



Ciao, America!: An Italian Discovers the U.S.

Beppe Severgnini , Giles Watson (Translator)

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In the wry but affectionate tradition of Bill Bryson, *Ciao, America!* is a delightful look at America through the eyes of a fiercely funny guest — one of Italy's favorite authors who spent a year in Washington, D.C.

When Beppe Severgnini and his wife rented a creaky house in Georgetown they were determined to see if they could adapt to a full four seasons in a country obsessed with ice cubes, air-conditioning, recliner chairs, and, of all things, after-dinner cappuccinos. From their first encounters with cryptic rental listings to their back-to-Europe yard sale twelve months later, Beppe explores this foreign land with the self-described patience of a mildly inappropriate beachcomber, holding up a mirror to America's signature manners and mores. Succumbing to his surroundings day by day, he and his wife find themselves developing a taste for Klondike bars and Samuel Adams beer, and even that most peculiar of American institutions -- the pancake house.

The realtor who waves a perfect bye-bye, the overzealous mattress salesman who bounces from bed to bed, and the plumber named Marx who deals in illegally powerful showerheads are just a few of the better-than-fiction characters the Severgninis encounter while foraging for clues to the *real* America. A trip to the computer store proves just as revealing as D.C.'s Fourth of July celebration, as do boisterous waiters angling for tips and no-parking signs crammed with a dozen lines of fine print.

By the end of his visit, Severgnini has come to grips with life in these United States -- and written a charming, laugh-out-loud tribute.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Callie S. says

Leggere Severgnini è, per me, l'occasione di ricordare ogni volta come possa intrattenersi con intelligenza un lettore e conquistarlo grazie a una penna agile, arguta, mai eccessiva e prossima, anzi, alla precisione chirurgica del bisturi.

Severgnini racconta, ma soprattutto interpreta, l'America degli anni Novanta; lo fa con l'arguzia irriverente del terzo osservatore, senza presunzioni di stampo sociologico. Ne viene una cronaca di vita appassionante e anche un godibile documentario letterario, di quelli in cui vizi e virtù, sebbene messi a nudo, non suggeriscono mai il desiderio di umiliare o ferire l'oggetto dell'analisi.

Raggiunta l'ultima pagina, soprattutto, lascia una gran voglia di partire e provare l'esperienza sul campo.

Mickey says

My process for selecting books to read has always been haphazard and arbitrary. It generally involves wandering around the library (or if fortunes are flush, the used book store) and waiting for books that present themselves to me. I figure that this is the way the literary gods speak, so I try my best to listen. This doesn't mean that I don't set specific goals. In 2011, I was alternating novels of George Eliot with novels of Margaret Atwood. 2012 was the year I tried to read more books of essays and more science books. 2013 more works by journalists. 2014 was for self-help books. 2015 was for short stories, but I don't think I read any. 2016 hasn't had any plan, but I've been reading a lot of autobiographies and memoirs. But through this loose method, I have read two books that have similar tales but opposing narratives. The first, *As the Romans Do: An American Family's Italian Odyssey*, is a memoir of an American who goes to live in Rome. This book *Ciao, America!: An Italian Discovers the U.S.* is about an Italian who goes to live in America.

This happy coincidence allows for some good compare and contrast. Both agree about the state of jogging (Americans being enthusiasts and Italians being puzzled), the differing nature and celebrations of Christmas, the habit of Americans being job and job title obsessed, the world-wide obsession with professional soccer with America being an exception. The one area in which they contradict each other is in the area of children. Both accuse the other culture of being too permissive and fawning over children, allowing them to run amok publicly.

This memoir is about an Italian family who lives in Georgetown for a year (from spring 1994 to spring 1995). Looking over the reviews, there is the common complaint that living in Georgetown at any time would not give a foreigner an accurate picture of America. I disagree. As big as the United States is, a family could spend a year traveling and still not visit every area of interest, and we would get a memoir of mostly gas stations, restaurants, and motels. (All of which, as the author says, are standardized in America to a degree that would be unthinkable in Europe.) The traveling family would only meet tourists and then, only briefly. In Georgetown (which I haven't seen anyone make a case for being different than any other suburb), they have a chance to be part of an American community and to make observations about the home life of Americans. I do not know if Severgnini has written about his other, previous trips to America, in which he stated that he made several lengthy tours around the country with various other family members, but I find nothing missing from this memoir.

Another complaint that I've seen is the idea that this book is "out-dated", because it is about the mid-1990's.

(The other book is also tagged with this.) I just don't see the problem in this. These are not travel books. Their intent is not to help you navigate through the streets or find a restaurant. Honestly, since they are from another time period, I find them *more* interesting, not less. Living in Raleigh, North Carolina, I can get in my car and be in Washington D.C. in a few hours. But I cannot visit Washington D.C. circa mid-1990's. I have to read to experience that. Severgnini talks a lot about the culture of that time. For instance, the first conservative House of Representatives in recent history, the Grunge look, talk radio, newspapers. There is even a quaint section about online shopping in its earliest years. There are some nostalgia-producing moments, like when he claims that it is easier to call someone than to contact them online.

What this book offers is a chance to look at how Americans are perceived by those living among us. Severgnini writes with an affectionate and observant air of the various American quirks. Some I've heard about (Americans come off as so friendly that they confuse people, Americans share intimate details too readily, Americans over-air-condition public places), some were new to me, such as Americans putting ice in their drinks being considered strange:

This is how the modern version works. You go in. A young waiter (usually the one at the bottom of the pecking order) sneaks up behind you and pounces, thrusting a bucket full of ice and water onto your table. Let's say you manage to persuade your tormentor to take the offending item away. A minute later a second bucket bearer will try again (refusing to believe that a customer doesn't want a free drink). You repulse him as well. Two minutes later the head waiter will notice that yours is the only table in the restaurant without a bucket of iced water. Convinced that you are being deprived of something that you are entitled to, he sorts out the problem personally. Head bowed, you accept defeat. You don't drink any, of course-that would be to risk a devastating attack of colitis. But you resign yourself to thinking of it as an insurance policy. After all, you'll be left alone now. (pg 67)

Severgnini has done his homework. There are many references to other travelers who have written about staying in America and the Americans. This adds so much depth to his book. But there is also the lovely way he has with words that makes this memoir memorable. I enjoyed his point of view and his sharp eye. There were several times that I laughed out loud at the way he phrases things, such as this story about garbage day in Georgetown:

The arbiters of our fate are the operatives of the sanitation department. Generally, these are muscular young black men who arrive clinging onto the decrepit garage truck that pumps out earsplitting rap music. Most sport handkerchiefs tied pirate-style around their heads. They jump down from the still-moving truck, exchange a few guttural syllables, and examine our heap of bags with a skeptical air. Anxious eyes watch from every window. Everyone is hoping to be the lucky one today. In the end, the pirate crew throws a few bags onto the garbage truck and leaves the rest. After they are gone, the street is covered with plastic bottles and cans, and looks as if a bomb has hit it.

As soon as the Tyrants of Trash have departed, professors, lawyers, journalists, and members of Congress emerge from the houses of Thirty-fourth Street to debate the following topic. What was their criterion for selection? How can we satisfy the aesthetic demands of the pirates? After six months, some conclusions appear inevitable.

- a) The pirates have a thorough knowledge of the city garbage regulations. Anyone who puts glass in a black bag (it should go in the blue ones, along with plastic and aluminum), or paper in the white bags (its proper place is in the green boxes), is immediately disqualified.*
- b) The pirates are cunning. They know that the heavier black bags will contain grass, leaves, and earth, for whose removal a special pickup service should be called.*
- c) The pirates are well aware of their own bargaining power. They know that Thirty-fourth Street is populated by cowards, and that no one is ever going to come out to complain.*
- d) The pirates don't want to work. (pg 99-100)*

This novel is entertaining and interesting. It has startling fresh imagery and an unusual perspective (for Americans at least).

Anne says

I recommend this book for anyone who wants some insight into how someone from another culture views some aspects of our everyday life. It is a very funny book. However, it is a bit dated, since it was written in 1995.

Virginia Milletti says

Il libro, sebbene in alcune osservazioni sia ormai vecchio, è stato scritto nel 1995, nel complesso, rimane molto attuale. Posso affermare con assoluta sincerità che più del 70% delle affermazioni, osservazioni e riflessioni, sono le stesse che sto facendo io che sto trascorrendo un anno negli Stati Uniti. La prosa è scorrevole e non manca di ironia sia verso gli americani e il loro stile di vita, che gli stessi italiani all'estero, e non solo.

Laura says

This is the first adult-level book I've ever completed in Italian, so I'm sure I missed some of the subtleties and the humor, but I chose to read it because 1) an Italian friend gave it to me and 2) because I've just completed the inverse of Severgnini's premise: my first year as an American in Italy.

The book is light and episodic. Italians will find it funny that Americans keep their buildings as cold as a refrigerator in the summer, and that Italians like to complain about it. Severgnini is fascinated with shopping in large grocery stores, American familiarity in manners, e-mail, and of course, fast food. He laughs at the excesses of "political correctness," circa 1994. He thinks that his Italian name is too difficult for American marketers to spell, not realizing that they can't spell Anglo names either. And I smiled when I got to the part in which Severgnini took friends to a 4th of July celebration in Washington DC—complete with a well-planned meal, a wicker basket, and summer white linen outfits—and wondered by they were getting stared at.

But a lot of what Severgnini recounts in this book is peculiar to the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, DC in 1994, where and when he was a foreign correspondent. It often reads more like blog posts for the crowd back home than like a true probing of the American spirit. The chapters are vignettes, now dated. Towards the end, he does try for a few pages to seriously assess what Americans are like, he comes up with five English words: Control, Comfort, Competition, Community & Choreography.

Okay. But more telling, to me, was a quote near the beginning of the book:

Per gli italiani che arrivano negli Stati Uniti, la soddisfazione non e' vedere un film sei mesi prima che arrivi in Italia, scegliere fra cinquanta marche di corn-flakes e leggere due chili di giornale la domenica mattina. Cio' che ci rende felici e' combattere con la burocrazia americana. Il motivo? Allenati a trattare con quella italiana, ci sentiamo come un torero che deve affrontare una mucca. Una faccenda deliziosamente rilassante.

Funny and culturally insightful. Reflects the time he was living in the USA--the nineties. Some perceptions still ring true: behaviors, values.

Sara Booklover says

Un libro molto carino e divertente, adatto a tutti coloro che vorrebbero andare negli Stati Uniti e che sognano davanti ai loro telefilm. Certo, il libro è del '95 e le parti riguardanti la tecnologia informatica sono ormai superatissime anche qui in Italia e non si può fare a meno di sorridere di fronte (ad esempio) all'incredulità di Severgnini davanti a chi fa shopping online (io ne fatto ormai così tanto che mi è venuto a noia...) e a chi scrive sui Social Network (abitudine quotidiana della maggioranza della popolazione mondiale...).

Però a parte la tecnologia superata ci sono altre informazioni interessanti.

Però una pecca c'è... perché Severgnini si è scelto per il suo soggiorno di un anno negli USA una casetta così "poco americana"? Trovo totalmente errato che gli italiani in america si trovano più a loro agio in una casa piccola che gli ricordi l'Italia. Io avrei preferito mille volte che mi descrivesse una di quelle ENORMI case indipendenti e a schiera della periferia che si vedono sempre alla tv, mi sono sempre chiesta cosa si provi a vivere lì dentro, altro che cucine piccole e inospitali e bagnetti microscopici, di quelle ne ho viste e vissute già in abbondanza, senza bisogno di fare un viaggio oltreoceano!!!

Ester Elbert says

Hylarious. As an italian immigrant I must say that is all true

Amy says

So fascinating to see America through the eyes of a foreigner living here. Having lived overseas, I thought I had a broader perspective on life in the States, but I'm still an American, so I apparently can't totally remove myself from the picture. I think the author basically likes American culture, but sometimes it was a little hard to tell. Excellent read, if you can handle having our great country's lesser points highlighted at times.

Michael Martin says

Dated, rather mean-spirited, and DEFINITELY not very funny.

Be prepared for all kinds of inaccuracies (Wolfman Jack in American Graffiti is "Lone Wolf"? Really?). Some nasty references to black areas of Washington D.C. as "Chocolate City" lowered my rating of this book to one star. It needed an American editor.

Liz says

The concept of this book -- an Italian and his wife move to America for a year to study the culture -- is the reverse of the ever-popular situation in which the American goes to Italy and does the same thing, which is why it interested me. I was reminded of *I'm A Stranger Here Myself* by Bill Bryson, which is an awesome book and provided lots of laughs and witty observations about American culture from an outsider. Unfortunately, I think Bill Bryson did a far better job of it. This book started off having its funny moments, but after awhile the humor does become a bit one-note, and the second half felt like a slog. Though a lot of the author's observations were spot-on, some of them left me going "Huh? I've never met anyone who does that!". Maybe it's because this book was written in the mid-90s and is solely centered in Washington D.C. that leaves one with the feeling that the author was somewhat limited in his experiences with American culture. He doesn't really seemed to have explored anything outside the bubble of the upper-middle class city dwellers he was ensconced in while he was here, and there is so much more to our culture than that. In that sense, I don't believe he really "discovered the U.S.", as the subtitle of this book claims. For that reason, I would probably not recommend this book to anyone. For readers interested in a much better take on the subject, I would suggest the aforementioned Bill Bryson book, which on all counts blows this one away!
