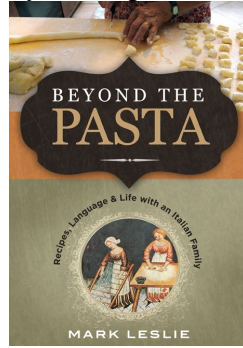


*Beyond the Pasta: Recipes, Language & Life with an Italian Family*

Book Club Discussion Points

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I hope you will use this list as a jumping off point into your discussion of *Beyond the Pasta*. You may keep your focus to one topic or maybe pick and choose your way through the list. Either way, these questions should spur you on to a great book club gathering. ~Mark

Possible Topics / Areas of Discussion:

Foreign Travel:

- Why do we go to other countries? Which particular countries draw us? Why those? What do we seek when we go there? How long do we stay? How often do we go back? What does that say about them and about us?
- In what ways do we discover “they” are just like “us”? How do we discover it? In what ways do we discover differences? Do similarities and differences matter?
- At what point does a tourist become a visitor or even, as Mark writes, a “lover” of another country? How and why does the transition occur?
- How is foreign travel like first moving to a new town or community?
- What is the effect of being far away from home when momentous change occurs to your family or country? Mark was in Italy on 9/11, were you out of the country? If so, how was your experience similar to or different from Mark’s?

Foreign Language:

- How often do Americans become fluent in a foreign language? Why? What is the experience of traveling in a foreign country in which you do not speak the language versus traveling where you do? Would you be as daring as Mark—to journey to a foreign country at your present age to learn a new language?
- Do language issues or the expectation that everyone will speak English contribute to the various stereotypes about American tourists? How? Why? What is the experience of trying to speak in a foreign language? Anna was terrified the first time she met Mark because he was a foreigner and they had no common language between them. In what ways are we all like Anna? Why did Anna’s opinion change and what would it take for you to change your opinion if you were in Anna’s position?
- What does learning a foreign language teach you about the other culture and the way it thinks and describes life? How does it let you get inside another people? Does the way our own language works shape our own views and abilities to perceive?

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Cooking and Food:

- What role does cooking play in your life? What is its creative potential? How many old family recipes do you still use? What memories do they hold or what information about the past? How many recipes have you evolved or created?
- How often do you have family meals with everyone sitting at the table and talking? What are your favorite foods and your family's favorite meals? How are they prepared and how long does it take? What do those meals mean to you? Why?
- What does Mark realize about cooking and eating by living with a family in Viterbo, Italy? What does he realize about American culture's modern approach to cooking and food? What are the implications of "convenience"? How closely do his insights describe the approach to food of you and your friends? Does the "event" of your family meals now resemble those of your childhood? What do their similarities and differences say about your family and the greater sense of "family" you feel as a culture?
- Are any ingredients mentioned or eaten here not part of your regular cuisine? Which? How do you approach new or "foreign" foods? How "foreign" is the average Italian restaurant in America?
- For which meal described in the book do you wish you could join Mark? Which dish would you most like Nonna or Mark to cook for you? Why? Which dish might you cook first? Why?
- How often do people share their treasured recipes? Have you been given a recipe this is equivalent of Nonna's secret *torta* recipe? Have you ever shared it? For whom do you make this dish, how often?

Family:

- How often do we take someone we don't know into our homes for a week or a month? What effect does this extra person have on family life? What is it like to be the new person? How does it affect your approach to daily life? Place yourself in Francesca and Marianna's shoes—what would it be like to grow up with people from all over the world sitting down to eat with you every night and being in your house for a week or more? What kind of experience would that provide for your children if your home was a school for the world's students?
- How do you usually become a member of another family (marriage, etc.)? What is that process? Is inclusion guaranteed? Is acceptance immediate? On what grounds is it granted? Are most families closed or open? Why?
- Compare the family members' response to the two foreigners that were visiting at the time—Mark and Jimmy. Is there any significance to the family's insistence on calling Mark "Marco" while he was with them? How were "Marco" and Jimmy's response to the family different—were they similar in any respect?

Self/Identity:

- In the process of getting to know others, we often get to know ourselves in new ways, too. Mark surprises himself by not immediately disclosing his relationship with his partner, Richard, and then analyzes that moment. What do we disclose

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Self/Identity (continued):

about ourselves to strangers? What do we keep to ourselves and why? What do we disclose to new friends? What is the difference with having a long-time or best friend? Is there ever such a thing as full disclosure? Do we fully disclose ourselves to ourselves (or is psychology right about denial, repression, and such mental habits)?

- How does being in new circumstances unexpectedly open parts of our mind or memory, as with Mark's seeing his dead friend, Carol? How do you respond to such moments? How do the new, the self, and the beyond relate?

Mores:

- How do cultural traditions and habits develop? What value do traditional mores and customs have in our culture? In the Italian culture Mark describes?
- How are technology and mechanization changing contemporary mores? Is change inevitable? What aspects of traditional customs are you ready to see change and which would you defend against change? Why? Is life faster and is this better? Is life now more impersonal or personal? Why and how?
- Which aspects of Italian life seem attractive, even if they are unlike ours? Why? Which aspects does Mark particularly respond to and why? Which aspects does he notice?
- How does our culture negotiate waiting in long lines? What is our equivalent of the Italian "eh"?

Men/Women and Old/Young:

- Italy is famed as a patriarchal culture, male-dominated in most aspects. How true does Mark find this description to be and in what ways? What does it mean?
- Women's lives, as Mark observes them in Italy, seem to have a girl/ queen/ crone pattern familiar to anthropologists and to mythic and feminist critics. What roles do the young women play in the family and the society? How does the society view them? How is Francesca viewed and what roles does she play? What about Nonna? How does the older generation function in this society? What value do they have? How like our society's are these roles? How do the transition points between roles (growing up or growing older) appear to occur and how are they negotiated?

Being Adventuresome:

- If you were provided the opportunity to leave your "American life" for a month to experience a foreign culture, would you? Why?
- Have you ever willingly placed yourself in a new environment? If so, what were your reasons for doing so? Would you recommend this type of "wild abandon" to someone else? What new things, positive and negative, did you learn about yourself during that experience?
- Are you inspired to investigate a cooking or learning vacation? Do you enjoy the thrill of travel from the safety and comfort of your favorite armchair at home? How often do you allow your comfort boundaries to be tested and expanded?