy spots like crayons left to melt in the sun.*"

Such descriptions reach my soul and I actually found it difficult to ask a question which she has not already discussed on a very deep level. There is one description of the afternoon meal as she was growing up in Georgia, laid out upon a white, rustic table. The warmth embodied in that passage made me long to go home to Georgia though I've never even set foot there! That, my friends is descriptive power at its best!

Mayes writes, "*My reader, I hope, is like a friend who comes to visit...*"

We are your friends here, Frances~ Andiamo! (*Let's go!*)

Frances Mayes Interview by Denise Bouchard for *The Write Place At the Write Time*

1) You once wrote, "Tuscany is a world, Italy is a universe," and that "...five lifetimes would not be enough to explore it." Since then, you've traveled the world, widely immersing yourself in its neighborhoods, cultures and different culinary styles, experiencing the true essence of home in each. From Crete to Burgundy to Fez to your gorgeous main residence in the US overlooking Mount Tamalpais, you've seen and lived many definitions of 'home'. Still, when I open your books on Tuscan lifestyle (*In Tuscany, Bringing Tuscany Home*), I just melt upon seeing Bramasole. I can feel its extraordinary beauty and spirituality jump off of the page. My question is, after all- all of the travel, the up's and down's of settling into a community with all its characters, is Bramasole still the place where you walk through the door after having been away and think, "I'm home"? And how were you certain the first time you entered it that it would be

your home?

First of all, thank you! Your perception that Bramasole has a spiritual feeling to it is exactly mine as well. When I first saw the house, situated under an Etruscan wall from the 8th century B.C., under a Medici fortress, and above the valley where Hannibal defeated the Romans in 217 B.C., I thought it seemed utterly at home in time and place. I had the inkling that if the house were so at home, maybe I could be also. From the outset, being there felt right, like being in a boat rocked by the tides, lulled by the pull of the moon, and bright like the best days of summer. After all these years, yes, it's home. Heart's needle, bull's eye. But I've come to think of home in a different light, not that there's one home. Recently I moved back to the South where I was born and raised and immediately felt, I'm back where I belong. A startling feeling. Now when I go back to California, it's as though I never left. If I never saw Bramasole again, it still would be home. I decided not to be confused by this but to enjoy the sense of being extant in several versions!

2) Whether talking to us of the ancient Etruscans, the art of Florence, the poetry of Neruda, or of the playwright and poet, Federico Garcia Lorca, as you stand on the ground that inspired him, to me, you are the consummate guide and teacher. Your descriptions, like precious gifts taken home from Ithaka, transport the reader in full sensory capacity across the globe to Taormina, poised on Italy's geranium-dotted balconies, eating tapas ensconced in the cafes of South America, and swimming through the varied blue hues of the waters of Greece. I yearn for this because I'm always so disappointed when asking friends or acquaintances of their travels to hear that Paris was 'nice', they saw family in Prague, or met the Pope in Rome, while viewing the two hundred pictures of themselves blocking famous sites. When writing about your travels, how did you come to the decision to go off the beaten path toward authenticity, leaving the Fodor's depictions behind?

Again, thank you for such kind words! I was born to explore. I climbed out of my bedroom window one night when I was three and wandered about the neighborhood, kind of electrified by freedom. My mother would have loved to travel—perhaps she instilled in me the desire to go. Most of all, though, the kind of travel I like came to me through books.

Freya Stark, D. H. Lawrence, Lawrence Durrell, Eric Newby, Ann Cornelisen, Patrick Fermor, and all the Victorian women, such as Lucie Duff Gordon who courageously left suffocating lives and set out for adventure.

When I travel, I go to all the big sites but try to go early or late. Those are starting points. We walk, walk, walk. Fortunately, I married someone who likes to turn down the unpaved road. We both seek a real connection with how people actually live in the small town in Portugal, the fishing village in Greece. The great gift has been to get to know intimately a small town in Tuscany, all the biographies!

3) Drawing on the previous question, one of the most unique elements in your books on travel, is that they possess literary qualities of sophisticated description and carefully sketched personification- such as:

“Lying awake, I feel the familiar sense of the answer arriving. Like answers on the bottom of the black, fortune-telling eight ball, that I loved when I was ten, often I can feel an idea or the solution to a dilemma floating up through murky liquid, then it is as if I see the suddenly clear white writing, I like the charged zone of waiting, a mental and physical sensation of the bends as something mysterious zigzags to the surface of consciousness.”

Could you talk to us, as an instructor of writing, about the way you ‘see’? Seeing and observing not only with the senses but also through a deeper perception that comes from the very soul of things...

Well, one can try! I wrote poetry my whole life until I suddenly and unexpectedly changed to memoir writing. The habits of poetry—intense attention to images and a love of words’ textures—are part of my natural inclinations. I have loved and studied painting and architecture all my life. Color and line and how people live inside what they make—these are important to me. As for perceptions, maybe I’m just old enough to claim a little wisdom. I think; I see; I perceive. Also, I’m opinionated and contrarian. Always have gone against anything in the dictionary of accepted ideas.

4) On the ‘blue book’ and transformation:

“In 1990 our first summer here, I bought an over-sized blank book with Florentine paper covers and blue leather binding. On the first page I wrote

'Italy'. The book looked as though it should have immortal poetry in it, but I began with lists of wildflowers, lists of projects, new words, sketches of tile in Pompeii. I described rooms, trees, bird calls. I wrote about the people we met and food we cooked. The book became a chronicle of our first four years here. Today it is stuffed with menus, postcards of paintings, a drawing of a floor plan of an abbey, Italian poems, and diagrams of the garden. Because it is thick, I still have room for a few more summers. Now the blue book has become Under the Tuscan Sun, a natural outgrowth of my first pleasures here"- from Under the Tuscan Sun

You went on to say that a Chinese poet, centuries past, noticed that to re-create something in words is akin to living it twice. This is a beautiful example of journaling which transformed between the pages to sprout wings held together by the blue center, becoming a treasured non-fiction book. Can you give us a few pointers on journaling such as keeping out the day-to-day minutiae, the lists of things we want to manifest, and the changes that it evokes by enlarging our lives first upon the page?

I've never kept a journal, per se. What I need are books where I list words I like, a big notebook for, as you noted, postcards of paintings, ephemera, seed packets, etc. Then there's the handbag notebook and the recording button on the Iphone. I keep impressions, poems, colors, quotes, photos from magazines, all for future reference when I'm writing. Things that grab me at the moment do so for a reason. Often, when writing, I discover the reason.

5) Tuscans tend to celebrate the moment. Your friend, Fiorella says, "It's unhealthy to eat alone." An Italian man on a plane told your husband, Ed "Food is the sun... Family, work, friends, the day-to-day, the extraordinary- all in orbit like planets. There's order in the universe when someone says 'Let's eat'. Look at the story of Jesus, how one of his last acts before he was crucified was dinner with friends. Make every dinner count- something unbelievable may happen to you the next day."

In Tuscany, feasts are not just for special occasions but to celebrate the food itself and one another. I love this and I live this- family coming together and processing the fullness of the day... Tell us of one of your favorite feasts in Tuscany- large or small. Who was there, what was said, was there a toast?

My favorite feast is usually the last one I've attended! This first week back in Tuscany has been oddly cold for May and rainy every minute. We had one wine dinner with about forty feasting away and trying all the wines from a Brunello vineyard. But, just getting back, my favorite times have been the little dinners Ed and I cook and eat on our laps by the fire. There's much to plan, and the excitements of the summer lie ahead. These nights, grilling sausages, pouring our own oil over the bruschetta, opening a dark old red—these are fine times.

6) On travel:

“Travel pushes my boundaries.”

“You are released because you are insignificant to the life of the new place.”

“Travel releases spontaneity. You become a god-like creature full of choice, free to visit the stately domes, make love in the morning, sketch a bell-tower, read a history of Byzantium, stare for one hour at the face of Leonardo Da Vinci's Madonna Dei Fusi. You open, as in childhood, and for a time- receive this world. There's the visceral aspect too- the huntress who is free. Free to go, free to return home bringing memories to lay on the hearth.”

I feel that there is something else as well. Whenever I travel, I bring home the place which I have explored within me, such as a need to be barefoot after walking the beaches of the Caribbean. Can you say a few words on how travel changes us from within? Outside of Italy, has there been another place that has become an intrinsic part of you?

At the end of *A Year in the World* I wrote a chapter called “The Yellow Café,” a fantasy. I imagined that, at the end of my travels, I would open a café in my hometown in Georgia and I would bring with me all the treasures I'd acquired, chefs from all the countries I'd visited to cook for periods of time, and that the house would be filled with music I'd loved on my journeys, books, visiting artists and poets. Some people took it literally and I had several inquiries from publicists and marketing professionals wanting to be involved! I do think that once a trip is over, you continue to travel there in many moments of solitude or insomnia. The Cavafy poem seems wise to me.

Intrinsic part? Hard to make a dividing line. From some places you bring back a recipe for crab soup, an inlaid box, a photograph of a man peeling an artichoke, or a round cool stone from a beach. From others, more profound inner experiences, important meetings with a new friend, even transforming events. All are rich.

7) I love the way you traverse the world, partaking of its greatest gifts. In Greece, instead of buying one of the million coral necklaces, you hand-pick herbs indigenous to the region to transplant when you get home, and seek out the unusual tiles of Crete for your hearth. In Spain, you fall in love with the architecture of the courtyards and fountains, studying the flowing vines and bougainvillea. In the British Isles, you carefully observe and take note of all the gardens for the perfect roses to grace the stone wall of your villa. It is not only a rich way to travel through countries, but to travel through life- friends and natural gems collected along the way. We know what to pack in our suitcases but tell us what to bring in our hearts and minds in order to have the fullest experiences when setting foot outside of familiar territory.

I'm voraciously curious so I travel with a natural thirst. And for me, books inform so much of what I bring with me to a new place. Reading Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul*, then going there makes a tremendous difference. Reading *Mani* by Patrick Fermor, same thing. And reading about places you'll probably never go not only sets you dreaming, they make the complex world closer. *The Lost World of the Kalahari* by Laurens van der Post, *Journey Into Cyprus* by Colin Thubron, *A Winter in Arabia* by Freya Stark, *Journey to Portugal* by José Saramago, and so many more, have taken me on intense trips I'll never take. The more history--cultural and factual--you bring with you the more your eyes are opened to possibilities. It's sad to travel only to compare the new place to home. I love differences, large and small. I'm so glad the Italians are not like us, that the world is not small.

Ithaka

by C.P. Cavafy

*As you set out for Ithaka
hope the voyage is a long one,*

*full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
angry Poseidon-don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
wild Poseidon-you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.*

*Hope the voyage is a long one.
May there be many a summer morning when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you come into harbors seen for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind-
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to gather stores of knowledge from their scholars.*

*Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you are destined for.
But do not hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you are old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.*

*Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you would not have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.*

*And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience*



"Beauty" N.M.B Copyright 2008

Welcome to the willow world... an atmosphere of subtle, artful seduction, illusions and contradictions. This delicate yet determined, fragile but fierce realm is the home of the geisha...

Memoirs of a Geisha, the captivating novel by Arthur Golden captured our hearts and minds as we followed the trials and rites of passage of the protagonist, Nitta Sayuri. Despite strict ritual and obligation, the tale unfolds as a story of a young woman pervasive as water who never relinquishes hold of her ultimate dream. The exquisite passion, pain and triumph of Golden's characters make them come to life as they gracefully dance off the page into our imaginations. Here we explore with Golden the history, art, culture and creativity of the forbidden willow world to which he has given us the key...

Arthur Golden Interview by Nicole M. Bouchard for *The Write Place At the Write Time*

When asked about the process and structure he utilized to write *Memoirs*, Golden explains:

"I begin by asking questions of myself and write them out. For instance, 'Does Sayuri have a sister or brother? How many of them?' Then I answer them according to the needs of the story. 'She can't have a brother because she has to have nothing to go back to. She's only seven years old so she must have a sister to try to run away with...' The outline of the story isn't strict. The ideas come out when actually working with it; twists in the narrative get developed."

Similar to the process of constructing an immense cathedral, each and every part of this literary masterpiece was custom-made to fit the overall theme—each feature carved intricately from the foundation up. Golden's approach to his craft is more like that of an architect with methodical precision.

"I love problem-solving, finding the answers to riddles, assembling the right combination of pieces to complete a puzzle. This is how I see fiction, language in general."

His unique take on the composition of fiction most likely stems from his journalistic roots. Golden's great-grandfather bought *The New York Times* in 1896 and it is still, to present day, controlled by the family. Attune to the journalism/business side of writing, Golden felt drawn to more structured forms of storytelling. With his deep love of research, he had even contemplated the vocation of a professor. What ultimately swayed him against it as a career choice was the seemingly closed quality of it. His voracious appetite for learning wasn't satisfied. *"I wanted more than a tiny sliver of scholarly research."*

He held a degree from Harvard in Art History, specializing in Japanese art

and subsequently went on to earn a Masters in Japanese history at Columbia. Further education ensued during a summer at Peking University in Beijing and following a job at a magazine in Tokyo, he returned to the U.S. to get his Masters in English from Boston University.

Deciding on the novel as his form of expression and way to quench his insatiable thirst for knowledge, he taught himself the craft of fiction. *"Immediately I found that I enjoyed the complexity, the challenge for maximum effect in creating characters and dialogue. It hooked me."*

While in Tokyo, Golden had become acquainted with a man whose father was a prominent business man and whose mother was a geisha. Fascinated by the concept, once back in the States, he began to work on a novel that would imagine the circumstances of this man's childhood. As he wrote, however, he found himself far more intrigued by the life of the mother. He settled on the 1930's as a backdrop for her youth by back-tracking from the year she might have had a son. The result brings the incredible secrets of the geisha to light amidst social and political upheaval in Japan's history, extending into WWII. *"The best novels,"* Golden states, *"...are those that offer us experiences we could never live ourselves."*

The novel was written three times over ten years, shifting the point-of-view. The first person perspective of Sayuri suited the needs of the story best and fell into place as with the other elements of plot and character. Completely under the spell of Sayuri being used as a literary device, I was heartbroken as a reader to discover that she was a work of fiction- that was how powerful her presence came across. I ask Golden about the thought behind choosing her as a conduit for the readers.

"To accommodate the reader's needs, the narrator needs to be able to move back and forth freely. Context is the thing that matters most. Sayuri is introduced as the narrator in the prologue, being interviewed in New York. She's lived in the U.S. long enough to know what Americans won't know about the cultural details in her story and so she's reflecting upon her past through an American/western filter. She explains subtle

nuances and details for our benefit that she wouldn't normally if she were speaking to a fellow native of Japan." This frees her to portray the events in such a way that allows the reader to see everything the way she did when experiencing it firsthand.

"Context is established to give a more meaningful depiction of events. If, say, a host looks across the table at a man longer than he should, it doesn't mean all that much to an observer unless the third party knows that the man receiving the stare is the lover of the host's wife.

I also believe that if you have a first person narrator who is not the protagonist, you see the events of the story in an awkward, oblique way. It becomes the narrator's story. How could this character be present at all of the significant events? They would have to be a 'weak-magnet narrator' their actions don't affect the novel, but they attract main characters at times of crisis."

As a world full of contradictions, the history of the geisha seduces the intellect. Although men visited the elegant geisha, not to be confused with the Japanese courtesans, for fine conversation and entertainment designed to make them feel "more like men", the willow world was a powerful matriarchy which was in stark contrast to the general male-dominated society outside of the hanamachi. As with the 'honest' Venetian courtesans of 16th century Italy, the geisha were expected to be highly trained, clever, and educated as opposed to the wives of society who held higher social status but were not given opportunities to further their intellect so that they would remain submissive in their role. Geisha would most often withhold physical intimacy in order to maintain control over their patrons. Savvy and self-sufficient, these women kept their own finances, ran the geisha houses and teahouses. The first geisha were actually men, acting as comedians and musicians. Female geisha did not appear until the mid-1700's in Japan. They became skilled musicians, learned to dance and converse artfully, and some even painted, wrote and composed. Men of business saw this artistic atmosphere as a veiled haven apart from their reality.

The character of Nobu, in *Memoirs*, embodies many of these pairings of

opposite characteristics. He dismisses the silky conversations of the geisha and the attributes of their artistic world until he meets Sayuri who cleverly draws parallels between them. Nobu is practical and sensible, yet touchingly sympathetic at times even when he is designated as the antagonist. Sayuri with her blue eyes associated with the element of water (tied to artists and writers in Feng Shui) is able to move the grounded Nobu even though she ultimately rejects his affection in the pursuit of true love and her own destiny. *"The story takes on its own life, leading you in directions you never anticipated. I really came to like Nobu as I wrote about him. He came to life as a character with a strong viewpoint."*

To engage us from the very beginning, the first chapter opens with an intriguing contradiction reminiscent of the reciprocal balances throughout the novel:

"Suppose that you and I were sitting in a quiet room overlooking a garden, chatting and sipping at our cups of green tea while we talked about something that had happened a long while ago, and I said to you, "That afternoon when I met so-and-so... was the very best afternoon of my life, and also the very worst afternoon." I expect you might put down your teacup and say, "Well now, which was it? Was it the best or the worst? Because it can't possibly have been both!"~ Memoirs of a Geisha

Although it would seem to be two opposite extremes presented, it is only a foreshadowing of the great heights and dark depths of passion that the novel promises to evoke within you.

The theme concerning the pursuit of one's personal dream regardless any blocks standing in the way (whether external or internal) is one that resounded deeply in this novel which can be seen as a necessary stepping stone in anyone's life. Making a home for two years on *The New York Times*'s best-seller list and inspiring the film which won three Academy Awards, this book is sure to be a lasting fixture of literature in the ages to come.

Delighted to know that Golden is working on another book, I can only say that the stage is set in Amsterdam during the 1850's. A more capable guide to walk the corridors of history, I cannot fathom. Here I thank Mr. Golden for taking time away from his writing desk to be with us!

*Here we would like to thank featured past and present authors for permitting us to interview them. It was an honor to be able to discuss the craft of writing with them.

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