

TLC Showcase

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Introduction to *The Ladies of the Italian Class and the Urge to Purloin*

There was a time in my life when, upon sitting down in the dentist's chair for some nasty procedure, I would think to myself, "At least now I can relax." It was during this gruesome period, having high-tailed it to a mountaintop overlooking Lake Como, that I began writing *The Ladies of the Italian Class and the Urge to Purloin*. My mission: brainy social comedy that was adventurous, fundamentally kind, and, at the same time, as light as *prosecco*. Or at least more amusing than dental surgery.

The Ladies are perfectly respectable. They are *never* rude. But don't let that fool you. They cannot resist the thrill of a deliciously compelling 'Moral Obligation'. The Ladies travel the world, blithely flaunting law and convention if that's what it takes to help the hapless and set things right. By the time I had finished the first draft, I knew this would be book one in a series.

The Ladies of the Italian Class and the Urge to Purloin was a leap for me, a major departure from my usual style. I needed help I could trust. Refining the narrative voice, getting the right tone, was essential. I contacted The Literary Consultancy after seeing their advertisement in the *Guardian*. I was blessed with the perfect, wise, insightful reader, Anna South, by way of the brilliant Rebecca Swift. After the initial editorial advice, TLC did not abandon me to the whims of fate. They have been supportive beyond expectation. I have since used TLC as a perceptive, candid second-set-of-eyes and recommended that others do the same. In the spirit of honest reporting, I have furrowed my brow and asked myself whether I have any criticism that I might make. Answer: No. TLC is a godsend at a time when publishing is in turmoil. Really.

I hope you enjoy meeting my friends, the Ladies, in this brief excerpt from their first adventure, *The Ladies of the Italian Class and the Urge to Purloin*.

The Ladies of the Italian Class and the Urge to Purloin,
by Rosanne Daryl Thomas

Part One:

**The Ladies of the Italian Class Are Put in a Rather
Extraordinary Position**

(Le Signore della Classe d'Italiano sono messo in una posizione un' po' straordinaria)

Everything was perfectly fine exactly the way it was, which, as everyone over the age of reason knows, should have been a warning. It was Wednesday at 3:52 in the afternoon, eight minutes before the scheduled time. There was nothing unusual about that. The fiveish Ladies of the Italian Class were all, always, early.

In general they were a compatible group, happy as a cluster of bivalves nestled under the sea against the walls of a calm, inaccessible grotto untouched by petty annoyance. This afternoon, however, things were a little choppy. They were having their annual dispute about what to buy their beloved *maestro*, Walter Albergo, PhD, for Christmas.

Representing the Useful Things Are Always Appreciated lobby was Lily Hurriyet. She was somewhat more than ever so slightly miffed that her motion, clearly the only correct and sensible choice, was not effortlessly carried. This was to be expected. When Lily Hurriyet knew her mind, she did not waver. Even her cropped aluminum grey hair was never out of place. It wouldn't dare stray. Waywardness and indecision knocked on other doors. Her opinions were absolute. One might have credited her confidence in her unerring correctness as the natural consequence of an eventful sixty-some revolutions around the sun. But ever since she had learned to say "no" at the precocious age of nine months, Lily had always enjoyed the pleasure of knowing how things should be done and what ought to be what. Lily thought of herself as a patient person, but, really, there were limits.

On behalf of the Presents Should Never Be Practical wing spoke Miss Olympia Silver whose hair was gold and looked remarkably natural. If anyone could be a natural blonde at that age, it would be Olympia, who had been a fashion model and

wild thing in her salad, dressing to the side, days.

Six significant days younger than Lily, she was not inclined to let her forget it. When Lily protested that at their time in life, six days amounted to no time at all, Olympia would retort that whole nations could be up-ended in twenty-four hours. Works of genius had been created in less. There was no arguing with that.

Disposed toward cashmere and subtle, expensive jewelry for at least the past thirty-seven years, Olympia was an art historian, if that's what you call someone who studies art so modern it has not had time to acquire a history. "There's way too much practicality in his life already, poor man. Why inflict more when we could shower him with extravagance?"

"Something he wouldn't normally get for himself," ventured Jane Bond, tilting more toward Olympia's camp but not quite ready to embrace the purchase of a monogrammed sterling silver watering can for his garden.

Jane had not yet achieved that certain *bellissima eta*, that *eta* being a comfortable decade into the second half century, that delicious season of life when duty generally calls elsewhere, when the world decrees a woman invisible and her time becomes her own. Hazel-eyed, with independent curls, Jane Bond (directly related – both to the spy *and* the ornithologist after whom he was named) was practically half the age of the other Ladies though she sometimes felt twice as old. While others might strive to be recognized, Jane strove to be underestimated. She still did classified analysis for the Agency, but she couldn't talk about that. So, to her dearest friends, she was a part-time caterer, a baker of superb confections. In her spare time, she was a single mother with a twelve-year-old daughter who could translate Etruscan. Said daughter, by the name of Sophia Bond, was homeschooled as daughters who translate Etruscan so often are. Sophia, the youngest Italianista, might not be old enough to qualify as a lady in the technical sense of the word, but she could, when she chose to, be ladylike.

Olympia resumed. "Given that my suggestion is actually practically practical, you really might compromise, Lily. Walter loves to garden. We all know that. One needs a watering can. There is no reason in the world why it shouldn't be sterling. Sterling is pure and lovely. Surely you do not propose we buy him one of those molded aluminum contraptions with the visible soldering on the seams?" The very idea made her cringe.

"I do not propose we buy him any watering can soldered or otherwise. A nice subscription is always..."

"...boring," interjected the amiable Sophia to the cackling opprobrium of Miss Beatrice Lake.

Beatrice, platinum of hair, rosy of cheek and upturned of nose, was the preternaturally spry senior Lady at seventy-four. Despite braces on both legs that made it awfully hard to get about without her slick red chrome walker, many a young and beauteous spring chicken, unable to keep pace, hobbled behind her feeling rather stodgy and grey about the beak. "I have just the thing!" she said.

So did Sophia. "A bust of Dante with a hinged thing that opens at the skullcap to reveal a secret hiding place for the cigarettes he shouldn't be smoking!"

"No. Something absolutely perfect. Guaranteed to please."

"For heaven's sake, *what?*" Lily folded her hands and inclined her head in a manner intended to convey a kindly, democratic interest in the wrong ideas of others.

But whatever Beatrice was about to suggest would have to wait much longer than any of the Ladies of the Italian Class could possibly have imagined.

The annual Christmas present debate was abruptly suspended. Their adored *maestro*, Walter Alberro, PhD, who had originally set out in life intending to be a botanist, could be heard wheeling his bicycle down the hall. He pushed through the door, his thinning hair disarranged like the feathers of a wobbly fledgling who has not yet figured out his wings and what to do with them. "News," he said, but of course he said it in Italian which, as you know, is *notizie*.

"Bad news?"

By way of an answer he simply uttered two words that required no translation, "The directress."

The directress of the Institute for Learning Languages -- the letterhead of which was printed-up before anyone had realized, alas, too late, that the acronym was ILL -- rarely dipped her hand into her metaphorical basket in order to strew tidings of comfort and joy upon devoted students of *la bella lingua*. The Italian class was the class up with which she begrudgingly put because there were five paying customers, but to her mind Italian studiers in general lacked a certain moral heft. Spanish was a necessary world language and could be put to use amongst the

downtrodden. Italian was the language of love, of food, of opera and art, which was to say, a frivolous language of no practical use to the serious person, what with so much suffering in the world.

“She’s not trying to cancel us again?”

Walter Albergo moaned like a man beset by all the directresses in the world and peered over his spectacles. “We are to be joined by a new student this afternoon. One Jessica...something.” Her last name had struck him as memorable but that was all he remembered about it. “Jessica something.”

“Oh, dear,” whispered Lily into her open handbag as she anxiously pretended to search for lipstick.

“You couldn’t stop her?” Beatrice demanded in an uncharacteristically agitated tone, her red and yellow semaphore flag earrings waving back and forth over her turtleneck sweater fiercely signaling an S.O.S.

Walter shrugged. “I tried to discourage her. Nothing I could do.”

The child made a classic Italian gesture that conveyed the impression of a Buddhist monk stopping mid-meditation to milk a small female yak. “Shit.”

“Language, Sophia.”

“Well. We’ll have to make the best of it,” Lily opined, now that she’d had time to recover her composure and assume the helm. “We must be gracious. Give her a chance. We might like her. Who knows? She might add a pinch of spice.”

Beatrice was having none of it. Her voice was uncharacteristically terse. “It is all well and good to be the voice of reason, Lily, if you feel compelled to do so, but stop there. I, for one, am thoroughly content with the seasoning in our little midst exactly *status quo*.”

Olympia raised one elegantly manicured, platinum encircled finger.

“Seconded.”

“A new someone will change things.” Sophia frowned.

Lily stood firm. “We were all new once, weren’t we?”

“Never. We started out old,” huffed the twelve-year-old.

“We will be welcoming,” decreed Lily, who instinctively felt revolutionary sentiment from any quarter must be quelled before untidiness ensued.

“If we must,” grumbled Olympia, speaking for all the Ladies, including Lily. Everyone knew Lily was no happier about the prospect of a sixth than anyone else,

she just had her standards.

“We have no choice,” said Walter Albergo, falling into a dejected silence.

The Ladies repented. It would not do. Worse, even, than the prospect of an interloper in their midst was to see their adored *maestro* in the slough.

“Not to worry,” Olympia amended cheerily as the Ladies rushed to reverse themselves in a torrent of assurances considerably less sincere but every bit as vehement as their protests: What harm could there be? The desire to polish up her Italian was, in itself, a good recommendation. No doubt, she’d fit right in and be a treasured member of their select ensemble in no-time.

Everything would be just as wonderful as ever.

Or at least not entirely bad.

And so, though the Ladies’ sincerity was indubitably in-, they rose to the occasion for the sake of their *maestro*. And because they had to work awfully hard to be welcoming when welcoming was the last thing they wanted to be, Jessica Saurtrapp was provisionally ushered into the fold with a banner display of bonhomie and world’s best party manners. The Ladies impressed even themselves. Surely their efforts would have, at very least, stunned and temporarily disarmed the normal interloper-come-lately, eliciting a pleasing measure of party manners in return so that everything would start off nicey-nicely on the right foot, et cetera.

But though any stranger might have been made to feel that the clouds were fluffy and the warm sun shone upon them, Ms. Saurtrapp, number one, had no truck with fluff and sunshine, and number two and more to the point, did not see herself as a stranger. She knew who she was. It was these others of whom she was in doubt.

“I was not informed there would be a child in the class,” she said by way of hello.

Sophia squinted at the skinny woman whose veins protruded from her neck and brow. “I don’t mind adults,” she said with angelic sweetness, adding, “As long as they’re well behaved and keep up with their reading.”

“Neither do we,” added Beatrice, cocking one eyebrow in such a way as to inspire envy and emulation in all who saw her.

Jane smiled proudly at the junior and senior members of their little tribe and added a nudge in the right direction. “We’re really very open-minded, as no-doubt

you are too.”

Jessica Saurtrapp stretched her thin lips across her teeth and folded her frame into a molded plastic chair. “I was given to understand that this is an advanced-intermediate class.”

“That it is,” Walter agreed, willingly.

Sophia held up a packet of Xeroxed verse. “We’ve been working on a little canto by Boiardo, right at the really good bit where the noble knight Orlando is chasing a fairy around the bottom of a lake trying to pull her hair.”

Jessica Saurtrapp placed her elbow upon the wobbly table, her palm under her taut chin. “May I see the syllabus?” she interrupted.

“We don’t have a syllabus,” chorused the Ladies.

“We’re more improvisational,” explained Walter. “If there’s a need as we go along, we address it.”

“My last Italian class had a detailed syllabus.”

Walter shrugged that way Italians shrug even though he was born in New York. It was one of the things he’d picked up when he was stationed abroad with the Navy that did not require shots afterward. It came in handy.

“A syllabus is more effective. Hwhat needs doing and hwhen clearly spelled-out so needs are addressed systematically. I concede that medieval fairy stories...”

“Epic poetry in the chivalric tradition,” amended *il maestro* with uncharacteristic asperity as he loosened the knot in his tie.

“... as you will, fairy epics, are a possible means to an end if there needs must be less matoor readers to consider when choosing appropriate material. But textualized application in a classroom context must be selected not only for its litruhry value but its utility in a contemporary setting, reinforcing the grammatical core, with key dialoguing between the modern constructs of the word *qua* text as a product of the mind and the everyday parlance of the cultural milieu to legitimate real-world purpose.”

Sophia’s eyes goggled. Here was a language she could not understand. And yet, it sounded so much like English.

Lily’s faced flushed in irrepressible agony. She understood all too well. Having served time in the halls of academe she could suffer short bursts of high sounding jargon and theoretical claptrappery with few ill effects provided treatment was

prompt. Beatrice threw her a sympathetic glance. Knowing she did not suffer alone, Lily found strength to recover her composure before the offensive woman noticed it had gone missing. “You might be surprised to find you enjoy...”

Jessica Saurtrapp did not bother to disguise her doubt that enjoyment would ever be possible under this kind of duress. “The acquisition of language over the age of twelve requires diligent carving of neural pathways. Haphazardness is hazardous to the neural bonds,” she sniffed authoritatively, removing a black eyeglass case from her bag and turning it over and over as if it were an hourglass measuring the loss of her Very Valuable time. “I simply do not know if I can make this work.” She placed the glasses case upon the table and opened it with a snap. She then shut it with another snap, deciding that the putting-on of eyeglasses would not improve things. “How frequently do you review the irregular endings?”

“Now and then,” said Walter, quietly holding the hill against this brittle Boadicea. “As needed and desired.”

“Well. I would certainly require...”

“You might find you enjoy...” Lily began again, mysteriously compelled to persuade this snapping Saurtrapp that she ought to sink her weedy roots amongst the roses.

Olympia, an expert gardener who knew perfectly well the damage an invasive weed could inflict, countered, “On the other hand, not everyone has the same...”

“You’re quite right.” Jessica Saurtrapp unfolded herself and made a final inspection of those unworthies who would fain be her fellow-travelers on the bumpy road to fluent Italian. “I won’t take up any more of your time.”

When at last the din of retreating high heels could no longer be heard in the land, the Ladies, and Walter, exhaled. “Well that’s over.”

“I’m afraid it isn’t,” said Lily. “She left her glasses behind.”

Olympia inspected the case. “These are Doccia & Bagno. Pity.”

“We can leave them with the directress,” Beatrice proposed.

“As it is,” cautioned Walter, “She’ll bite my head off and spit out the teeth.”

“Any gold fillings?”

“Sophia! You’re terrible,” Lily said delightedly. “There is no reason to bother the directress. I will simply look up Saurtrapp in the book. How many can there be?”

“I shudder to think,” said Walter, with a convincing demonstration of how, if

he were to shudder at the horror of more than one local Saurtrapp, he would go about it.

“She was a female dog, with apologies to the canine race, and a thing that travels by broom, with apologies to the broom. Give them to me,” said Olympia firmly. “I’ll donate them to the Survival Shelter where they will find some deserving nose on which to sit.”

“They’re always collecting eyeglasses.”

“Good, then. It’s settled,” said Beatrice. “If everyone’s over the shock, maybe we can do a little Italian.”

“Before I forget. No class next Wednesday.” As they all knew (because their darling Walter Albero had jubilantly reminded them every single Wednesday since October) The Society for the Appreciation of Fruit was having its biennial gathering. Walter was extremely pleased to be giving a talk on the Williams’ Bon Chrétien pear tree. With a beaker of *Poire William* liqueur at his side, he had lingered with devotion over his research into the Williams’ Bon Chrétien’s English origins circa 1765 as other men might linger luxuriously over a contraband Cuban cigar. He had spent many years examining the subtle mineral influences of the regional soils on the ultimate taste of the *Poire William*. At the biennial gathering of The Society for the Appreciation of Fruit, far from the watchful eyes of wives and their ilk, Walter and his fellow devotees would sample and savor elusive, expensive varieties of the cherished tippie, all in the interests of science.

“We are all very excited for you,” burbled Jane, “Such a wonderful opportunity!” They all knew how he loved pears. And *Poire William*. The others, save Lily, burbled alongside her.

Lily, though present in *corpo* was presently absent in *mente*. “I don’t know it,” she mused, in Italian, which, when she was not flustered, she spoke rather gracefully. “Me not stay thinking it good if we no go back to the earrings,” also in Italian, by which the poor woman meant that she would not feel quite right about giving even a Saurtrapp’s glasses to the myopic poor without at very least making a ceremonial effort to find their rude, short-sighted owner.

It was her Moral Responsibility.

About the Writer

The Ladies of the Italian Class series marks a new direction for Rosanne Daryl Thomas, whose other works include a graphic novella about a coffee addict, a memoir about beekeeping and a *New York Times* 'Notable Book' that was optioned for film by Mick Jagger. She also writes a satirical column called [*The Amanda Chronicles*](#). She is not as old as most of the characters in *The Ladies of the Italian Class* and *the Urge to Purloin*, but she aspires to be as intrepid. When she travels, her ancient cat, and whenever possible, her daughter, come with her.

