A photograph of a narrow, sunlit street in Sicily. The street is flanked by multi-story buildings with balconies and street lamps. The lighting is warm and golden, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The street leads towards a bright light at the end, creating a strong sense of perspective.

Sicilian
Odyssey

FRANCINE PROSE

Author of *Blue Angel*, National Book Award Finalist

The Lives of the Muses

Blue Angel

Hunters and Gatherers

Guided Tours of Hell

The Peaceable Kingdom

Primitive People

Women and Children First

Bigfoot Dreams

Hungry Hearts

Household Saints

Animal Magnetism

Marie Laveau

The Glorious Ones

Judah the Pious

FRANCINE PROSE

Sicilian Odyssey

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC DIRECTIONS

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
Washington, D.C.

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For Howie Michels and Letizia Battaglia

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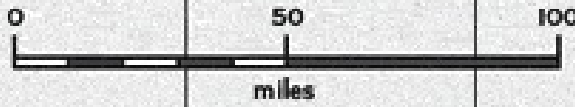
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SICILY

12°00' E 13°00' E 14°00' E 15°00' E 16°00' E



- △ Archaeological site
- ★ Provincial capital

15°00' E 16°00' E

Arrivals

On the north coast of Sicily, which Homer called the Island of the Sun, the shipwrecked Odysseus washed up on shore and was saved by Nausicaa, the king's daughter. Farther inland, on the flowery banks of Lake Pergusa, Hades seized Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, and carried her clear across the island to a spring just south of Syracuse, where they descended into the underworld and remained there until Demeter's pleas persuaded the gods to let Persephone rejoin the living for two-thirds of every year. Pursued through Arcadia by the river god Alpheus, the nymph Arethusa prayed to Artemis for help; changed into a fountain, she reappeared across the ocean, in Syracuse, joined with her pursuer in a pool that today is overgrown with papyrus, occupied by placid white ducks, and surrounded by stylish bars. So even in pre-Homeric times it must have been apparent that this island was so magical that the gods and heroes would naturally have come here to act out their dramas of danger and survival, of grief, mourning, and reunion.



Amphitheater, Segesta

Sicily is where Daedalus landed. After the failure of his ingenious plan to free himself and his son from King Minos's prison on the wings that he fashioned from wax, after the tragic accident he must have witnessed, watching his son soar higher and higher, closer to the sun until the wax wings melted and sent Icarus plummeting into the sea, after gathering up his son's body and burying it on the island of Icaria—only then did the architect of the Labyrinth, the inventor, and the master technician come to rest in Sicily, of all the places he could have chosen. What did he see as he flew in and—according to the myth—touched ground somewhere along the west coast? Whatever sights greeted him would have only distantly resembled what the traveler finds today. Erice, near where Daedalus is said to have arrived, was not yet the austere and lovely medieval town swathed in mists and set high on the mountaintop like a diamond solitaire in an antique ring. The salt pans on the coast between Trapani and Marsala, the cathedral at Cefalù, the giddy baroque excesses of Noto and Palermo, the

petrochemical plants at Gela—none of it would exist for centuries. Lake Pergusa—where Persephone was seized by the enamored Lord of the Underworld—had not yet been encircled by a dusty racecar track.

And the island's colorful, brutal history had not yet had a chance to cover the landscape with the rubble and dust of battle, invasion, foreign occupation, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, warfare, tyranny, crime, and death. Inhabited by prehistoric tribes, the island had still to repel and then embrace the long succession of invaders—Greeks and Carthaginians, Romans, Goths and Vandals, Byzantines and Saracens, Normans, Swabians, the Spanish and French—all of whom would inflict great losses and bestow even greater gifts on the conquered country. In fact, the whole history of Italy—and of much of Europe—seems to have been distilled, concentrated, and acted out on this singular island. “To have seen Italy without having seen Sicily is not to have seen Italy at all,” wrote Goethe, who landed in Palermo in April 1787. “For Sicily is the clue to everything.”

It's easy to understand what drew the invaders here, why they bothered, what they wanted. Some part of the attraction must have been the sheer beauty, which—as Homer reminded us—men will go to extreme lengths to possess, to claim as their own. But there was also the fertility, the generosity of the soil. From earliest times, the goddess of fertility—Cybele, Demeter, Ceres—has been worshiped here. In the archaeological museum at Syracuse is a collection of votive figurines of the goddess holding sheaves of grain. Down the hill from the Greek theater at Palazzolo Acreide are the Santoni, a dozen or so statues of Cybele roughly hewn from the rock face. The fact that the sculptures have been put behind bars—for their own protection—makes them seem all the more mysterious, otherworldly, and imposing. Every August, the hill town of Gangi decorates its streets with ears of corn tied with red ribbons—a festival that derives from the sacred rites in honor of Demeter. And in Enna, the highest major city on the island and the nearest to its geographical center, you can climb out on a rock believed to have been the most important altar in the cult of Ceres and, on rare clear days, you can see all the way to Mount Etna.

So perhaps Daedalus saw only the goddess's gifts: the golden hills, the turquoise coast, the warm sun, the stands of wild fennel and orange, and, across the island, the smoking cone of Etna with its threat or promise that something dramatic was about to happen. Perhaps he intuited or understood that he had come to a land in which the most extreme natural and man-made splendor insisted on its right to coexist with the most extreme horror, the most sustained and terrible bloodshed—a conjunction that must have seemed refreshingly truthful and even comforting in its honesty in light of the pain and loss that he had just endured. Possibly, Daedalus recognized that he had reached a place in which the most lush magnificence, the most sybaritic pleasures console us for—without ever lying about—the harshness of existence.



Rooftops, Enna

For all those reasons, it is the place where I most want to come at a time when the world has never seemed more chaotic, more savage, more precious, or more fragile. When Howie and I leave New York to spend a month in Sicily, it is February, 2002. We have not ventured very far from home since that morning last September, when, as we waited to board a plane for California at John F. Kennedy airport, we first noticed the plumes of black smoke billowing east from Lower Manhattan and joined the cluster of shocked, silent travelers gathered around a TV set. And now, like Daedalus, we have traveled to Sicily, partly to experience its mystery and fascination, the richness of its art and architecture, its history and its culture, the seamlessness with which it merges the present and the past—and partly to discover what this island has learned and can teach us about the triumph of beauty over violence, of life over death.

How strange that Daedalus should have landed in the west when, by all rights, he should have been coming from the other direction. Perhaps he had heard about—and feared—the eastern shore, the legendary Riviera dei Ciclopi, the “coast of the cyclopes,” from which the blinded and infuriated Polyphemus hurled giant boulders after the fleeing Odysseus and his men. The rocks are still there, bizarrely shaped volcanic mini-islands poking out of the sea off the beach at Aci Trezza. Decorated with holy statues to bless the fishermen sailing out in their wooden boats, the islands are visible from the seafood restaurants to which chic, prosperous Catanians drive up from the city to tuck into steaming plates of linguine with lobster and *risotto alla marinara*.



Fishing boats, Aci Trezza

The Greek navigators, who first landed up the coast at Naxos, may have had good reason for steering clear of Polyphemus's stony, dangerous missiles. But for modern travelers, like ourselves, this side of the island—or more specifically, the airport at Catania—offers a gentler, more accommodating place to land than its counterpart in Palermo, with its precipitous approach and its proximity to the chaotic, homicidal traffic of the island's capital.

The plane from Rome deposits us at the sleepy Aeroporto Fontanarossa, which, in the decade since we've last been here, has come to resemble a regional airport in some distant Balkan outpost. Not that I remember precisely how things looked the last time we were here. Howie and I were traveling with my mother and our two young sons, and our most vivid memories are of yanking the boys out of the path of cars speeding in the wrong direction up one-way streets. But we saw just enough—and remembered enough—to have fallen in love with Sicily, and to have promised ourselves that we would come back, as soon as possible.

Mostly what I remembered was the beauty of its shore, its landscape, and especially its art; and the fact that a few hours' drive would take you from one of the world's most perfectly preserved Greek temples to the site of the greatest surviving Roman or Byzantine mosaics. I remember thinking that Sicily was the place I wished I'd been born, and where I would like to be reborn—preferably as a big, handsome, life-loving, prosperous Sicilian guy, with a large adoring family, an enormous appetite, and no worries about weight, health, or business. (Gender loyalty aside, I realize that being reborn as a Sicilian woman might involve more of a daily struggle.)

Now, as I wait at the baggage carousel at the airport, I'm surrounded by guys just like that—embracing, talking, gesturing with their hands in semaphores so expressive of their individual personalities, so voluble, graceful, and emphatic that it's as if they're each conducting a symphony: the music of the language. And this—more than anything—reminds me that I'm in Italy, in Sicily, again.

Life here burns at a high heat and lends an unusual warmth to the people who live it. Though Sicilians have a reputation for dourness, for severity, for short violent tempers and an agonized religiosity, the fact is that almost every casual social interchange we have is characterized by a remarkable sweetness. The first policeman whom we approach to ask for directions engages us in a fifteen-minute conversation that ranges from the annoyance of paying high taxes to the pleasures and the relief of having (nearly) grown children. When he and Howie discover that they're the same age, they burst out laughing; each had assumed the other was years younger. A few days later, we ask a long-distance bus driver, leaving from Syracuse, how to reach the city's archaeological museum. He asks where we're from and tells us: *No problema!* Get on the bus! “*Buon giorno*, hello,” he calls to the understandably startled passengers who follow us onto the bus. “*Andiamo*, get in, come on, we're

going to New York!” Within minutes, he’s made an unscheduled stop—a slight detour from his regular route—in order to drop us at our destination.

Much has been said and written about what the great Sicilian writer Leonardo Sciascia has called his countrymen’s “natural tragic solitude,” but what’s less often remarked upon is the Sicilian sense of humor: the comedy of the puppet theater, of the folk paintings collected in Palermo’s Museo Pitrè and Palazzolo Acreide’s Casa Museo Uccello, of the allegorical floats of Carnival, and of the ham sandwiches and plates of spaghetti fashioned out of marzipan and displayed in the windows of the pastry shops so common that, it often seems, every city block has at least one and sometimes two *pasticcerie* or *gelaterie*. Certain sweetshops—Maria Grammatico’s in Erice, for example—are known all over the island, and function as pilgrimage sites for travelers from other parts of Sicily and the mainland.

In no other region do adults have quite so fierce an ardor for pastries, candies, and ice cream; here, an ice-cream sandwich is literally an ice-cream sandwich—huge gobs of pistachio or strawberry pressed inside a brioche or a roll—and Sicilians eat them for breakfast. And like so much else about Sicily, this enthusiasm turns out to be contagious. Soon after we arrive, I find myself craving a daily cannoli and the sort of teeth-aching, sugary confections I would never dream of eating at home; just as I watch myself persuading Howie that the best way to get to our hotel is to drive—just a short distance, really—in the wrong direction up a one-way street. Still, it takes quite a while longer before I stop closing my eyes on two-lane highways when drivers cut into our lane to pass speeding trucks on inside curves at over a hundred kilometers an hour, and then dart back onto their side of the road at the very last minute, barely avoiding a head-on collision. Driving anywhere in Sicily is not for the faint of heart.

It’s easy to be happy here, but it requires an adjustment that is as much biological as cultural: learning to live on Sicilian time. No one eats lunch until almost two, no one starts dinner until almost nine—the hour when the whole neighborhood goes out for pizza, which no one serves at lunch. At around one-thirty every afternoon, a kind of paradoxically high-speed gridlock seizes the roadways as everyone rushes home for lunch, shuttering stores and businesses, leaving their offices, and, within minutes, emptying the streets of the suddenly silent cities. At about seven in the evening, especially on Sundays, the local population turns out for *la passeggiata*, the slow, ritual stroll up and down the main street.

Stores are closed on Monday morning, Friday is a slow day too, and nothing at all (connected with business or commerce) happens on Sunday. Messina on a Sunday is a completely different—unrecognizable—city from the honking, buzzing madhouse that is reborn every Monday. One Sunday morning, we drive into Mazara del Vallo to find what looks like a ghost town in some postnuclear horror film. Not a soul is on the street—or anywhere, it seems. At last we walk into the Duomo, where the whole town has gathered to gossip with their friends, admire the new babies, check out the opposite sex, and pay the minimally acceptable amount of attention to the priest intoning about the importance of the catechism.

We wander outside and cross the piazza, where we find a few holdouts, mostly middle-aged and elderly men, reading the paper, smoking, chatting, and waiting for their wives and families in a kind of social club that doubles as—and that *is*, officially—a museum of ornithology. Its walls are lined with dusty glass vitrines containing dozens of stuffed birds and small forest animals baring their sharp tiny teeth in one last admirable display of ferocity, if only for the taxidermist. At last, at *long* last, the church bells ring, the townspeople come bursting out of the cathedral into the warm afternoon sunshine—and it’s time for lunch.

Bleak Fontanarossa is good preparation for the suburbs of Catania, disfigured by mile after mile of the sort of dilapidated high-rise apartment buildings that evoke the grimness of Eastern-bloc state-socialist housing. It's rather like an architectural memento mori. Driving past, you can't help thinking of the rubble on which it was built—founded by the Chalcidians in the eighth century B.C., Catania was destroyed by earthquakes in the twelfth and seventeenth centuries and covered by volcanic lava in 1669—and the rubble to which it is eternally in danger of returning. The outskirts form a forbidding, protective shell around the city's historical center, which for years had been steadily decaying but is at last being revitalized, thanks in part to a recent influx of technology- and computer-related industry. Catanians say that "Etna Valley" is the local equivalent of California's Silicon Valley. If the Riviera dei Ciclopi is placid and beneficent, the city of Catania—built of dark volcanic rock and cursed with a reputation for petty crime, urban neglect, and pollution—is lively, but tough in a way that demands a certain amount of vigilance and concentration.

So we have decided to base ourselves in Acireale, a half dozen or so kilometers north along the coast—a friendlier city, though it too traces its origins back to a myth of violence. In love with the nymph Galatea, the Cyclops Polyphemus grew jealous when she became enamored of the shepherd Acis, so he crushed Acis with one of his lethal boulders. The shepherd's body was divided into nine parts and scattered across the landscape, and from each part grew one of the nine towns whose names begin with Aci: Acireale, Aci Trezza, Aci Castello...

Late on the afternoon of our arrival, we decide to go for a walk from our beachfront hotel (named, charmingly and improbably, Aloha d'Oro and built in accordance with someone's equally charming and improbable Polynesian/North African/Mexican fantasy) and to head up into town toward the Piazza del Duomo. It's misty, chilly, getting dark. But as we turn up Via Vittorio Emanuele, we begin to notice dabs of color—a baby dressed in a bright yellow bumblebee costume, a teenage boy sporting an oversize, striped-velvet, Cat-in-the-Hat stovepipe hat, a middle-aged woman in a jester's cap ringing with tiny bells. And before we know it, someone has showered us with confetti.

Shrove Tuesday is almost two weeks away, but the citizens of Acireale (home of "*il più bel Carnevale di Sicilia*—the most beautiful Carnival in Sicily") are getting a head start on their pre-Lenten celebrations. Strings of glistening lights form an arching canopy above the main streets, dance music blares out of invisible loudspeakers. In the Piazza del Duomo, the soaring, extravagantly elaborate facade of the cathedral is brilliantly illuminated, as are the stalls selling masks, roasted pumpkin seeds and chestnuts, fried sausage, panini, noisemakers, plastic bags of confetti. Half the local population—and nearly everyone under twelve—is in costume, dressed as pirates and knights, skeletons and witches; lions and lambs, angels and devils stroll hand in hand.

Some of the masks are familiar; in fact the plastic monster heads are the very same ones I saw in October, at Halloween, in New York City. And yet there's something about the spirit of the event that's entirely different from Halloween in Greenwich Village, or Mardi Gras in New Orleans, or St. Patrick's Day on Fifth Avenue. At home, public holidays have mostly become excuses for teenagers and young adults to dress up or paint their faces green and get as hammered as they'll get the following weekend, as they got the weekend before. But this pre-Carnival celebration in Acireale feels like an entirely unique moment in the yearly calendar, a time for people (many of whom clearly know one another) to step out of character, to leave their normal selves behind, and to unleash something that—precisely because of familiarity, proximity, and the need to coexist harmoniously and amicably—stays in check for the rest of the year.

To walk through Acireale in the days preceding Carnival is to understand what it means for the Lord of Misrule—that great equalizer, leveler, and liberator—to be in command. Children giddily bob their elders over the head with colorful plastic mallets that make a hollow sound somewhere between

the noise of a baby rattle and the pop of a firecracker. It hurts just enough so I can feel (or think I feel) the fillings rattling lightly in my teeth, but after the first half-dozen bops, I'm no longer tempted to wheel around and show the little bopper how New Yorkers act when someone's invaded their personal space. Groups of high school students spray each other—and total strangers—with shaving cream and strings of colored foam propelled by aerosol. Shy girls clutch bags of confetti, waiting to get the nerve to fling a handful at some cute boy—for much of the revelry is energized by the explosive charge of courtship, romance, and sex.

But finally what makes the merriment seem so Sicilian is the ease with which it combines the mournful with the festive (the tunes played by the fresh-faced, earnest high school marching band are almost comically dirgelike and funereal) and the present with the past. The designs of the elaborate princess costumes (the outfit of choice for little girls) seem modeled on the gowns worn by Bourbon royalty and make their wearers look like the pretty, uncomfortable, and slightly stunned children in Velásquez's "Las Meninas." And smack in the middle of a group of kids, parading in formation and dressed like Harry Potter and his fellow students at the School for Wizards, is, incongruously, a sort of giant eyeball-on-legs meant to represent a Cyclops.

Catania's Feast of St. Agatha also takes place at the beginning of February, at the same time as the start of Acireale's Carnival, and less than ten miles away. But the atmosphere and the mood of the crowd are so remarkably different that the festival could be taking place in another country. The Feast of St. Agatha is celebratory but solemn in a way that seems appropriate for a religious holiday honoring the city's patron saint, a martyr credited with having rescued the town from an especially threatening eruption of Mount Etna; in some versions of the legend, her outstretched arms diverted a stream of lava that would otherwise have inundated the city. On cloudless days, you can see Etna's gently smoldering cone at the end of the long straight boulevard that bears its name. The last time we were in Sicily, Etna was erupting, and, from our hotel room in Taormina, we could watch the tongues of fiery orange lava snake down the mountainside.

Just before noon on the final day of the feast, a crowd of Catanians—many of whom carry long yellow candles they will light in the course of their peregrination around the holy sites associated with the saint scattered throughout the old quarter—gathers in the square in front of the stately, gloomy cathedral. The charcoal-gray volcanic rock from which so many of its buildings are constructed gives Catania the air, among Sicilian cities, of the family member with the long face, the sad story, the bad news.

At exactly twelve, a series of cannon blasts sends puffs of white smoke wafting across the blue sky; the church bells toll. And as a procession of priests, ecclesiastical dignitaries, local officials, and members of fraternal orders dressed in eighteenth century costume emerge from the church, displaying a silver reliquary containing the relics of the saint, a young mother standing in front of me tells her small son the story of St. Agatha.

Smoothing back his hair, gently stroking his forehead, speaking in a melodious voice, she narrates a mercifully bowdlerized version—minus the gorier details—of how the blessed virgin refused to marry the suitor who had been chosen for her and, consequently, as punishment, had her breasts cut off. A visitation from St. Peter healed her wounds and restored her breasts, but Peter could not, or would not, save her from a horrible martyrdom—from the tortures that insured her beatitude and made her the patron saint of women suffering from diseases of the breast.

This evening, at the height of the festival, young men, dressed in black berets and white suits (rather like karate uniforms) and assembled in groups representing the various trade organizations, will carry the *candelore*—heavy, gilded litters decorated with images of the saint and topped with tall

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