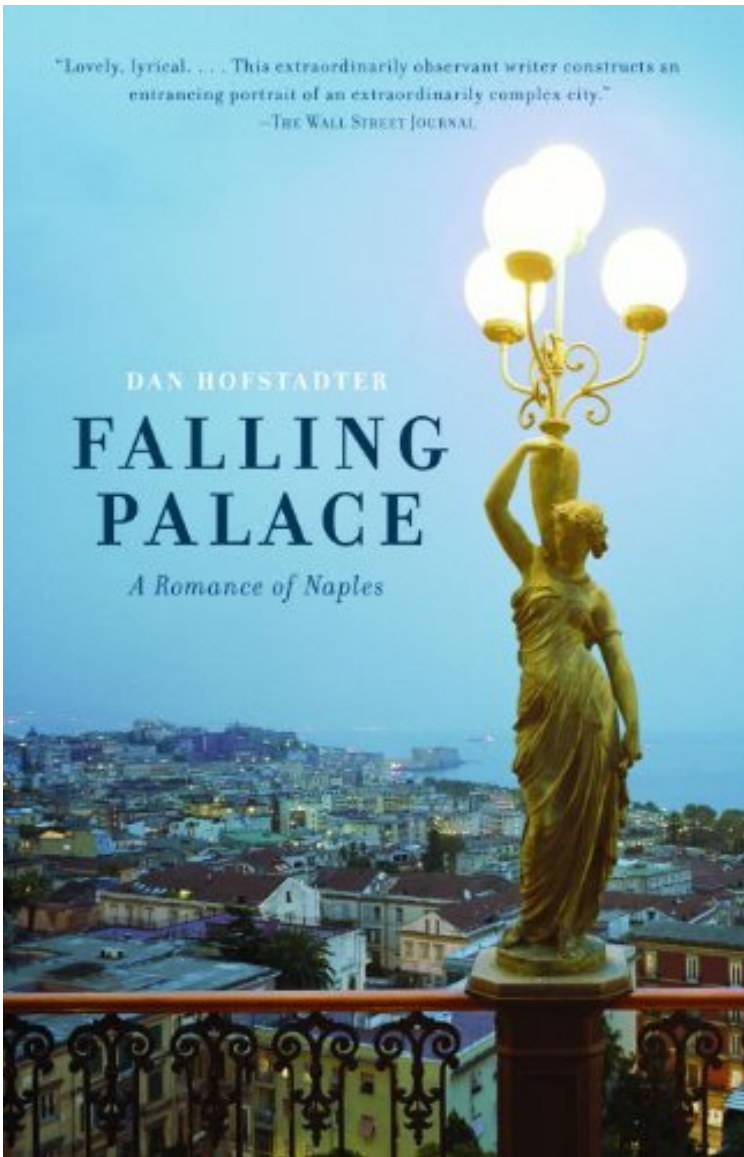


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Falling Palace: A Romance of Naples



Par Dan Hofstadter
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Romance of Naples

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA portrait of the sun-drenched volcanic city from an American who has lost his heart to the place and to a beguiling Neapolitan woman.In Falling Palace Dan Hofstadter brilliantly reveals Naples, from the dilapidated architectural beauty to the irrepressible theater of everyday life. We witness the centuries-old festivals that regularly crowd the citys jumbled streets, and eavesdrop on conversations that continue deep into the night. We browse the countless curio shops where treasures mingle with kitsch, and meet the locals he befriends. In and out of these encounters slips Benedetta, the object of the authors affections, at once inviting and unfathomable. Weaving the tale of an elusive love together with a vivid portrayal of a legendary metropolis, this is a startling evocation of a magical place.From the Trade

Paperback edition. Extrait 1 Sidewalk-ology The Caff Gambrinus, in Piazza Trieste e Trento, was the most convenient meeting place in Naples. Inside, politicians rehearsed the deals they would later strike in the city council chamber, the Sala dei Baroni; visitors and greenhorns from outlying towns staked out the sidewalk tables; and carabinieri gaddled about in the streets, receiving their dole of female admiration. The caf's interior was lined by mirrors full of shifting lights and decorative panels by painters of the Belle Epoque.

Two gigantic Venetian chandeliers romped overhead, as though inviting you to do the same on the floor. Benedetta with her unique blend of affection and defiance inevitably claimed a lot of my time; but once, when she had to study for one of her "soul-destroying" examinations, I decided to embark on a study of my own, of the people's gestures in the Gambrinus. For several nights I took up a station at the bar and watched the patrons, and soon I began to recognize many of their gestures. I could say that I recognized them from Arthur Avenue, in the Bronx, or from Havemeyer Street, in Brooklyn, but really I recognized them from everywhere. I say this because so many gestures are actually universal, signals the body dictates and the mind passively ratifies. To signify money, for instance, we rub a thumb against a pointer; to show exasperation, we fold our arms and cock our heads. Other gestures, though not necessarily unknown to us Americans, seemed more intrinsically Mediterranean. These included nose-tapping, to signify the odor of something fishy; the pulling down of an eyelid, to suggest that one ought to keep one's eyes open; and the upward jerking of the lower jaw to indicate refusal, like an animal jibbing at suspect food. Still others were typically Italian, such as the hands pressed prayerfully together and shaken at someone who was behaving unreasonably, or the sign for "later," an index finger twirling around in front of the speaker's nose, like the hand of an imaginary clock. Some gestures enacted an entire social role, such as the hand held edgewise and palm up, rocking back and forth at shoulder height, pretending to threaten a blow. To understand this one, you had to remember that the classic Italian grandmother had two prime insignia, the matterello, or rolling pin, and the spianatoia, or pasta board. The hand held edgewise stood for the matterello. There was never a time when I conceived of Neapolitan mimicry--that rolling-pin gesture, for instance--quite apart from Benedetta. For all her chattiness, she was the archetypal enunciator of body language. Words came second for her: when she spoke, speech glossed gesture, rather than the reverse. Her body never stopped doing its wry little pantomime, her smile archly informing me that nobody's words could be fully believed, not even hers. "They can't fool me," she seemed to be saying. It never occurred to her that she might be fooling herself. In those days, prowling the historic Neapolitan bookshops--Treves, Colonnese, Pironti--I found, at Colonnese, I think, a book titled *La mimica a Napoli*, by a learned Neapolitan abb named Antonio De Jorio. It made a big impression on me. Writing in the early nineteenth century, De Jorio had thoroughly researched his city's gestural vocabulary, and he furnished amusing plates to support his contention, showing standard types of quarrels and domestic calamities. De Jorio was a French-style positivist, and his writing was as ponderous as today's social science jargon, but he also championed the nifty idea that conversational mimicry had a grammar much like that of spoken language. He claimed that such mimicry had its nouns and verbs, its adjectives and expletives, even its metaphors. I made heavy weather of the abb's prose, but in time I came to enjoy him, responding to the sly humor lurking within his long-winded arguments. Sometimes I wished I could talk to him and put a few pointed questions to him. If you whistled and drew a feminine curve in the air, I wanted to ask him, was that synecdoche, "the part for the whole"? In the Gambrinus I saw De Jorio's catalogue of gestures come alive, plus others he hadn't dreamt of. Waiting at the gelati counter, some women moved their whole bodies in unconscious arcs, even pointing with a foot to illustrate a point. The difference between the patrons here and those in, say, an American caf wasn't so much the air pictures themselves as their frequency, their relentless articulation. Wrists, ankles, necks, and waists spiraled in a constant ballet, but the most interesting moves belonged to no known language. They were personal and abstract, like abstract art; and it occurred to me that such intimate gestures were as intrinsically mysterious as the movements of serpents or parrots. In Naples, I was learning, the body spoke the mind. Watch the hands, I would remind myself, as I listened to people talk; keep your eyes always, always on the hands. My very first test, you might have said, was Gigi in Al Portico, telling me a story in his bizarre lingo, a staccato mix of Italian, Neapolitan, and lots of white wine. Gigi was a theater person, a comic and a poet, and he was unlike anyone I knew in this town. I didn't know anyone else who, flinging himself down opposite me with barely a salutation and no preamble, would launch into an anecdote, a harangue, a routine. Gigi had dyed-blond, porcupine-like hair, and always had a three-day beard. With his tommy-gun stutter and opaque, coffee-bean eyes, he flaunted a vaudeville version of shiftiness, and he habitually glanced around as if to jump up at any moment. Gigi talked mainly with his hands, which flew in all directions, like startled birds,

but when he wanted to make a point he slowed down and molded the air, kneading it, cutting it like a baker. Drawing a distinction, Gigi gave you two loaves of air, pushed neatly apart with both hands. Benedetta had recently introduced me to Gigi, who seemed the answer to my difficulties with the Neapolitan dialect. I had originally studied in central Italy and was used to Italian with a Tuscan sound; when I started spending time in Naples, talking at a normal clip, people answered me at the same speed, but in a language I hardly recognized. Many expressions were new to me, while others were old friends in outlandish disguises. Most words ended in a faint generic vowel, a sort of primal "uh," or they simply dropped their final syllables. Down here those syllables seemed expendable, like the outer leaves of an artichoke. I hoped that Italian-without-words would offer a way out of my difficulties. Since the Neapolitans were renowned for the graphic precision of their gestures, I had set about studying the patrons in the *Gambrinus*, hoping to appropriate the gestural vocabulary, but naturally my study went beyond that *caf*. I had resolved that whenever I encountered a dialect speaker, I'd follow his gestures as an aid to gathering his meaning. That was where Gigi came in. I thought he could unwittingly help me learn what I needed to know. Listening to his stories, watching his simultaneous manual elaboration, I'd gradually absorb a basic gestural lexicon. This evening, for instance, I was trying to follow him carefully without letting him see that I was copying his hand motions under the table. Gigi had the habit of resuming old conversations as if we had left off chatting the evening before, and sometimes he resumed conversations we had never begun. This time we had run into each other by accident. The weather that fall was so balmy that people couldn't keep off the streets, and toward nightfall, when the traffic fumes had settled, many wandered idly about, performing the *passeggiata* or dropping into a *caf* for an aperitif. Some restaurants were serving dinner outdoors, and this balmy evening, at about ten-thirty, I had followed my nose to a table at *Al Portico*, a place that served food on a terrace out back. At one of those tables Gigi had spotted me. That was where I usually met Gigi. The first time he ever saw me, he said, hearing that I was an American, "Do you know Joe Pesci?" "Not personally," I answered. "I know who he is." "Well, I'm an actor, too," he said, forgetting all about Joe Pesci, "and I'm famous, too. My name is Gigi Attrice." He extended his hand as though responding to applause. Gigi is a male name in Italian, a diminutive for Luigi. Gigi told me that he specialized in comic routines and could sometimes be seen on television. I'd never seen him on television, but Benedetta had--she told me later that she'd seen him trying to push a car uphill, with what success she couldn't remember. This evening Gigi was telling me a long story about a friend of his who worked as a concierge. Like most men in the service trades in Naples, Gigi said, this fellow had to hustle to make ends meet. The story illustrated the *arte di arrangiarsi*, the technique of occupational improvisation, but it was meant no less to say something about Gigi himself. As Gigi talked his hands went faster and faster, but soon I lost track of the sign language, because I got drawn into the tale. The concierge's name was Abinotto, Gigi said, and his building had some unusual tenants. Among them were a transvestite, a secretive old widower, and a smuggler of contraband cigarettes. There were also three illegal Arab immigrants and a pair of elderly sisters, one of whom had two beautiful daughters who'd been deluded into thinking they were fashion models. Those girls," Gigi said, "went constantly to fake interviews and beauty contests, events they had to pay for. One of them got pregnant and didn't know who was the father. But my friend Abinotto knew. Being the concierge, he knew all there was to know about her, and all about the other tenants as well." Gigi was a nervous raconteur. If it's true, as they say, that comedians are angry deep down, then Gigi exemplified that truth. Maybe because of his stutter, he had a bilious way of telling a joke. Shakily he lit a cigarette, then lost his grip on it, bobbed it in the air, and rescued it--all without burning himself. He told me that Abinotto had a porter's lodge off to one side of the building's entrance. In the lodge Abinotto kept nothing but an old service revolver his father had given him and seven hundred condoms. "Gigi, why seven hundred condoms?" "Listen," he said, dragging on his cigarette, "Abinotto wasn't so young anymore, okay? His wife had died a few years earlier, and just before that he'd bought a job lot of condoms on the black market. He'd calculated the number of times he was likely to have sex with her before one of them died, and it was seven hundred. Of course he'd been wrong, poor guy, so now he was stuck with the merchandise, which he thought he might as well dispose of. At a profit, if possible." Maybe Gigi was embellishing this tale, but I was so intent on memorizing at least a few of his gestures that I didn't question its veracity. And anyway his delivery was distracting. He kept sticking his hand the one holding the cigarette under his shirt collar to scratch his neck. And every time he introduced a new character he would wring his own features into a version of that person's face--you wouldn't have thought his own could contain so many others. Around us on the terrace, tables were being claimed. Parties of diners, overdressed, with glittery watches, were sitting down and confabbing with the waiters. Many of

them glanced over at Gigi as he rattled on, waving his arms, and some couldn't help smiling as they recognized him. The air vibrated with the clinking of tableware and the laughter of women. At intervals I could hear the snarl of a Vespa on the other side of the arbor that screened the terrace from the street. When a waiter came, Gigi asked for more wine and I ordered ziti. "My friend Abinotto is basically a good person," Gigi said. "But his concierge's salary wasn't enough to live on. He needed more money, okay? So he began to run errands for the people in his building. They'd give him money to buy things for them, and of course he skimmed off a percentage for himself. Così si arrangiava that was how he got by. And, well, as he ran these errands, his lodge began to fill up with merchandise the old pistol and the condoms had company now. There were boxes full of contraband cigarettes for the smuggler, who was afraid of keeping them in his own place, and porn videos for the old widower, and in the end Abinotto's lodge was packed with all this stuff--the pistol, the condoms, the cigarettes, the videos." I thought Gigi's tale had the neatness, the brilliant illumination, of a story by Boccaccio, who lived in Naples for eleven years and adored the city. In

Boccaccio's stories the people acted the way you'd expect them to act, with direct, inescapable consequences--everyone was bathed in a high, searching light that left nowhere to hide. I was smiling at Gigi's story, but I could already see the police sniffing around Abinotto's lodge, making the obvious connection between the porn videos and the seven hundred condoms and the beautiful girls upstairs; the pistol and the contraband cigarettes wouldn't help matters any. So Abinotto's arrest wasn't about to surprise me. What did surprise me was that Gigi, as he was wrapping up his routine, stuttering and nervously scratching his chest, bobbed a lighted cigarette and dropped it right down his shirtfront. Retrieving it just above his belt, he fished it out from under his shirt, inserted it in the corner of his mouth, and kept on talking, unscathed. Later, I asked him point-blank to show me some Neapolitan gestures. He said, "What do you mean? What gestures?" From the Hardcover edition. *Revue de presse Beautiful . . . Outstanding . . .*

Hofstadter's book free of knowingness, charged with experience is written with the ease of affection and discovery . . . It is a story of love for an arcane city and for a girl, Benedetta, who embodies the Neapolitan enigma. The city prevails on every page . . . Hofstadter has penetrated the extended labyrinth, and his account of his explorations, literally breathtaking, is lyrical in the Neapolitan tradition. Shirley Hazzard, *The New York Times Book Review* Lovely . . . Deeply felt . . . Those who know Naples and those who don't will enjoy Hofstadter's delicious descriptions of that unusual metropolis. [A] deft writer . . . He makes these people real and sympathetic to us . . . [He] succeeds wonderfully in conveying the city's mix of poverty and splendor . . . Its curiosity about Benedetta that will keep most readers turning these pages, but in the end, it's Hofstadter's feel for her city that satisfies most deeply. Marjorie Kehe, *Christian Science Monitor* Secretive, shadowy and hot: what a lover Naples makes. Hofstadter gives a good sense of its spectral exuberance . . . Like Annie Hall, this is a tale of a fleeting romance looked back upon many years later . . . with the city as much a character, and object of his affections, as the woman. Matt Weiland, *Newsday* Chilometri away from those sun-kissed, espresso-soaked travelogues . . . Hofstadter paints a warts-and-all portrait of both Benedetta and Naples, and the two are all the more alluring for their imperfections. Melissa Rose Bernardo, *Entertainment*

Weekly