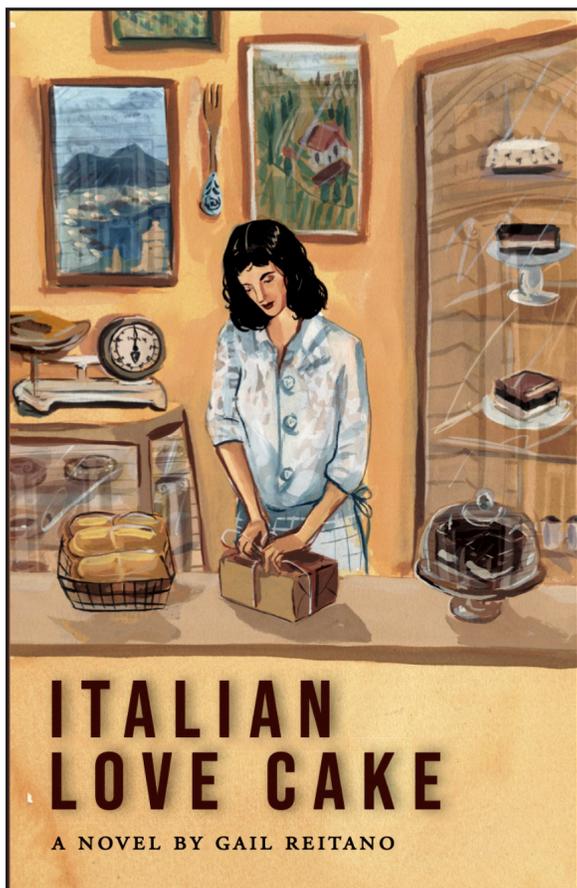


ITALIAN LOVE CAKE

by Gail Reitano

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"As World War II approaches, Marie Genovese mourns the recent loss of her mother, struggles to manage the family's failing Five & Ten as well as her brother flirting with Fascism, and meets a man who is dangerously off-limits. Isolated and uncertain, she draws on the wisdom and strength of Italian-American women, turning to her ancestresses for the necessary ingredients to survive and thrive. *Italian Love Cake* is a novel about charting your own course, creating your own recipe for happiness—a sweet dessert in which to indulge."

—Maria Laurino, author of *Were You Always an Italian?*

Gail Reitano grew up in the southern New Jersey Pine Barrens. She graduated from Rutgers University and lived in London for twelve years before moving to the San Francisco Bay Area. Her fiction, memoir and personal essays have appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *Catamaran Literary Reader*, and *Ovunque Siamo* among others, and have been featured on public radio in the Bay Area. *Italian Love Cake* is her first novel.

"A beautiful journey of feminist and political awakening in late 1930's America."

Kim Chernin, author of *In My Mother's House*

Marie Genovese looks out from her apartment window above the Five & Ten and wonders how she'll save the failing store she's inherited from her mother. In a historical moment overshadowed by fear, economic uncertainty, and the controlling behavior of men, a powerful line of women—living and dead—helps Marie navigate her path to independence.

With the realist detail of Sinclair Lewis and the modern, feminist sensibility of Elena Ferrante, *Italian Love Cake* is the account of a woman thwarted in her self-expression and autonomy. Gail Reitano sets the story in a deeply patriarchal culture, but boundaries between masculine power and feminine exaltation are blurred and frequently crossed. In this Depression-era portrait of a first-generation Italian-American woman, Marie Genovese asserts her own mind, and her sexuality, on the way to achieving her economic dreams.



Early Praise for Italian Love Cake

"Much like the great works of realism written in the 1930's, *Italian Love Cake* focuses in crisp detail on the daily life of the powerfully attractive Maria Genovese. The dramatic tensions between Marie and the men in her life are lived against a backdrop of warring democratic and authoritarian visions of the future. A strikingly original and inspiring narrative."

—Mary Lawlor, *Fighter Pilot's Daughter*

"Sparks fly from the first page to the last in this unconventional novel written with mastery and daring."

—Renate Stendhal, *Kiss Me Again, Paris*

"Elena Ferrante's American counterpart. . . a beautiful journey of a woman asserting her sexuality while a small town witnesses her feminist and political awakening in late 1930s America. A real gem."

—Kim Chernin, *In My Mother's House*

Reviews, Links, and Interviews:

Questing, KWMR Point Reyes

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Talking Points for Italian Love Cake

- First-generation immigrant experience
- Identity definition and development
- Historical depictions of the female body as a consumable commodity
- Intersections and relationships between love and death
- Situating this novel in the canon of feminist literature
- Spectrum of self service and service to others in the context of love and relationships
- Role of food in relationships and personal/political dynamics
- Intersections between Italy and America
- Hollywood movies as dream machine for early immigrants
- Mother-daughter relationships; absent mothers
- The living and their relationship to ancestors
- Women's economic independence
- Women and Catholicism
- Women as bosses
- Societal pressures on women
- Class and economic independence

Interview with Gail Reitano on Italian Love Cake

Where did this novel begin for you? Was there a defining moment that led to the compulsion to write this story?

I was working in the nonprofit sector, and with every freelance job, my desire to write full time got stronger. The defining moment was while working as a consultant to the Prison University Project at San Quentin Prison in San Francisco. As interesting as that was, I was already feeling the pull of wanting to write a novel and was looking for an excuse to leave my job.

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My Brilliant Friend by Elena Ferrante had just come out. I'd been writing personal essays about my Italian American family. I had been thinking about Italy and was wondering what our connection was to Europe, three generations removed. That history seemed lost to me.

What about Ferrante's narrative inspired you?

What caused me to pick up Ferrante's novel was the setting – Naples, where my maternal grandmother's family had come from. And what I read shocked me. The similarities between Ferrante's Neapolitans and the people from my hometown was overwhelming, right down to the surnames, the prejudices, the mania to make money and enter a better class, the rejection of the importance of a good education. It was like I was reading about my own small New Jersey town. That's when I decided to write about my own Italians. Before Ferrante, I didn't believe an American, I should say, a non-Italian reader would be interested.

Your novel takes place in a small rural town in New Jersey. How does "place" inform the story?

Place and character are my starting points and they kick-start the narrative. My fictional town of Littlefield, New Jersey is an unusual place, one frozen in time. What is exceptional about this southern Jersey town is its proximity to large port cities, places where immigrants landed in the tens of thousands and then fanned out into outlying areas, in this case, rural land and small town life where they could realize the American dream.

Places live in you. You can't escape their power. Though I now live in California, I think about my hometown a lot. Littlefield, the fictional town in *Italian Love Cake*, and the Five & Ten, which is Marie Genovese's world, are jumping off points for all that my main character thinks and feels as she battles to pull herself up, enter a new class, an American class.

Your main character lives in town, so you have all that life going on, but the surrounding area is barren, the New Jersey Pine Barrens, in fact. Can you speak to that contrast?

Every day, Marie sees her late mother's close friends and other familiar faces on a very familiar main street, which is the view from her apartment window. And she is proud to be from town, which she considers a step up from the farms and agrarian life a mile away.

"Littlefield sat in the middle of a flat plain of mostly farms, where in summer blueberries ripened on bushes, and in fall cranberries floated in bogs, all beneath a vast blanket of pine. The town spread out for miles, but we were at its center."

Small town snobbery--town versus country--was very common where I came from. It existed in my own family; on one side were farmers, on the other, business people. We took great pride in living in the middle of a million acre pine forest known as the New Jersey Pine Barrens, but we were also glad we lived in town. We were both physically isolated and also within easy reach of the densely populated northeast corridor. These contrasts were useful to me in describing the split Marie Genovese experiences between her Italianness and her Americanness. She is proud to be a shopkeeper and not a farmer, a store owner and not merely someone's employee, an American and not an Italian. But of course she is an Italian, and that lost history and her family's place within it becomes an area of curiosity and exploration, something she must find out about.

The author Kim Chernin mentions a "feminist awakening." What does feminism look like for a woman coming of age in the 1930s?

I won't be giving anything away to say that, like many women, Marie is slow to realize the power she has not just over men, but over the limitations she places on herself. Her mother's death, when Marie is only twenty, leaves a gap in her sexual and emotional education that puts her at a disadvantage. A telling scene is when, after her mother's funeral, Marie catches her reflection in the window, smooths her dress, and notices how it hangs on her. In that moment she reflects on her mother's fuller-figure. Here, the mother, such a powerful influence in a woman's life, is missing. Yet Marie inhabits her mother's world, must function in her family's store, order the men who work for her around,

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including two younger brothers and a man who once worked for her mother. She has responsibilities, and she must keep them all employed. But she soon realizes the respect her mother commanded doesn't automatically transfer to her. So she projects, even when she doesn't feel it, the image and strength of a survivor. And every challenge only fuels Marie's ambitions and her desires.

What are Marie's desires?

She wants to succeed. She doesn't want the store to fail. She wants to make money and be as secure as she can be. Over time her ambitions expand: she wants to be the best, and most successful Five & Ten. She even dares to hope she might one day pass down that wealth to the next generation, something a woman in 1930s America could never hope to do.

Marie is a Ferrante-like female character. What I mean by that is her strength. The reader knows from the outset that, whatever happens, Marie won't sit back and wait to accept what she's given.

I'm very drawn to characters who are, in Ferrante's words, full of vigor. They are women who want something. "...the vigor of the woman was like that of plants, invasive life, rampant life, or, to take a word that makes a bad impression, *vigenza*, force." In short, a forceful woman. Marie has become a forceful woman. Like all women, she wants control over every aspect of her life. I once considered this goal very Italian, specifically Italian. At the time, I was growing up in an Italian household, in an Italian community and I watched the women I knew, my mother, grandmother, and aunt all struggle for their autonomy, their independence from fathers, husbands, brothers. There were always so many people to navigate, men, of course, but sadly women too, all with an idea of the right way to behave, what should be done, and who should decide. Control over our bodies, our environment, our prospects can't be left to others, and when it is, the results are disastrous.

Where does Italian Love Cake come in? I mean, the actual cake?

I was waiting for this question! Because of the terrible economy, Marie begins baking cakes to earn extra money. When she makes an Italian Love Cake for the richest man in town, she uses her mother's recipe. To the rather standard ingredients, she adds herbs like anise and mint and casts intentions. Initially, these are modest--she wants more baking commissions--but as the Depression deepens and WWII approaches, her hopes become more ambitious. She wants her own sphere of influence, and this extends well beyond the kitchen. Though Marie dabbles in herbs, she is not a witch, but rather a woman who employs whatever she can to achieve the status she feels she deserves. Women have always used food to gain power. It is the power of the nurturing mother, of the caring spouse, and also of the witch, who folds herbs and spells into food and potions.

I was interested in the scenes where Marie talks to her dead mother. They seem natural, and manage to avoid magical realism which can sometimes feel forced or fantastical.

When Marie sits in the room she calls the *ex-voto*, a small storeroom in the apartment where she's created a shrine to her dead mother, she asks for guidance. Sometimes it's a moral question, though the question is rarely specific. It's often only a mood she brings to that room that her mother quickly reads, and Marie derives the answer in silence--of course, her dead mother doesn't speak. But Marie is able to think through moral questions in that meditative atmosphere created by the spirit of her mother. I think for many women, we carry our mother's voice within us. The first time I experienced this was when I had my own child. I could recall how my mother would handle a certain situation. I could summon that advice without having to call her up. Though sometimes I did call her!

Did you ever worry that Marie might not be a sympathetic female protagonist because of some of the choices she makes?

Some women might find Marie Genovese selfish, self-obsessed, maybe even immoral. As one friend put it, Marie is sleeping with a married man. Another friend of mine, herself a libertine, a bold thinker, a risk-taker--accused me of creating an immoral character. I don't see Marie as immoral. I see her as inexperienced, desperate, full of desires that the world conspires to deny her. She's like someone in a cage, and when she's presented with a means of escape, she seizes it. It is shocking how many women have slept with married men. And yet, we continue to police each other, shame each other. I'm not saying it's morally the right thing to do. Only that women continue to do it, while never

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admitting they do.

Marie's affair threatens not just her reputation but her livelihood. Wasn't this an unnecessary risk?

Marie hardly weighs the risks before she falls in love with Joseph Ashworth. At first she's flattered that such a man would be interested in her, but soon that feeling is replaced with the discovery of her own sexuality, of pleasure, and of need. Again, I'll refer to Ferrante, who says the only way for women to rehabilitate themselves, to restore their loss of status and recapture their beings is to "redeem their hidden sexuality and start again from there." This was easy to write. I experienced a similar transformation in my own life when I escaped the claustrophobia of my Italian Catholic hometown and upbringing, and went to live in New York City. There, I never worried that something I might think or do might be a potential sin. I'd left behind the kind of judgement that stunts you. After Marie meets Joseph Ashworth she is liberated from her previous way of thinking. She's empowered to be herself, and the moment she ceases disguising her desires, she's able to tackle any problem.