

An Interview with Linda Lappin

by Sandy Sims

Linda Lappin grew up in the small town of Kingsport, Tennessee and earned her BA at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, and her MFA at the University of Iowa Writers Workshop as a poet, publishing a volume of poetry with Kayak Books of Santa Cruz in 1976. In 1978, in her early twenties, she went to Italy on a Fulbright grant and stayed on. Though she loves Italy and may live out her life there with her Italian husband Sergio, Lappin, fifty-three, does not romanticize the American expatriate writer's life, which is tough in many ways. Lappin's works as an award-winning literary translator and as an English teacher at the University of Rome. She also teaches creative writing to American college students at the Viterbo program of the University Study Abroad Consortium, operated by the University of Nevada at Reno and hosted by the University of Tuscia in Viterbo.

Lappin's new novel *Katherine's Wish* (Wordcraft of Oregon, August 2008) is based on the final years of New Zealand writer Katherine Mansfield. An excerpt of the novel was nominated for a Pushcart prize in short fiction in 2007, was short-listed for the Eric Hoffer prize in short fiction, and appeared in *Best New Writing 2007*. The novel is a finalist for the 2008 *ForeWord Magazine* Book of the Year award in the category of general fiction. It is also a finalist for 2009 IPPY award in the category of historical fiction, and was shortlisted for the 2009 Eric Hoffer Book Award in fiction. Her poems, short stories, essays, and literary travel pieces have been published in U.S. literary journals and abroad, including *Agni*, *the Kenyon Review*, *the Southwest Review*, *Story Quarterly*, *the Literary Review*, *Tiferet*, *World Wide Writers*, and in anthologies published by Seal Press and New Rivers Press. Lappin's first published novel, *The Etruscan* (Galway, Ireland: Wynkin deWorde, 2004), a post-modern literary Gothic tale set in Italy in the 1920s, received critical acclaim, and was named one of the best twenty picks for summer reading in 2006 by Small Press Distribution in Berkeley, California. Lappin's mystery novel, *Signatures in Stone*, is currently being considered for publication. Her latest project is a novel, *The Diary of J.H.*, inspired by the life of Jeanne Hébuterne,

Sandy Sims is an award winning journalist and travel writer with a Masters in English with an emphasis in creative writing from San Jose State University. She has published short stories in literary magazines, and her travel stories have appeared in numerous newspapers and magazines.

the companion of Modigliani. Lappin has received two NEA fellowships in literary translation and the Renato Poggioli Award from PEN for her translations from Italian. Lappin has helped establish the Centro Pokkoli, a writing center in Vitorchiano, where she lives. Her websites are <www.lindalappin.net>, <www.theetruscan.com>, and <www.pokkoli.org>.

Sandy Sims: You grew up in Kingsport, a small town in Tennessee, which is a far cry from a city with international and literary influences. This would have been especially true back in the 1970s when you were attending high school and college. Where did your interest in foreign languages and writing come from?

Linda Lappin: I always loved reading and libraries. I can still recall the odor of old books in the stacks on a hot summer day upstairs in the Kingsport public library. My parents, now in their eighties, have always been avid readers. My father—a scientist, a research chemist—was interested in just about everything, though there wasn't much fiction on the bookshelves at home when I was growing up. That came from the library. I became curious about foreign languages at a very early age, perhaps because we had several foreign language dictionaries in the house. My mother, a first generation American from Chicago, spoke Polish and German as a child. My father had studied German and French at college and grad school. My mother studied voice with a renowned voice teacher in Chicago. She was interested in opera, so we had lots of sheet music in Italian, and Italian dictionaries too. Foreign languages in some form were always present. I got it in my head that when you grew up, one of the things you should know how to do was speak another language.

Sims: How did you happen to come to Italy?

Lappin: I first came to Italy on a study abroad program in college to visit a boyfriend who was studying etching in Florence at the Santa Reparata School in the early seventies. Like many young Americans, I fell in love with Florence and with Italy. When I returned home after an extended visit of several

months, I began seriously studying Italian language and culture at college. I continued in graduate school with literary translation projects from Italian. While at Iowa, I heard about a translation project being organized by the Fulbright program in Rome. I applied, and to my great surprise, I won a grant to participate.

I set out for Rome right after taking my MFA degree. That year was very difficult. I could translate texts from Italian, but I couldn't *speak* Italian fluently, so I felt tongue-tied and frustrated. Here I was a writer, meeting Italian writers in order to translate their work, and I couldn't express myself articulately and self-confidently in their language. It would take a while for me to be able to do that. I also had health problems at the beginning. I was always getting the flu—I think I must have had the flu three or four times that first autumn. It took a couple of years for me to adjust, and I kept dreaming about losing my teeth. I guess that meant that I was afraid of losing my roots. It took years to grow them back. Though sometimes I wonder if I might eventually feel like returning to live in the states. A remote possibility.

Sims: How did you manage to stay on and support yourself?

Lappin: When my Fulbright grant ran out after two years, I wanted to stay on at all costs. I found a teaching job at the University of Rome, and then a few years later transferred to the University of Tuscia in Viterbo. After teaching for twenty-one years in Viterbo, I was recently transferred back to Rome. My position is called “Lettrice,” a lecturer or reader—my main activity has been teaching writing and translating skills to students majoring in English. It used to be a wonderful job, but the Italian university system keeps demoting it and its native tongue teaching staff in a very disheartening way.

Sims: You are busy translating and teaching, but you have managed to be a prolific writer of poetry, short stories, literary travel, and more recently, four novels. When did you start writing and when did you begin to think of writing as a profession?

Lappin: First, I should say that I consider my cre-

ative writing more a vocation than a profession— simply because, like many writers, I earn very little from my creative work. Oh, money may trickle in occasionally from a prize, a review, an article, or a travel essay—but teaching and translation are my bread and butter. I dream of being able to stop all the little translating and writing jobs, as well as the English teaching, and just concentrate on writing. But that doesn't look likely to happen anytime soon.

I always wrote poems and stories, even as a child, but things started to click when I won a poetry prize at college, judged by Arizona poet Richard Shelton, whose work I admired. Shelton was a surrealist, and my own poetry followed that vein and still does. And I guess you could describe my novel *The Etruscan* as slightly surrealist too, as it mingles the realms of dream, illusion, and hallucination with what we call “reality.”

I started out as a poet, and published a small volume of poetry, *Wintering with the Abominable Snowman*, with Kayak books in Santa Cruz, and then went on to the University of Iowa to work with Donald Justice. I took an MFA there in 1978. *Kayak*, run by George Hitchcock, was an extraordinary magazine and poetry press in those days, publishing poets like Phil Levine, Charles Simic, Charles Wright, Margaret Atwood, and others. I can't remember how I found out about it. I must have found a copy of the magazine in a bookstore and then became a subscriber. I was astonished when Hitchcock published my first poem. I was a regular contributor from the mid '70s until the magazine's demise.

While at Iowa, I also worked for the International Writing Program as a translator, and that's how my translation career began. One of my first jobs was the team translation of *Two Women of China*, a novel by Hualing Nieh Engle. My task was to polish the literal translation done by Chinese scholar Jane Yang into English. The book eventually won an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. My experience at Iowa was very stimulating. I participated in the graduate poetry and fiction workshops where I studied with Ian McEwan, worked for the International Writing Program, and also attended

the graduate translation workshop held by Russian translator Daniel Weissbort. All these experiences were very valuable and informed my later work, as writer, translator, and teacher. I suppose I knew at Iowa that I wanted to be a “professional writer,” whatever that means, but that to me also embraced literary translation.

Sims: You were young and still living in the U.S. when your poetry chapbooks were published. Did that give you the confidence to keep writing when you came to Italy?

Lappin: I suppose I was lucky to be published so young. It was a wonderful experience, but I am not sure that publishing chapbooks gave me confidence. After I came to Italy, I stopped writing creatively for five years. I think it was because translating and teaching sucked up my creativity. Life was a financial struggle, and I was running myself ragged doing private English lessons to make ends meet, often working at my desk ten to twelve hours a day. And I was in that in-between place with language. I think I was also in a period of gestation, gathering new impressions, with new expressive means developing unconsciously, but not yet matured. I also suffered from isolation. By this point, I didn’t know any writers in Rome who were working in English, and the Italian ones whose work I was translating thought of me as a translator—not as a writer.

Sims: What got you writing again?

Lappin: I’m not exactly sure when or why, but in 1985 I began writing again—but not poems as much as whimsical, metaphysical stories about expatriate life in Rome. Perhaps it was because I was renting an apartment of my own by this time, where at last I had a little desk and a studio space—a room of one’s own, so to speak. Before that I had been living in cramped rented rooms in other people’s flats. I began to write longer prose. The first short story I wrote, “Signs of Inexplicable Stress,” had my future husband, Sergio, as a character. *The Reaper*, then an innovative literary magazine founded by poets Robert McDowell and Mark Jarman, who were previously connected to *Kayak*, accepted the story

for publication in 1985. Just before the issue with my story was to come out, the magazine folded and the publisher reorganized as Story Line Press. Twelve years later, in 1997, that story was finally published in the *Southern Indiana Review*. The editor of *SIR*, Thomas Wilhelmus, had been *The Reaper's* fiction editor, and somehow “saved” my ms. from the scrapheap. In the meantime, I'd also published short stories in Italian journals, and one was broadcast by the BBC.

Wilhelmus, who regularly contributes fiction criticism to *The Hudson Review*, was one of the first people to pay attention to my work. He became a mentor of sorts, and would comment encouragingly on the manuscripts I sent him. This was all by mail, which entailed spending a fortune on photocopies and postage, sending manuscripts off, and waiting months for reply. Those positive words he had for me are one of the things that kept me going. Then when e-mail came in, he was the very first person with whom I exchanged e-mail. What a revolution. Technological developments have had a great impact on my work and my way of working. I was able to buy my first word processor in 1987 with the money I received when I won an NEA fellowship for my translation of *Brothers*, an eerie, intriguing novel by Sicilian writer, Carmelo Samonà (later published by Carcanet). I also bought a warm winter coat, which I couldn't have afforded otherwise.

Sims: Who are the writers who have inspired you?

Lappin: Of the classics—the Brontës; of the modernists—Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield; not only their fiction, but their diaries and journals. Mansfield's letters have been immensely important to me. For nearly a decade, I tended to avoid reading contemporary fiction because I didn't want to be influenced by other voices, but I did read contemporary poetry and nonfiction. But that was the period of minimalism, so different from my own style. I loved Raymond Carver's work for its pithiness and its sting of the absurd. I had known Carver in Iowa, and later through the Fulbright translation workshop, I introduced him and his work to the

young Italian translator who would become one of the major Carver specialists in Europe. I am partial to Ian McEwan, and I think Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant, and A.S. Byatt are superb writers. My new mystery novel, *Signatures in Stone*, has been influenced by Mary Butts, a little-known English novelist of the early 20th century who dabbled in the occult. Fairy tales are also a major source of inspiration, as well as the poetic philosopher Gaston Bachelard.

Sims: Going along with what Sergio says about publication, in an interview with Harvard student Melanie Tortoli, you wrote of the “stateless state” of expatriate writers, that they are “doomed to relative isolation” unless they are lucky enough to find a niche in an existing network in the country where they live.”

Lappin: The phrase “stateless state” was coined, I believe, by expat writer and publisher, David Applefield, who led a panel on that topic two or three years ago at an AWP conference. In recent years, my whole focus has been to find a way to overcome the isolation of the expat writer. That’s one reason I started the Centro Pokkoli here in Vitorchiano. My dream was to create a center where writing teachers could bring students for a workshop of a week or so and soak up the atmosphere—and where local writers could benefit by meeting and mingling with them. A place also where individual writers could come for a period of retreat and work in a unique setting. I also dream of organizing conferences on writing and literary translation here in Vitorchiano, but it’s a struggle just to get a handful of participants each year for the few workshops and retreats we organize.

Here in Italy, there is little support for writers, few writers’ organizations, and almost no place where writers gather to talk and share their work. Here, writing and publishing are for the elite, the rich, or the politically established. Many Europeans also tend to think you either can or can’t write, and why bother to try if you can’t? They often think that workshops are only for dilettantes, though Switzerland is an exception, thanks to the efforts of the Geneva Writers Group and the Geneva Writers Conference,

and things have also greatly changed in Britain and Ireland in this regard. Creative writing is now taught in universities there, and possibly in Germany, but not in Italy. In America, there are writers' support groups, writing programs, grants, conferences, all to support developing and professional writers. I think this wealth of opportunities is uniquely American. Expatriate American writers are often not eligible for contests and grants in the States because of residency requirements, and getting to conferences in the States is expensive. This makes networking with writers, editors, and publishers difficult. Here in Italy, we also don't have access to well-stocked libraries with literary journals or major updated reference books. And using the Internet from your home can be expensive.

Before the Internet, getting manuscripts to even arrive in America and to the right address was difficult. They often seemed to fall into a black hole out in the Atlantic. Once I was summoned to the central post office at Piazza Bologna and was sent up to the top floor to the director's office. He handed me a badly torn envelope with one of my manuscripts inside with the words "addressee unknown" stamped in big black letters across the front. The magazine I had sent it to had either gone out of business or moved. By having me come personally to the post office to retrieve this errant story, the director wished to prove that the Italian postal service, despite rumors to the contrary, was functioning efficiently. I suppose they never considered that this little visit took up my entire day.

Sims: How have you made connections with the publishing world after living abroad for so long?

Lappin: By the end of the '90s I had published in scores of U.S. literary journals and anthologies, had won a short fiction prize in Britain, and had been broadcast by the BBC, but it was very hard to interest publishers in my novels. I tried the contests. My very first as yet unpublished novel, *Prisoner of Palmary*, was short-listed in 1999 for the Mid-List first novel award. A year later, *The Etruscan* was semi-finalist for the Three Oaks fiction award from Story Line Press. But if you don't win first place, you

don't get published. It was frustrating because publishers would sometimes keep my manuscripts for as long as two or three years, and then reject them, but I kept on persevering. I thought I ought to attend an international workshop or literary event in order to do some "networking."

I went to the Ploughshares Workshop in the Netherlands, where I was lucky to meet a wonderful writer and writing teacher, Thomas E. Kennedy, also an expat writer based in Copenhagen, author of *The Copenhagen Quartet* (soon to be reissued by Bloomsbury.) He helped put me in touch with editors interested in writers working in Europe. He recommended my novel *The Etruscan* to Wynkin de Worde, and also introduced me to David Memmot, publisher of Wordcraft of Oregon, who has just published my new novel, *Katherine's Wish*. I also kept on networking by attending other conferences and workshops in Europe—the Geneva Writers Conference, a biennial affair still going strong, and the Paris Writing Workshop at WICE, which though it has downscaled its operation, is struggling to survive. Perhaps I should say that while at the Ploughshares workshop, I also received the best piece of advice of my whole writing career thus far. And that was: Write reviews. From all counts, it was great advice. I learned to distinguish at a glance strong writing from weak, vivid detail from superfluous. It taught me self-editing and brevity, and opened the door to many literary journals.

Sims: How has living in Italy affected your writing?

Lappin: I have absorbed the influences of Italy, assimilated its cultural and literary traditions, which include themes of treacherousness, danger, and intrigue. These surface in many of my stories and novels, which do not show the *Under-the-Tuscan-Sun* face of this country. I include the dark side. The mystery novel I've written, *Signatures in Stone*, depicts Italy as a place of intrigue. It's set in Bomarzo, a sculpture park here in the area of Tuscia, created between 1550 and 1570. The sculptures represent bizarre creatures and pagan gods. For centuries, the place was abandoned, all-but-forgotten by art historians until the early 20th century, so that

it became completely overgrown. Salvador Dali was among its “rediscoverers” who brought it once again to the world’s attention, and today it’s one of “the things” to see in Italy. Some scholars now believe that Michelangelo had a hand in designing it in part. *Signatures in Stone* takes the rediscovery of the park as its starting point. The heroine is an older, British mystery writer who is staying in Bomarzo in 1928. She is with a group of eccentric tourists, and the park is being cleared of hundreds of years of thorns, vines, and debris. In the midst of this process of “uncovering,” a murder happens, and the heroine is the prime suspect. I can’t say more without spoiling the fun.

Sims: All your stories are grounded in specific places, and your characters are vivid, sometimes extraordinary. What comes first—place or character?

Lappin: My stories usually spring from places I know well—or places that have intrigued me because of their unique landscape, or their layers of history. I am particularly partial to the Mediterranean and to islands. I get caught up in the spirit of a place I have visited, and then as I muse about it, I begin to hear different narrative voices—voices materialize, characters emerge and define their identities, and then their stories unfold. Then I start writing it all down, following the stories through the landscape. Most of my work begins by “writing itself,” in the initial stages. My short fiction is contemporary, but my novels all have historical settings and places—mainly the 1920s, and require a lot of research. That’s true of my current project, *The Diary of J.H.*, also based on the spirit of a very special place: Montparnasse right after the First World War. It deals with the life of Jeanne Hébuterne, the companion of Modigliani. Most portrayals of her in films and period memoirs emphasize her role as a sacrificial lamb to Modigliani’s genius. What they don’t stress is that Jeanne was also a very talented artist, striving to create her own life and her own artistic style amid a thousand difficulties. A piece of the new novel, along with an updated essay I wrote about her life, previously published in the *Literary Review*, will soon be available in a new electronic chapbook

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series, *World Voices*, edited by Walter Cummins and Thomas E. Kennedy, on WebDelSol.

Sims: *The Etruscan* has layers of history, mystery, and the spirit of place. Where did that story come from?

Lappin: Before I wrote *The Etruscan*, Sergio and I had been exploring Etruscan ruins for many years. The Etruscans were a highly advanced people who pre-dated the ancient Romans and probably founded the city of Rome. History knows them as mysterious since all that is left of them is, basically, their tomb art. Their language has never been successfully decoded, although there have been many attempts to do so, and the literature they created was destroyed by the Romans who eventually absorbed and effaced them. The area where I live, Tuscia, distinct from Tuscany, was the heartland of Etruscan culture. The Etruscan ruins near our home are scattered through the woods and countryside, isolated, sometimes on farmland, with no fences or barriers to keep you out. You can walk for miles through the woods, exploring open tomb chambers covered with vines and overgrown with weeds—it's a very eerie feeling. No artwork is left in them, but you have a sense of the Etruscans' reverence for the earth as a sacred mother.

I was interested in Etruscan religion, myths, and lore and in the local country superstitions, which are actually vestiges of much older pagan and possibly Etruscan beliefs. Their funerary art depicts death as a transition to another state of being—of fulfillment and pleasure. This is how DH Lawrence saw the Etruscans in his book, *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, and in some of his extraordinary poems. Lawrence believed that the Etruscans possessed the key to the secret meaning of life, which involved absorbing the cosmic energy of the universe, not just metaphorically, but physically, through rituals, dancing, music, play, sex, and libations. Lawrence's ideas about the Etruscans inspired my vision of the novel's setting and of Federigo del Re, the antagonist of the novel, who claims to be descended from them. But I don't know how I wrote it. It's its own world. I think it's a reflection of my own unconscious mind.

Sims: One of the strangest places in the story is the

house where the protagonist, Harriet, stays. Where did that place come from?

Lappin: What actually got the ball rolling was an old house I had rented on the edge of Vitorchiano, which is a medieval village. The woman who rented it to me was from a family of stone carvers, and there were some weird stone gorgon masks inside and outside the house. It was also full of mirrors. The owner claimed she had cured her depression by filling the house with mirrors. The house had dark ceiling beams, a dark red brick floor, tall windows, and all those mirrors had been hung at angles so that they would reflect the canyon or the trees outside with a very intense, greenish-gold light. Those dark, cool rooms had a very peculiar atmosphere, and it was there that I got the inspiration for the character of Harriet, an independent, modern 1920s woman, who is an artist and photographer, who comes to the area to photograph Etruscan tombs. I imagined her staying in that house, exploring the tombs, having an accident in one of them, losing consciousness, and then waking up to find herself half undressed with Federigo del Re in the tomb.

Federigo springs from a tradition of country dowsers, healers, aristocratic occultists, and charismatic seducers. He also derives from the realm of fairy tales concerning the “animal groom” as a Jungian symbol for a woman’s animus, or masculine side. He claims to be descended from the Etruscans and to have inherited their paranormal powers. It was typical for occultists in the 1930s and ’40s to make such assertions. And I have met a few local people who believe they are in contact with the Etruscans through their dreams. It’s interesting to note that when Freud wrote “The Interpretation of Dreams,” he was inspired by dreams he had after visiting the Etruscan tombs of nearby Orvieto. So it could be said that in some ways the Etruscans influenced the birth of modern dream interpretation. Dreams are an important part of my novel too. While writing it, I tried to weave in everything I know about local superstitions, the evil eye, dreams, legends, folklore, flora, fauna, and even recipes.

Sims: The dream of living in a foreign country, sip-

ping espresso with other expat writers, living in a medieval village, and turning out beautiful prose is an enduring image in the minds of many American writers. After living and writing here so long, how do you see the life of an expat writer?

Lappin: As Rimbaud said, “real life is elsewhere,” meaning you are always attracted to some other place where you imagine finally fulfillment will come. That’s an illusion, but it is a powerful one that compels people to move abroad. The tragi-comedy of the expat is that you don’t really belong anywhere. Often the figure of the expat is romanticized, as in *Under the Tuscan Sun*, but that is very far from my own life. The dream of Italy is just that. A dream. Italy is a country going through enormous problems at the moment: economic, social, political, institutional, and environmental. Some of these things make the international news, but it’s difficult for people who don’t live here to really grasp what is going on. It’s hard to foresee the evolution to come. When you’re a tourist or a person staying for just a brief period, you may enjoy the pleasures and positive things about a country without having to deal with its negative aspects. But when you live in a place, you have to deal with those as well. The expat writer’s life is often a scramble. Writing requires leisure, which can be a very hard won privilege when you are living abroad.

Sims: What are some of the negative aspects you’ve had to deal with here in Italy?

Lappin: Rent has skyrocketed, food is very expensive, public transportation gets less efficient and more expensive, and jobs are poorly paid and scarce. The country is in a state of economic crisis, which has been getting worse since the Euro was adopted. Immigrants and foreign residents have miles of red tape to work through so that vital paperwork can become a nightmare. New policies concerning immigration from non EU countries like the U.S. and Australia have become even stricter in Italy, making it much harder for Americans to come for a stay longer than three months.

Sims: As busy as you are translating, teaching, and running Centro Pokkoli, when and where do you

write?

Lappin: I have to laugh when I hear writers say they must have a special pen, a special place, or must be wearing special clothes to write. I envy them. I write everywhere and anywhere. Whenever and wherever. On the train, the bus, wherever I have a minute of concentration. I write a lot on my computer and on my laptop. It's faster, and the truth is I can't always read my handwriting. I work on a piece until I get a draft, then go through it methodically sentence by sentence, phrase by phrase, constantly editing and rewriting by hand. It was after I married Sergio that my work could expand from short stories to novels. The security of having a roof over my head allowed me to slack off a bit on my extra jobs, and dedicate myself more to my own writing. He encourages me, and is a wonderful companion and cook.

Sims: Much of your prose is poetic. I'm thinking just now of your piece, "A Quiet Life in the Country" in the anthology *Tanzania on Tuesday: Writing by American Women Abroad* (Ed. Kathleen Coskran & C.W. Truesdale, New Rivers Press, 1997). It's a beautiful memoir, grounded with detail of the place where you stayed alone for a year in Tuscany. How do you achieve such depth of detail in your writing?

Lappin: I am currently working on a book called *The Genius Loci, A Writer's Guide to Capturing the Soul of Place*, a cross between a book of writing exercises on tapping into the spirit of place and a sort of memoir of my writing life. Intense visualization and calling all the senses into play are part of the technique of recreating places and atmospheres I have developed—which has to do with re-evoking forgotten impressions and making them real and tangible in the here and now. Basically, in any setting of our past, there will be one or two details—the glare of the light, the taste of the water, a window or a rock or a chair, which if we work with it long enough, will unleash a flood of other memories, sensations, and emotions, and also an intimate voice, which we can learn to record with great precision. There's an essay on "Visualization" or "Seeing" in a little book by Italo Calvino called *Six Memos for the Next*

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Millenium, which deals with learning to conjure up vivid detail in one's writing. That is the direction I work in, using all the senses, including the "sixth sense."

Sims: Your new novel, *Katherine's Wish*, is based on the final years of renowned New Zealand writer Katherine Mansfield. How did you find the material and inspiration for this story?

Lappin: I've always loved Katherine Mansfield's writing, especially her diaries and letters, as well as the stories. For years I read everything I could find about her. Then I visited Fontainebleau outside of Paris where Mansfield died while staying at Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. I was allowed to take a peek inside the building. Mansfield, fatally ill with tuberculosis, had gone there to spend a period of spiritual reflection. I wrote an essay about how Mansfield ended up there, which was published in the *Southwest Review*. Then I showed it to an editor, David Applefield, who said he thought it was good material for a short story. So I wrote a story and showed it to someone else who suggested doing a series of short stories about Mansfield, and from that beginning it became a novel. Although it sticks very closely to the "facts" of Mansfield's life, I consider it a speculative work. In the book I try to recreate a vividly detailed "slice of life." Much of the book is set on trains, in train stations, hotels, and rented houses where Mansfield spent the latter part of her life. Inner quest, homelessness, and displacement—those expatriate themes are also important in this novel.

Sims: Do you have an agent?

Lappin: I was lucky enough to meet an agent, Susan Schulman, at the Geneva Writers Conference. She is representing my two new works, *Signatures in Stone* and *The Genius Loci, A Writer's Guide to Capturing the Soul of Place*.

Sims: You mentioned to me that your experience with publishing *The Etruscan* was not altogether a smooth one. What happened? And now with this

new novel, how will you participate in the publishing/marketing process?

Lappin: *The Etruscan* had a funny run of bad luck from the beginning. In Italian they say, “*Il diavolo ci ha messo la coda*”—untranslatable, but it means that the devil, with a flick of his tail, manages to make things go awry. And that’s what happened. Postal strikes and botched deliveries delayed the arrival and the return of the galleys, so I was unable to make corrections prior to publication. A box of books got lost in the mail for months when they were needed for the first launch. The author details were wrong when the book first came out on Amazon. For some reason, the distributor had it listed as out of print the very week it was published. The website I created for the book, <www.theetruscan.com>, with a clickable map of images and audio files, was hacked and was down for months just after I had sent out publicity directing readers, bookstores, and libraries to the website. Shortly after the book became available in United States through Small Press Distribution, the publisher folded, and the book was remaindered.

But it was an important learning experience, which showed me how important timing is, especially for a small press book. And though you may do your best to prepare the way for your book’s reception, it’s all mainly beyond your control.

On the other hand, *Katherine’s Wish* had a run of good luck, because its date of publication coincided by chance with a major conference on Mansfield held in London, and with the publication of volume V of Mansfield’s letters, which helped create interest in the book as soon as it came out. The biggest problem I faced with *The Etruscan* was that the publisher, being in Europe, couldn’t really afford to distribute or promote it in the U.S., which was the natural market for the book. Small, independent publishers have a hard time surviving, and I must say he did the best he could for as long as he could manage. I tried hard to promote *The Etruscan* myself, and Sergio, who makes videos, made a beautiful DVD documentary about the novel called *A Tale of Tusciana*, which is available on You Tube.

Sims: Even with that impossible start, *The Etruscan*

seems to keep on going. It's still available at Barnes and Noble and Amazon.com and a few independent bookstores.

Lappin: Yes, often novels from small presses languish after a year, but this one keeps having flickers of life. Now and then I get an e-mail from a reader, often from students or teachers using the book for a course or from people doing theses on it, etc. which lets me know that despite all, it's being read. I was amazed to discover through Worldcat.org that it has made its way into academic libraries, including Harvard, Cornell, and Yale, which means that some libraries actually do buy small press books, and that's a good sign.

To my delight, last year a professor from the University of Florence gave a paper on *The Etruscan* at a symposium in Venice on "The American imagination in Italy," discussing the book as representative of American fiction about Italy. Another major highlight for me as a writer was when I did a reading from *The Etruscan* at Shakespeare & Company, the Paris bookstore. Shakespeare & Company is a cultural magnet for expat writers, and it's an honor to read there. The current bookstore started in 1951, taking its name from the famous bookstore founded by Sylvia Beach which had closed during the Nazi occupation of Paris. Beach's book store was a gathering place for Joyce, Hemingway, and T.S. Eliot. Today's Shakespeare & Company is in an ancient building not far from Notre Dame, and the readings are held upstairs in a library packed with rare, old books by the last century's greatest writers. The walls are covered with photos of the beat poets who used to hang out there. You feel the weight of tradition in that room! But it's no inner sanctum. They welcome unknown writers like myself. Sylvia Whitman, daughter of the founder, now runs the bookstore. She works very hard to keep the bookstore a vital center for contemporary writing, and not just a shrine of the past. I read there again from *Katherine's Wish* last November.

Sims: Going back to the paper given by the professor in Florence, what are typical American expat themes?

Lappin: The theme “Seduction of an innocent abroad” is pretty typical of expat writing. It’s a major theme in *The Etruscan*, even though the main character in my book isn’t a typical “innocent” but a post modern one. There are a number of themes in expat writing in general: Displacement, solitude, homelessness, identity crisis, transformation, and seduction—that is seduction in a broad sense, by landscape and the charm of a different culture and by the spirit of place and time. These are the main themes of my work. I think the “loner” theme predominates American expat fiction, as well as my own work, though of course it’s a theme generally in modern fiction. As I mentioned before, many of these themes are also present in *Katherine’s Wish*.

Sims: After all these years do you feel a part of Italian culture?

Lappin: I guess I am what you call a cultural and linguistic mediator. But the expat winds up essentially going against the grain of both countries. Some people back home think expatriates have rejected the American way of life, which is not necessarily true. Certainly not true for me. There are many things about American life and American political institutions which I value highly. On the other hand, people abroad don’t have such a good idea of Americans. They tend to see us as rich, fat, violent, superficial, materialistic, gun-toting, and culturally ignorant, as often portrayed in films and on television. They also think our foreign policy has caused 99 percent of the world’s problems. I think expat Americans help shift that stereotype of Americans for the better. The election of Obama has also helped enormously.

Sims: Soon it will be more than thirty years since you have lived and supported yourself in Italy. What has kept you here all this time?

Lappin: When asked why she never traveled to the U.S. to lecture, British writer Vernon Lee, contemporary of Henry James and friend and mentor to Edith Wharton, said she could not imagine being in a place which had not previously been warmed by other people’s lives. I know what she means. The layers of cultural history, which have built up here in

the old world, do have a resonance, a weight which you can perceive all around you. They are part of the spirit of place. I still am intrigued, rather fascinated by the hushed voices in those layers, by the rich texture. But Italy might just end up to be a tar baby. Who knows?

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