

Freaking Out in Florence

I've done hundreds of invited public readings from my books over the last thirty years, but the thrill hasn't worn off. Every reading feels new and I'm always a little keyed up. It's just like going on-stage, something I still remember from the plays I performed in as a college student. The excitement is tinged with apprehension: what if it doesn't go over well? But something different happened to me back in 2012 in Florence where I was reading from my Gilded Age novel *Rosedale in Love*.

I had a panic attack for the very first time.

I had been invited to an international Edith Wharton conference because my novel retells the story of *The House of Mirth* from the perspective of its despised Jewish suitor. Where Wharton makes him a stereotype of the vulgar, money-grubbing Jew, I made him three-dimensional, giving him a life, a family, a history, dreams and inspirations.

The day before my reading, I was in a small bright classroom of the college which was hosting the event and listening to an academic paper, when suddenly the walls seemed to close in on me and I felt dizzy. It wasn't the heat; I knew that in my bones. This was something different. When the paper ended and the applause started, I slipped out and hurriedly got a cab back to my hotel across the Arno. In the cab, even though I was headed towards the quieter, less crowded part of the city (the Oltrarno), I started hyperventilating. I managed to keep my head enough to

speaking my travel Italian and get my receipt at the end of the short ride. I'd learned just enough for this trip to get around the city and order meals.

Upstairs in my silent room, I took a bath to calm myself down, and a Valium, which I'd brought because I'd had to leave a very sick dog behind me at home in Michigan, a dog just diagnosed with cancer. He wasn't in danger of imminent death, but his life expectancy had just been shortened by years, and our family was in a state of shock.

When I finally calmed down, I tried to figure out what was going on, and the answers came quickly. Though I'd done readings in London, Glasgow, Paris, Vienna, and in twenty German cities and towns, I've never been alone abroad doing a reading. On my tours, I'd either been with my spouse or had a host, sometimes more than one. I'd also never read from my work at an academic conference, which is odd since I'd read at universities and colleges—not to mention book fairs, museums, libraries, synagogues and churches.

Luckily the panic didn't hit right before the reading. It happened twenty-four hours beforehand. I had plenty of time to calm down, sight-see, eat a splendid bistro dinner, sleep well, wake up to the Florentine sunshine the next day and have breakfast on the hotel terrace where one wall was covered in flowering sweet jasmine. I had a view of the Arno and its bridges and the beauty of the city worked on me like a massage. As I spent the day preparing, I understood my panic even better: the stakes were higher than usual in some ways. I was in effect a second keynote speaker, which definitely made the situation different from a typical reading for me.

More importantly, as a reader, I didn't have the advantage I'd recently had on tour of reading a passage from a book I'd read many times before. Touring Germany, Canada and the U.S. from 2009 through 2012 to talk about my memoir / travelogue *My Germany*, I consistently read the Prologue. It was short enough; had a clear beginning, middle and end; and people found

it dramatic. Sticking with the same text meant that I knew it very well in English, and could maintain lots of eye contact with my audience (and even improvise a little). Readings are performances, and that one was different every time because I did so many of them and the energy was always different in each venue. I could even read the German translation when asked, and introduce myself in German.

But in Florence I had a brand new play, in effect, and this was my opening night. Even the setting was unique: the tiny [Gothic Church of San Jacobo](#), the oldest venue I'd ever spoken in over the course of my career. It was a bit overwhelming to be surrounded by so much history everywhere I turned. I was even trying something new for me: reading the text from my iPad.

So how did it go? About half of the conferees came, which was surprising to me on a lovely evening in Florence when they could have been sight-seeing. And I'm happy to say that when it was done, one of the conference organizers came up to me and said, "That was *perfect*." You can't ask for more than that, except perhaps a great meal afterward, which is what the conference had arranged a few blocks away at a gorgeous trendy restaurant.

I still had another full day in Florence before heading to Rome, and that next day I kept things quiet: visits to two beautiful but nearly-empty churches not far from my hotel, a siesta after lunch, and a dinner two blocks away in the Piazza Santo Spirito. I was my own host, making sure that I was comfortable. It was another new role for me abroad. I liked it.