

Reading the Italian Mind

A columnist for Milan's daily Corriere della Sera and author of the forthcoming La Bella Figura: A Field Guide to the Italian Mind, Beppe Severgnini is a keen observer of the Italian culture and character. In a conversation with FP, he discussed American best-sellers, the failure of Italy's politicians, and why Italians would rather write a book than read one.

FOREIGN POLICY: What do Italians like to read?

Beppe Severgnini: We don't like to read very much. The truth is that a book that sells 2,000 copies is considered to have done well. But there is great passion: In Italy, there are many more writers than readers. I hardly know anyone who doesn't want to publish a novel, poem, or memoir. But these same people

don't realize that, to write, you also have to read; it's like a musician who won't listen to music, or a cook who won't eat.

FP: But American books tend to sell well. Why?

BS: Because Americans know how to construct a plot, by making it gripping. Americans know how to narrate a story, both on film and in a novel.

FP: Many argue that Italy is in decline. Is that true culturally as well?

BS: Well, it's not the best of times. I can discern some movement in the fine arts, writing, both fiction and nonfiction, in the younger generations. I call them the e-generation: euro, e-mail, Erasmus [an exchange program between European universities], and easyJet. The e-generation,



including novelist Niccolò Ammaniti, Gucci designer Frida Giannini, and jazz pianist Giovanni Allevi, is shaking things up a bit.

FP: Who is the "next big thing" in Italian culture?

BS: There are scientists [who were] born in the 1960s and 1970s who are now spread across the United States. Stefano Soatto, 38, is director of the vision lab at UCLA, and

Carlo Ratti, 35, is director of the SENSEable City Laboratory at MIT. I have this Web site, called "Italians," which is a true community made up of Italians living abroad whom I regard very highly. Among the 120,000 daily visitors, there are a few thousand who, well, let's put it this way: If we could pick our next government out of this group, I would feel much better.

Interview: Davide Berretta, a researcher at FOREIGN POLICY.