



Marcus of Umbria: What an Italian Dog Taught an American Girl about Love

Justine van der Leun

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Marcus of Umbria: What an Italian Dog Taught an American Girl about Love Justine van der Leun Tired of laboring in city cubicles, Justine van der Leun sublets her studio apartment, leaves her magazine job, and moves to Collelungo, Italy, population: 200. There, in the ancient city center of a historic Umbrian village, she sets up house with the handsome local gardener she met on vacation only weeks earlier. This impulsive decision launches an eye-opening series of misadventures when village life and romance turn out to be radically different from what she had imagined. Love lost with the gardener is found instead with Marcus, an abandoned English pointer that she rescues. With Marcus by her side, Justine discovers the bliss and hardship of living in the countryside: herding sheep, tending to wild horses, picking olives with her adopted Italian family, and trying her best to learn the regional dialect. Not quite up to wild boar hunting, no good at gathering mushrooms, and no mamma when it comes to making pasta, she never quite fits in with the locals who, despite their differences, take her in as one of their own. The result is a rich, comic, and unconventional portrait about learning to live and love in the most unexpected ways.

Marcus of Umbria: What an Italian Dog Taught an American Girl about Love Details

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From Reader Review Marcus of Umbria: What an Italian Dog Taught an American Girl about Love for online ebook

Cheryl Schibley says

This sweet little book sat on my bookshelf for a while before I picked it up to read. I am so glad I did it was a very good read. I fell in love with Marcus and Umbria.

JulieJ says

Ever dreamed of moving to a foreign country on a whim? This is about a woman who did, the small town in Umbria where she lived, and her life there. Is it a love story? Sort of. But it's also a memoir and felt like a journey of discovery and self-discovery.

Carla says

I picked up this book because Ms. van der Leun graduated from the school where I teach (I remembered her and had also read some of her pieces in O Magazine) and I almost returned it to the library because my reasons for reading it were not pure. I am glad I read on because I really enjoyed this book. First, Ms. van der Leun is talented and engaging writer. Her story has a refreshing perspective. Critics on Goodreads said that she was self-absorbed and unlikeable as a character but what the heck! -- it's a MEMOIR, the author is supposed to be absorbed by her own experience at a very specific time in her life. I appreciated Ms. van der Leun's honesty (she is not without fault and peculiar motivation -- entirely human) and loved how she wove reflections about her past into her more contemporary story of living in a village in Umbria with a new love, limited (no?) prior knowledge of Italian and a paucity of wherewithal to trust herself in new and challenging environs. Her humor appears as she tries to navigate Italian country life, her boyfriend's tight-knit, extended and traditional Italian family and the language. I finished the book thoroughly satisfied and wanting to meet Marcus in person!

Audra (Unabridged Chick) says

Shamefully, I've had to quit trying to read this book as I've had it for about four months and can't seem to break 100 pages. I just can't stand our heroine! The book has a chick lit feel to it -- which might work for some but is a turn off for me. The 'struggles' of Americans living in bucolic foreign lands aggravate rather than entrance me, and this book was no exception.

LindyLouMac says

I felt the title and the blurb were somewhat misleading as I was expecting more about Justine's relationship

with the dog a female called Marcus, yes really and less about Italian culture. In fact I was unsure if I was even going to like the book as I am not a doggy person and would have been happier had it been publicised as yet another Life in Italy story. As really that is what it is, dressed up as a doggy tale to maybe attract a different readership, no idea why though. It was no surprise to me therefore to read a review where the reader was disappointed as there was too much culture and not enough about Justine's relationship with Marcus.

Despite not agreeing personally with the way the book has been marketed I did enjoy it especially as there was an awful lot I was able to empathise with as an expat in Italy myself.

Justine whilst on holiday in Italy starts a relationship with a local man, Emanuele, and barely knowing him decides to give up the New York lifestyle that she is already disillusioned with to live with him in Collelungo. His family the Crucianis accept her as one of the family, despite the fact that due to the culture shock she is experiencing she finds it very difficult and never truly feels she belongs. I don't think Emanuele ever really felt she did either, when you read that he had a key ring engraved with words from a Bob Dylan song as a gift for her. 'Justine, I love you but you're strange'

The relationship with Marcus comes about because one of the things that Justine found hard to cope with was the rural Italians behaviour towards their dogs. It is not usually that the dogs are treated cruelly it is just that they are not seen as pets, but as animals that have to earn their keep and certainly would not be allowed indoors. It has been like this for generations and is not something that Justine was likely to be able to change overnight.

Unable to adapt to Italian rural life and realising that she and Emanuele, as much as they had been good friends to each other, it was never going to be a lifetime commitment. With the relationship as good as over she makes plans to return to the USA along with Marcus. What a culture shock for her, the dog I mean, that must have been!

Can I recommend this well it really depends what you are expecting. If you are hoping that her relationship with Marcus will be thoroughly explored and that you might actually learn something from the lessons she learnt, you will I think be disappointed. I never did discover what that lesson was. That is No then but Yes if you want to read a story that despite, the title is focused on Justine's I think realistic portrayal of life in rural Umbria.

For a photo and more please visit my blog.
<http://lindyloumacbookreviews.blogspot...>

Mirella says

Marcus of Umbria, What an Italian Dog Taught an American Woman about Love is a memoir recounting of the author's own experience. Told in first person narrative in novel style, it is the story of a young woman from New York who visits Italy on vacation and falls in love with a handsome Italian gardener named Emanuele. Although she returns home after her vacation, the draw to Italy disturbs her peace. Within a few weeks, she abandons her job and life in New York and returns to Italy to move in with her new Italian boyfriend and live with him and his family in Collelungo an Umbrian town of 200 people.

However, building a relationship between two people of vastly different cultures is challenging to say the least. As the author immerses herself into a new Italian life, she faces numerous challenges, makes a realm of good friendships, and finds an unusual true love.

Being first generation Italian Canadian and having travelled to Italy on numerous occasions, what I enjoyed most was that the novel gave a very clear and accurate picture about rural Italian life. The author captured the essence of the culture, the traditional roles of men and women within a family and the bonds that bind them together. She went into wonderful detail about the food, a simpler lifestyle, and the generosity of the Italian villagers. The relationship between rural Italians and their pets was also accurately portrayed in that animals often serve a utilitarian purpose rather than kept as pets.

The author has a nice easy writing style, peppering her prose with poignancy and humour. For the animal lovers or anyone who loves Italy and its rich culture, this is a wonderful, satisfying story. Because the story arose from the author's direct experiences, the novel was rich and vivid and a true pleasure to read.

Gail Cooke says

Had a bad day at the office? Justine van der Leun had more than a few plus seven years of living in New York City, and she wanted a change. When an acquaintance invited her to spend a month in his village, Collelungo, Italy, she couldn't pack fast enough. Thus began a life changing adventure for her and a warm, hilarious, head-on honest memoir for us.

MARCUS OF UMBRIA will enchant from the first page. After meeting a handsome musician/gardener, Emanuele, during her first visit to Italy Justine decides to move there permanently in hopes of finding "a great love.....a new place and a new way to live." Now, Collelungo (population 200) was a new place for her but in actuality an ancient city in the heart of Umbria. The people were farmers, quite set in the ways of their predecessors and happy to follow them.

Emanuele's family, the Crucianis, took her in – albeit they found her odd. For her part, Justine attempted to adapt, helping where she could, gamely following their habits, and attempting to learn the language. But she found that much of the fabric of life for the Collelungoese had been woven centuries ago and she could not change a stitch "This was a culture of women who took care of men from birth to death, and of men who feigned incapability until they actually became incapable." (ie Justine once saw an aged woman carefully making her way across the piazza carrying a stack of starched and ironed shirts – after all, "she had been ironing her son's shirts for seventy-five years.")

Justine found herself "unable or unwilling to do what society dictates an Umbrian woman should do – including incessantly cleaning up after a man, killing chickens with my bare hands, and cooking lasagna and wild boar." However, in addition to finding that she and Emanuele were not meant for each other Justine did find the love of her life to date in a small pen attached to the horse barn – a badly neglected puppy whose ribs she could easily count. She immediately made him her own and named him Marcus. As it turned out he was a she and a purebred English pointer. Caring for Marcus in a place where dogs were treated as livestock and often died by the age of three. Nonetheless, she persisted much to the consternation of the Cruciani family.

Speaking of that family, the author has created unforgettably vivid verbal photographs. It is as if her words were a camera clearly imaging mother Serenella (who worked 14 hours a day and then came home to prepare a feast in 20 minutes); father Fabio with his ever present cigar who is usually found in a seated position, Emanuele's siblings and diverse relatives. Hopefully some day MARCUS OF UMBRIA will become a film

as these people are too wonderful not to be brought to mind again on a wide screen.

Justine van der Leun has given us a memoir to savor, a sampling of the Old World vis-a-vis the new, a candid remembrance enriched with life lessons, laughter, and the ever changing faces of love.

Gail Cooke

Kristie says

After reading some of the reviews from other readers I am compelled to comment. This book had its pluses and minuses, but over all I couldn't disagree with the writer's experience and the difficulty of writing a memoir. It is true that the author seems immature when she goes to live in Italy, and she is young. She makes many mistakes in her choices but does seem to learn something from them. I do have to agree that I wish there were more stories about Markus, but yet not less about the family in Italy. Maybe even more about her other experiences in Italy.

You see, I too have lived in Italy, many times throughout my life, mostly in the areas of Orvieto in Umbria and in Florence, Tuscany. To say that there is no culture clash would be dishonest and I recall at the end of our five month stay in Florence feeling exactly the way Justine does by the end of her memoir; when she looks down at all that beauty from a beautiful horse and wants nothing but to get out of there. That was such a clear feeling for me, only I was standing at the top of Giotto's bell tower and looking down on Florence. I was desperate to leave, partly so I could return to my dog back in the states, and yet also felt as if my heart was being torn out.

I don't know if Justine has returned to Italy but I am sure she will. I did, about seven years later and this time to Orvieto. I have returned to this little city many times since then and have had varying experiences, depending on my health, independence, and state of my marriage and other relationships, not to mention what was going on at home. One thing I know is that these experiences are part of me as is Italy and its people, even if I might never quite feel wholly a part of it, always a bit of an outsider. Although, at times I think that is my own doing and not that of the people who live there, especially in Orvieto, where I have been treated with such kindness and understanding by the citizens there. I would say I have been more harshly judged by some of the other Americans who were there teaching alongside my husband, often sticking their egos out far enough for any sane person to trip over.

My last experience in Orvieto a year ago, was certainly one of my best. I was older and so much more comfortable in my own skin, so much more confident walking the streets of Rome or Florence, Venice. Also so much less concerned about being an American in Orvieto. I no longer worried that the natives might hear me speaking English down below their open windows while they ate lunch up above me. And I understand as well why the people of Florence dislike Americans. I understood that one before we even left there. After living in Florence for five months, I hated Americans as well who were tourists, so rude and obtrusive.

As for the treatment of animals in Italy, I have seen what Justine saw and other types of treatment as well. I saw posters everywhere urging people not to leave their pets on the loose while they went on vacation. This has been a practice there. I have also seen though, since becoming part of the EU, many positive changes in Italy. Recycling, fewer cars, more pedestrian areas, and better treatment of animals, better treatment of the environment. I still never saw a male dog who was neutered, but did see dogs everywhere, traveling with their families on vacation. People had brought them with and treated them well. I can't ever imagine things being very humane on any farm in any place. There is something characteristically brutal about raising animals for food, but if you are going to eat meat, you may as well be forced into seeing how it's raised and

slaughtered, unlike the way we are here; and I have no doubt that animals on a small farm in umbria are certainly better treated than animals on factory farms here in the states.

Back to Justine and writing a memoir, I can't think of anything more difficult. I have an MFA in creative writing and have wanted many times to write about my experiences in Italy but have found it impossible. So I must give her credit for not always placing herself in the best light and for not always romanticizing Italy or the rural Italians. Its real, not a romance, and I think most of all that was what she was trying to express. I say good for her.

Michelle says

Marcus of Umbria: What an Italian Dog Taught an American Girl About Love by Justine van der Leun is about a young American woman who moves to a small, rural village in Italy on a whim and ends up falling in love with a dog.

Does it surprise you that I really, really enjoyed this book?

After becoming smitten with a local Italian ragazzo on vacation, the author packs up her New York City life and transplants herself to Collelungo in Umbria, the Green Heart of Italy. She immediately becomes part of the family, and she is expected to contribute as such. I think it's safe to say this is her first of many culture shocks detailed throughout the book.

As we learn more about Justine's new surroundings and the people playing prominent roles in her daily life, we also get to know the author through how she handles new, challenging situations. The picture isn't always pretty, but it certainly seems honest. Being able to trust the author of a memoir is always a huge plus.

Justine's time in the village wasn't full of leisurely days sipping wine under the Umbrian sun and raucous family gatherings by night, and she pulls no punches on this anti-Under the Tuscan Sun lifestyle she adopts. Her fidanzato isn't the most attentive (although he seems like a good enough guy), his brother has a cruel streak to say the least, and common methods of keeping and training animals are heart-wrenching to animal lovers.

Justine manages to present these tidbits and others in a very matter-of-fact way though, without judgment. It is what it is, if you will, and in many instances, it's been that way for centuries in Collelungo (and other small towns throughout Italy). I can't speak for what the people of Collelungo might think about Justine's perceptions as related in the book, but from my perspective in what seems to be a similar village, they rang fairly accurate.

But through all the ups and downs of life in Collelungo, Justine's growing love for Marcus, an English pointer she rescues, keeps her grounded — in fact, literally, as she is reluctant to leave town even after her love affair has soured, not knowing what will happen to her beloved pooch. Indeed, the only issue I had with the book is that I would have liked more Marcus!

Witty, descriptive, well-crafted, and just plain entertaining, this book gets four and a half espresso cups out of five; more Marcus would've had my cup runneth-ing over. Marcus of Umbria is more about Justine's year living in rural Italy than simply a girl meets dog tale, but what it does, it does well — so I highly recommend it.

Roberta says

I was hoping for a better feel of Umbria and didn't get one. Instead, the book is the highly self centered musings of an unlikeable young woman. The Italians call her egoiste and she fits the word. And her projection on to the unfortunate dog is pathetic. Skimmed it quickly.

Simon says

This was the first book that I won from Goodreads and I really enjoyed it. The author writes of a girl who leaves her known life in New York for an unknown world in Italy, searching for true love. She learns about the effects of different cultures on each other and she learns to adapt. After falling in love with an Italian farmer, she really falls in love with a dog that she rescues from the family of her lover - realizing that she is more connected with the dog who depends on her than with the lover who doesn't!

This entertaining book is written as fiction but at times sounds more like a journal of her travels. The characters are real, including the dog which she still has with her. Justine writes the truth about many thoughts that we all have and does it in a way that is very enjoyable.

I would recommend that you take this journey with her and then take one of your own!

Jenna (Falling Letters) says

Originally posted 1 October 2010 on Falling Letters

It's been a long time since I've finished a book that left me feeling so frustrated and unsatisfied. Usually I can tell within the first 20 pages or so whether I'm going to enjoy a book or not, but I decided to stick it out with this one. Forgive me now while I rant about the shortcomings of this book.

This book was dreary, dull, negative. The author had nothing positive to say about her travels. The entire memoir consists of her complaining about everything she encounters within the culture she chose to place herself in. She finds it appalling that people treat dogs as work animals and not as companions. I was thoroughly disgusted at some of the comments she made. There was one statement (on page 136) that made me lose whatever hope I had that the author was going to redeem herself. While complaining about how the locals never throw food out, the author says:

I'd seen her use brown bananas to bake a fluffy breakfast loaf.

Well, yeah, what the hell do you think breakfast loaf is made with? (Maybe that seems a little like overreacting, but after 136 pages of the author's petty whining I couldn't take it any more). Granted, some of the things that bother her are valid, but for the most it's just her bitching about how she hates life in the Italian country. And yet she chooses to live there for months with a man she admits she's not in love with.

That's the other thing that was frustrating. The book is advertised as 'What an Italian dog taught an American girl about love', but the dog is mentioned on maybe 40 pages (and that sounds a bit generous). Barely at all. I expected the entire book to be about the author and her loving adventures with her dog but frankly, the dog could have been removed from the book and it would have been the same. Every now and then, the author mentions that she loves her dog and not her boyfriend, but you never see that or feel it. It's like she just threw the dog in there so she could make a nice sounding book about it.

You never feel like you're getting the whole story. You don't feel sorry for her and her boyfriend (a page or two says 'Yeah, we eventually realized it wasn't going to work out but I stuck around anyhow'), you don't feel the love for the dog. When I finished this book, I was immensely relieved to not have to read any more of the author's shallow and selfish opinions.

...

Right, so that all sounds a little a harsh. As annoyed with the author as I was, I still managed to finish the book. It was not at all enjoyable, but I managed. I think I would feel a lot better about the whole thing if it wasn't marketed as dog love story. Perhaps a better subtitle would be 'Why I Hate Country Hicks of Italy' (but I guess that wouldn't sell as well...).

Gina says

Having just adopted a puppy of my own, I was extremely interested to read this memoir about a woman who travels to rural Italy in search of adventure, hoping for a love affair, and who ends up finding a wonderful dog.

I really wanted to like this book, and I did enjoy parts of it, but overall, I found that the only character I even remotely liked was Marcus, the dog. Justine van der Leun paints an ugly picture of the residents of the pastoral Umbrian town in which she finds herself. At best she makes them seem antiquated, and at worst downright cruel. I think I was the angriest with Justine herself for staying in a problematic relationship and not wanting more for herself. I kept wanting to tell her, "get out of there if you're so unhappy." Instead she stays because she doesn't seem to think enough of herself to be alone. While she draws an unflattering picture of the locals of Collelungo, the ugliest person to me was Justine van der Leun, because she acted as if she had no choice in the direction of her life.

She continuously criticizes the Italian family and villagers she finds herself among, and doesn't seem grateful at all that they've opened their homes to her, a relative stranger. She stays on the outside of everything, wishing things were different, but doing nothing to make that happen. While some of the people she encounters are deplorable, many of them are generous, too.

If the point of this book is that you can find love and companionship in a dog, I would have preferred to read more about van der Leun's time with Marcus, rather than the negative experience she had with the Italian people. The book's ending was rather predictable, and it might have been more interesting to find out what happens next, but perhaps that's being left for another book. I for one won't be purchasing that one.

Carol says

This book was a very interesting account of one woman's attempt at a different lifestyle. It was at times humorous (cultural misunderstandings), puzzling (why did she stay) and unsettling (treatment of women and animals), but always entertaining.

Pamela Hsieh says

I studied abroad in Italy (first in Florence, then in Bologna) as an undergrad for a couple years, and I found so much communion in reading this memoir. There is truly something universal about the "living abroad" experience, the making a place for yourself in a foreign land. It brought back so much of the familiar in my time abroad, and I felt really nostalgic.

I really appreciated Justine's voice and the way she describes some of Italy's less savory characteristics without judging them or overly romanticizing them. I really adored her depiction of Fabio. *Simpatico*. :)

My only qualm with the story that I would have liked to see more of is internal exploration. I believe living abroad is more than anything a development of character and knowing oneself better, opening oneself to new thoughts. There were glimpses of this, but overall due to the consistent "jumping around" in chronology and scenery I believe there was a lot more to Justine's experience than was presented. (For instance, it was never truly clear to me how much Italian Justine actually picked up in her time in Umbria. And besides her obvious respect for animals -- something I share as I am an avid animal lover -- it just generally seemed as though I never truly knew who Justine was before she moved to Italy. I didn't feel she gave enough justice to either man she was with in the story, which either means there was a total lack of connection in the first place -- doubtful -- or she just didn't feel compelled to share. Which is fine to an extent, but like . . . if you're going to write and publish a memoir, there's kind of an understanding that the writer will reveal their innermost experience, yes?) The writing style though was lovely, and I found the story to be very unique.

In response to some complaints that Justine is whiny or negative about her life in Italy, I wanted to speak up. I personally feel that she did a lot of justice to the cultural differences between Italy and America. Americans on the whole have a general tendency to romanticize Italy for what they think it is rather than actually dedicate the time and energy to truly live there and discover what it's really like. I actually went into reading the book with a guarded, careful heart because I didn't know whether I could trust Justine's depiction of my precious second home. Slowly, as I read more, I eventually let my guard down because I didn't feel she set out to misrepresent the general vibe. Sure, many of the characters behave in unpalatable ways, but isn't that true of many people in general, regardless of nationality? I didn't find her unnecessarily antagonizing anybody. I did feel like Emanuele was far less prominent than he should have been, considering the huge role he and his family played in her life there. But I personally have an ex-boyfriend who came from rural Italy (a farm, as well) and I found a lot of her story to explain certain things about him I never understood fully either (especially with regards to his attitude towards animals). This was particularly because I always lived in cities while I lived there -- but I've found a similar experience in the US on the occasion I meet farmers or people from rural areas. They're truly different worlds. I didn't personally feel Justine was harsh, whether intentionally or not, towards anybody. In fact, I'm sure I would have been far more antagonistic if I were the one telling the story (just imagining the scenes at the farm involving slaughtering pigs/lambs were enough to upset me, let alone the ordeal with Calamity Jane).

Ultimately, it was interesting and a pleasant surprise to enter a memoir that I thought would primarily be about a woman's relationship with her dog and discover something a little different (so yes, I agree the marketing was a little misleading). I really enjoyed the read, and I sincerely hope Justine continues to write and publish into the future.

