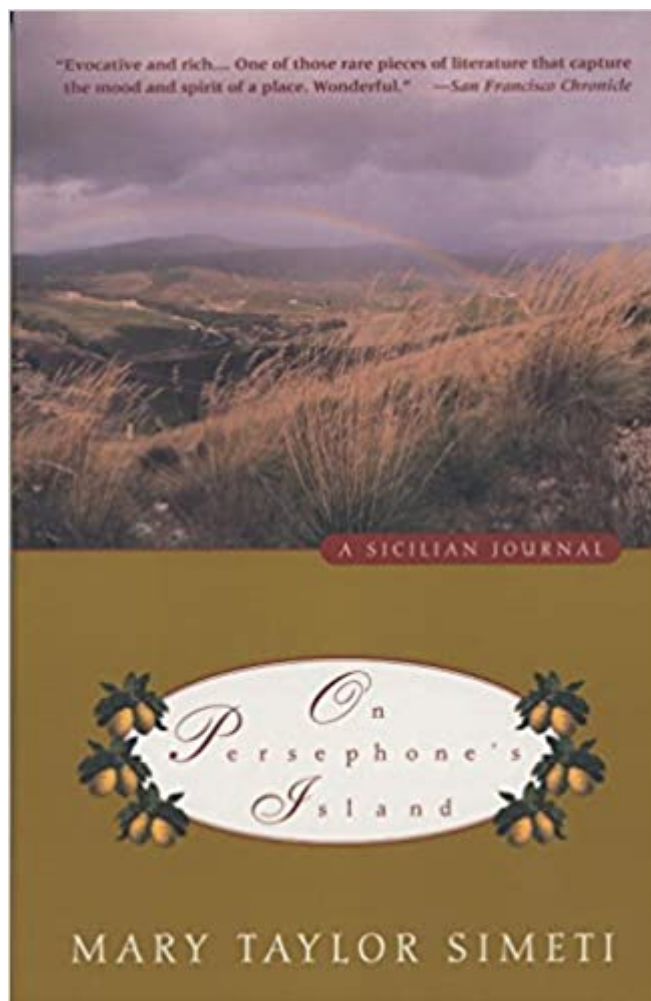


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# On Persephone's Island: A Sicilian Journal



## Synopsis

An American woman residing in Sicily for the past twenty years portrays the Sicilian landscape and customs—both rural and urban—from the perspectives of both a “foreigner” and a resident.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Mary Taylor Simeti arrived in Sicily in 1962 to do volunteer work. Freshly graduated from Radcliffe College after growing up in a distinguished and privileged New York City family, the last thing she expected was to fall in love and marry a Sicilian. *On Persephone's Island: A Sicilian Journal* is the ambivalent love story of an intelligent, complex, and self-reflective woman. The book recounts the events of 1983, the year Simeti turned 42. Her narrative alternates between Palermo, where her children attend school and her husband Toninno is a professor of agricultural economy, and Bosco, in eastern Sicily, where she shoulders demanding responsibilities on the working farm that has belonged to her husband's family for three generations. Simeti feels the isolation of being an expatriate and outsider, although she claims to welcome this perspective when faced with frustration and disgust at the pervading political corruption and corrosive effects of the Mafia on everyday life. Despite her natural diffidence, she shares personal insights that make *On Persephone's Island* as compelling as her prose. Simeti intersperses rich helpings of Sicilian history and culture with mundane events and insight into what motivates the peasants essential to the survival of the family farm. And she makes pessimistic observations about the complexity of changing times in a society where the persistent reliance on feudal relationships and agriculture is finally crumbling. An

academic manqué, Simeti researches and ruminates on the mythological underpinnings of the many holidays and festivals that punctuate the rhythm of Sicilian life. She focuses particularly on the Greek goddesses Persephone and Demeter, who held Sicily under their protection. She eventually discovers a correlation between her own situation and the story of Persephone, who alternately inhabited the worlds of light and darkness.

An American married to a Sicilian professor and ancestral farm owner, Simeti with her family divides the year between Palermo and the countryside. In a beautifully written journal covering one year, she records with an artist's eye the rhythm of the seasons, the extremes of climate and contrasts between the lush coastal region, wheatlands and the mountainous, more barren interior of the island. With a useful historical perspective on Sicily's blend of civilizations, she also provides lively insights into the character of its people, their social and burial customs and festivals, some of them of Greek, Arab or Norman origin. The author appears to have retained an American independent spirit while immersing herself in an alien society and mastering the practical demands of rural existence. That her sensitivity to the charms of her adoptive land does not blind her to its shortcomings makes her a most reliable guide. Illustrations. Copyright 1986 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

I found much of this very slow-going and way too much detail to be an enjoyable read. I got lost in the multiple holidays, horticulture and the many family outings (this is why I prefer fiction often because a good writer deletes all the extraneous detail to get to the themes). HOWEVER, there was a revelation when I actually was in Sicily. The details did help me understand what I was seeing and what I was eating...down to the gelato on a brioche and the fried chickpea patties! So if you are planning to go to Sicily, this book will set the stage for a great visit.

I found this book by looking at offerings about Sicily. I borrowed it through interlibrary loan and decided I must have it in my permanent collection. This book is a treasure. Yes, it's dated. It first came out in 1986. But much of what she wrote about is timeless. Her personal story is just a part of the book. Sicily is the focus. The knowledge she shares will help you understand the island if you're planning to visit. If you research her, you'll find out that she and her husband still make wine. She has had a remarkable life and I'm grateful that she shared her story with all of us.

The author paints a lovely portrait of what life is like for an American expatriate- who is also wife and

mother- in Sicily. Every aspect of daily Sicilian life is recounted: the feasts and celebrations, the rural traditions, the city routines. Knowing Sicily well, I knew all these depictions to be true. I did feel that the book went on a bit too long, however, and seemed at times considerably repetitive and a bit too languorous. Yet the writing is beautiful and intelligent, and the writer is enjoying painting her Sicilian life in all its detail. Were it slightly more concise, it would be a perfect read!

I bought this book because I plan to travel to Sicily next spring and am currently reading up on it so that I have as much understanding about this fascinating place as one can gain from an armchair, and also to prepare me for the actual experience of going there. I was delighted to see that Mary Taylor Simeti had done a travelogue of Sicily, because I remembered her charming tale of Queen Constance and her various travels around Italy that I read some years ago. I was not disappointed in this book. Simeti plans her book around a year, starting with the old New Year that occurred November 1st, with the Feast of the Dead, and gradually working her way around the seasons so that the end of the book finished one year later. Although she spends much time discussing her garden and her various meanderings around the Sicilian countryside with her family, this book is also a snapshot of life in Sicily during 1982-1983. I was a young woman then, freshly married, and her vivid prose enabled me to go back in time nearly thirty years ago, to re-remember events that I had completely gotten, such as the Italian government's successful attempts to divert the lava flow of Mount Etna, so that it did not go into populated areas. (They did this using dynamite). But I loved this book because of Simeti's relentless quest for the shadow of Persephone and the Greek civilization that existed on Sicily so many years ago. Highly recommended. Four stars.

A great recount of an expatriate's journey of her life in Sicily. Mary Taylor Simeti writes in such a way that your senses are awoken as you read.

Love gardening, Love food, have any Italian blood [especially Southern] read this An English woman married to a Sicilian Mary Taylor Semeti is fascinating. then read all her other books about the Onion of the Mediterranean. Learn how close their food is to ancient Roman food etc and all about the series of invasions that gave the Island the name Onion [layers] Fannie PS love to cook read Pomp and sustenance 25 centuries of Sicilian Cooking.

I was going to Sicily and this book was recommended to me. It far exceeded my expectations--so much so that now that I have spent time in Sicily I want to reread it. It is a well written account of an

ex-patriate's life abroad. She is a very sensitive woman to all her surroundings.

Beautifully written, poetic. Not a page-turner per se, but I read it through steadily on a recent trip to Sicily. It definitely lent richer, deeper meaning to my experiences.

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