

**A DIVA'S CHRONICLES...**



**WINE, WOMEN, AND WORDS: OBSERVATIONS FROM  
THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FICTION FESTIVAL**

**by AMANDA BRICE**

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Wine, food, beautiful scenery. Those usually aren't the first things that pop into most people's heads when asked to free associate about a writer's conference. Well, maybe the wine part.

But definitely not the scenery. Every conference I've ever been to in the US has been in some generic hotel ballroom, and you rarely even have time to get out and explore the host city.

But the International Women's Fiction Festival isn't your average conference. That much was pretty obvious upon arriving in Matera, Italy and first encountering the awe-inspiring sassi, the ancient cave neighborhoods clinging to the side of the cliff, which became our home for the next several days. And the fact that the workshops were held in a former convent. And the fact that attendees came from all over the world (in fact, Americans were in the minority).

Yes, I could go on and on.

But if I could sum it up, I'd say that we took some great workshops and ate a lot of really incredible food (problematic for me, since I've got a bridesmaid dress I need to fit into!). And I do mean a LOT of really incredible food.



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The typical day went like this:

8 am-ish: eat breakfast

8:45: walk to conference

9 am: conference is scheduled to begin

9:30 am: first workshop actually begins (everything ran late...we called it being on "Italian time")

9:30-10:30: workshop

10:30-11 am: coffee break

11-12:30: more workshops

12:30-2:30 pm: lunch break

2:30: workshops should be resuming

3:00: workshops actually resume (Italian time again...)

3-5:00 pm: workshops or meetings with editors and agents

5-6:00 pm: happy hour

6-8:00 pm: walking tour of the sassi

8:00-9:30 pm: some other evening event

9:30-11:30 pm: dinner

11:30 pm-12:30 am: think about going back to hotel, but instead end up dancing to a gypsy band at a street carnival

Note the 10:30-11 am slot: "Coffee break" Those of you familiar with the typical North American conference (doesn't matter the field, really) are probably thinking bitter coffee and stale pastries. Maybe some fruit if you're lucky.

Think again.

A "coffee break" in Italy consists of a long buffet table holding the most amazing food you've ever seen, complete with pastries, sandwiches, focaccia, quiches, cheese-potato puffs, fruit, vegetables, antipasti, pasta, salads, desserts, fresh buffalo mozzarella, and more. Not to mention the freshly squeezed juices and the espresso machine on either end of the spread.

And that's just "coffee break." We're expected to actually eat a full 3-course lunch less than two hours after this mid-morning "snack." "Happy hour" in the evening is similar to "coffee break"...just substitute wine and champagne for the espresso.

But enough about the food. Let's talk about the conference itself.

The ratio of writers to industry professionals was incredible. There were maybe 50-75 people total at the conference (including translators), yet 20 of them were agents, editors, or a Hollywood director. So if you want to have a pitch appointment, no problem. In fact, you can pretty much have as many appointments as you want. But if not, no big deal, because it's so informal that you'll likely end up speaking with an agent or editor over dinner...or happy

hour...or sightseeing...or maybe you'll even end up going shopping with her. So if you come away without having ever pitched an industry professional, it's because you really weren't trying.

Another difference from, say, RWA Nationals, is that the entire town welcomes you with open arms. There wasn't literally a red carpet, but pretty close. The first afternoon I was there, I went exploring with fellow Diva Jenyfer Matthews. We were struck by all the construction in the piazzas, and were told that the town would be hosting a ginormous farmer's market/wine tasting festival, complete with nightly performances on stages throughout the historic district. They picked that weekend because the Women's Fiction Festival was in town, as a way to welcome the authors to Matera.

So, what insider industry info did I learn?

Maria Duerig of Blanvalet (Germany) says ebooks have gained in popularity in Germany because they don't have fixed prices, whereas all other books do. Unlike the other countries represented at the conference, blockbusters aren't a big part of the market. Crime novels, from historical to modern, remain strong, but do not send her any cozy mysteries, as these are not selling well (this was a common theme amongst the panelists, actually). The paranormal wave has finally hit Germany, and fantasy is big (they're cross-publishing them between YA and adult), although sci-fi is not. Relationship books remain popular. She also sees a trend of "misery memoirs", but the subject matter must either be very far from home or extremely German, because readers love to be voyeurs. Good chick lit is still selling very well, but if there's no sex in it, then no thank you. German women are beginning to want hotter and hotter books, and the biggest change from her report last year is that the erotica trend has hit big time. Finally, all publishers want what she terms "big women's sagas" but readers don't seem to be buying it. She thinks the next big thing will be graphic novels of women's fiction and romance.

Isolde Wehr of Moments Verlag (Germany) says Germans love Highlanders and vampires, but the last thing she'd want to see would be a Highlander vampire. PLEASE don't send that to her. She loves historical romance and historical fiction, and one of her recent buys was a female James Bond set during the Regency.

Giulia Ichino of Mondadori (Italy) says that thrillers and mysteries will always remain hot in Italy and that love stories will always sell. Young Adult is gaining ground as a sector. An interesting thing she mentioned is that she's seeing an increase in newer readers, and these newer readers are reading books from new authors, so her house is buying a lot of debut authors, whereas it used to be the trend to build an author, but now readers want something new.

Cinzia Leone of Memori (Italy) likes a mixture of images and words, so would like to see more graphic novels, particular those with a manga influence. She's also looking for memoirs and more literary material. She "hopes the Highlanders will go home" and that "vampires stop biting necks".

Sabine Schultz of Tea (Italy) is also interested in memoirs, but from everyday people (not celebrities). She adores Regency romance, and has bought a few cozy mysteries set in Jane Austen's world. She also sees a trend of current events books dealing with Iraq and Afghanistan, both in fiction and non-fiction. She'd really like to see more multicultural books.

Catherine Cobain of Headline Publishing (UK) says the market is cyclical. You may be seeing less chick lit published, but it's certainly not dead. In fact, their Little Black Dress imprint is doing very well. She thinks that more sophisticated or darker women's fiction will be popular. In other words, what happens when "chick lit grows up." She admits that blockbusters are big, and while the paranormal wave hasn't hit the UK yet, she knows it will, although she has been buying a lot of epic magick realism lately. She advises writers to stop chasing trends because it'll be over by the time you finish writing anyway, and besides, all editors and agents want to be the one who discovers the next big trend, so just write what you want to write.

Tony Lacey of Penguin (UK) says that while there's no biography genre in France, it's huge in the UK, particularly what he calls the "misery memoir," (usually written by women) which has been a staple of the bestseller lists for more than 10 years. He thinks this is because they're located so close to Ireland. Narrative non-fiction is becoming as popular as novels in the UK, perhaps because novel writing is becoming too subjective (the omniscient POV has been replaced by private consciousness, and some people don't like this and have turned to narrative nonfiction for facts and stability).

Chuck Sambuchino of Writer's Digest (US) said that sci-fi & fantasy, particularly in middle grade and YA is hot. And thrillers continue to be strong. He says that writers determine what's hot by writing the next big blockbuster, but he feels that there will be a big war trend in the US due to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the upcoming 150 year anniversary of the Civil War.

Leah Hultenschmidt of Dorchester Publishing (US) says her company likes to take risks, and that they can do so because they're smaller. They particularly love blending genres (mystery with romance, paranormal with mystery with romance, historical with paranormal with romance, etc.) to put them on the leading edge of a market. Dorchester was one of the first houses to publish paranormal, so she personally is starting to be a little tired of it even though she knows it's only beginning to be popular in Europe. She believes that paranormal is popular is because of the primal instinct of the alpha male. It's for this reason that she'd like to be more very sexy romances. She says Romantic Suspense continues to be strong, but that it's very difficult for new authors to break in. She would love to see some good historical romances, but stresses that they should be before 1900 – the 1920s and WWII do not sell well, even if they're fascinating times in history. Maybe this will change in the future, however.

Now that I've had a few days to settle in and get over my jet lag (not to mention the horrible head cold that I inevitably get every time I have a flight longer than about an hour), I've begun to process the events and memories of the conference. In many ways, it didn't even feel like a conference, due to the intimate size and unprecedented access to insiders. And I think that's the

point. It may have been the smallest conference I've ever attended, but in many ways, it was also the most ambitious, yet the most welcoming.

It truly proved that with fiction, the world has no boundaries.

### **About AMANDA BRICE**

**Amanda Brice is an intellectual property attorney just outside of the nation's capitol. A lawyer in Washington? No, there are none of those!**

**Ever since she was little, Amanda loved to write, but some of her earliest endeavors were less than spectacular. Still, *Nancy Flew and the Mystery of the Lady Ghost* was critically acclaimed by the strictest of literary critics, her 4th grade teacher. Amanda dreamed of becoming either a ballerina or an author, but her father convinced her to "do something practical," so she eventually went to law school and spent her time writing briefs and pleadings instead of fiction.**

**Still, the urge for creativity nagged at her, until one day, while she was working on an advanced law specialization degree in intellectual property, she decided that writing chick lit was much more fun than her paper on the patentability of indigenous medicinal methods. So she wrote the first 80 pages of her first novel instead, and begged her professor for an extension on the law paper. From that moment on, she was hooked and has been splitting her time between writing and practicing law ever since.**

**In her spare time, Amanda enjoys dancing, reading, cooking, traveling, and obsessing over whether Duke will beat Carolina in basketball. Go Devils! She blogs at [www.fictionistas.com](http://www.fictionistas.com).**