



## When We Were Strangers

*Pamela Schoenewaldt*

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A moving, powerful, and evocative debut novel, When We Were Strangers by Pamela Schoenewaldt heralds the arrival of superb new voice in American fiction. A tale rich in color, character, and vivid historical detail, it chronicles the tumultuous life journey of a young immigrant seamstress, as she travels from her isolated Italian mountain village through the dark corners of late nineteenth century America. A historical novel that readers of Geraldine Brooks, Nancy Turner, Frances de Pontes Peebles, and Debra Dean will most certainly cherish, When We Were Strangers will live in the mind and the heart long after its last page is turned.

## When We Were Strangers Details

Date : Published January 25th 2011 by William Morrow Paperbacks (first published 2011)

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Author : Pamela Schoenewaldt

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## From Reader Review When We Were Strangers for online ebook

### Gigisxm says

I don't enjoy historical novels. When this was our bookclub choice, i groaned. I started it early anticipating the struggle ahead. But i truly got into book. I was a quick read but I did put it down in protest a few times. From very humble and naive beginnings I journeyed with Irma as she failed and rose again and finally found her niche and found herself and in the process bloomed into the woman she never thought she could be but we the audience knew she always was.

I got anxious at every set back, yet she persevered. Everything that could go wrong did. I was shattered as I saw a foreshadowing of the rape. I had to put the book down a that point, but I came back. I wanted Irma to preserve, to overcome, to not only survive, but thrive.

I enjoyed the character development, the storyline. It was gritty, not always pretty or perfect, it felt real. By the time we got to the end I was so grateful for a happy ending i didn't find it cheesy. It was necessary, it was needed.

This was a beautifully grimy look into the life of early immigrants to the US. But can the same not be said of immigration today?

Edited to add: I did particularly enjoy the strong female cast of characters in the new world, which was a stark contrast to Irma's village where a woman's only hope was to marry (and hope her husband doesn't beat her) or that relatives would support her in old age if she didn't marry. During her travels she meets all manner or single, independant, business women.

Well done

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### Dem says

#### 3.5 Stars

When we were Strangers is an inspiring story of strength, determination and courage of a young Italian Woman who travels across the world in 1880s to better her life.

Pamela Schoenewaldt's debut novel tells the story of the lonely and eventful journey of Irma, a young Italian woman possessed of a quiet inner strength as she ventures alone into a wide, unknown world of the 1880s America. Irma begins her life in the remote Italian mountain village of Opi. Her ancestors found only misfortune after leaving their home, but with a plain face and too small of a dowry and men appatently "as scarce as hens teeth" twenty-year-old Irma sees no other choice but to take the boat in search of a better life. Her brother emigrates to America and shortly afterward Irma find herself taking the same path and hoping to meet up with him in America.

I really enjoyed this book as my own great grandmother travelled around this time to America from Ireland I was interested in Irma's story. I think it really captures the struggle of emigrants from all over the world who travelled to American to seek their fortune at this period in time. I really felt the author captured the sense of

time and place and I really found myself seeing everything through Irma's eyes. I really appreciated the struggle with the language for someone like Irma and dealing with leaving a close nit village to a vast city must have been such a struggle for emigrants.

I also felt the great sense of loneliness and fear that must have been felt by women travelling alone at the time.

*"It was not for love that poor girls sought husbands. We yearned for daily bread and a tight roof, firewood in winter and with luck a man who wouldn't beat us, who would talk with us in the long"*

Women back then wanted to little and ended up with putting up with so much.

This book is good historical fiction and the characters are very well written and believable, I think the author did a good job with her research and I found myself turning the pages quite quickly.

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### **MrsF says**

Ergh, just finished. In short summation, this was disingenuous, overtly derivative, horribly cliched, laughable, and all round just b-grade. Uh, so yeah, I wasn't a fan!?! The idea of the story piqued my interest, and it was certainly an easy read which got me into it - but that ease soon became a case of 'let's state the bleeding obvious'. I prefer an author who presumes at least a hint of intelligence in her reader, sheesh!

The inconsistent pace of the story really bothered me. There were times when it meandered along, abusing opportunities to cram as many tired analogies as possible into prose; then others when it raced through traumatic events with rapid fire succession, leaving no space for the weight of these to dwell with the reader.

There were MANY times during my reading when I rolled my eyes, groaned in disgust, or just snorted with laughter at the ridiculous and outrageously predictable narrative. Irma was one minute a naive, timid, trembling lamb - the next a confident, determined, outspoken career girl. It just didn't gel.

And what of Carlo?? Maybe there'll be a sequel ;)

Some of Schoenewaldt's phrasing drove me batty ie. Opi was like 'God's drool on the mountain' - what?! Or if drool wasn't your thing, '[Opi] sitting like a brown-gray lid on the mountain'. Oh dear....

I have to say that overall I read it as a very idyllic version of history. Despite a couple of (granted, shocking) dark turns (and such turns that all of us have faced in one form or another), basically all her dreams came true, and she lived happily ever after in the land of opportunity. Argh! I'm nauseous!!

Sorry to any who have enjoyed it. Each to their own of course, and I love reading put of my 'genre' faves care of my bookclub, but I really felt like I read a script from a very bad daytime movie.

Ok, I'm done!!!!

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### **Jan says**

Whenever snow or rain storms keep me indoors, my favorite thing to do is snuggle up in front of the fire place with a good book. Yesterday, I picked up *When We Were Strangers* by Pamela Schoenewaldt, and was literally transported to the 1880's. This beautifully written and remarkable story about a young Italian girl's journey from her village in Opi, Italy to America, was both riveting and memorable. Schoenewaldt's exquisite prose carves out a heartfelt tale about determination and the will to survive against all odds. From the first time I met protagonist, Irma Vitale, I was emotionally captivated by her circumstances and drawn into her life. A single women and immigrant struggling to endure seemingly impossible obstacles, Irma is a character I am not likely to forget. I couldn't put the book down and recommend it to anyone who likes to read about the resilience of the human spirit. Five stars for *When We Were Strangers*.

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### **Julie says**

Loved this book! The way Irma's homeland is within her heart and soul really spoke to me. As someone who has spent the better part of two years being incredibly homesick, I could really relate to Irma's longing for home, and yet pushing on, knowing she was making a better life for herself. I have been living this same thing, although I have access to all of the modern conveniences that allow me to keep in daily contact with those I left behind. I would have never been strong enough to travel so far like so many did back then - but I'm glad that my ancestors were, or I never would have been blessed to be born in America.

One of my favorite passages in the book...

"I drew my chair close to the young woman, who seemed to be my age and wore the plain cotton dress of a factory girl. She said her name was Francesca De Santis and she worked at Mr. Levi's factory on Battery Street, sewing pockets onto trousers that people called blue jeans. Her accent rippled through me and I nearly wept for joy. She was from Abruzzo and seemed freshly in America, still bearing the smell of our earth and the savor of our bread."

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The smell of our earth and the savor of our bread...

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### **Marcy says**

"Even an uprooted tree could find a scoop of welcoming earth." Irma was from a small village in Italy. After her bereaved father came home drunk, he tried to make a pass at his daughter. Irma knew she did not have a safe place to live in her village any more, particularly with the old-fashioned mores of her village. She decided to go to America, the land of opportunity, where her brother had gone before her. Irma became the classic immigrant "sewer" and "embroiderer" in Cleveland. There were dangers and poverty she had not anticipated in this city. She left Cleveland in pursuit of a better life in Chicago. There were trials in Chicago as well, but here Irma had made friends who loved and helped her through the worst of her experiences, in

addition to a much better job. The owner appreciated her gifted handiwork. In Chicago, a woman doctor helped Irma out of a crisis, and then convinced her to help her heal the poor and sickly in an evening clinic. This experience changed Irma's life as she set out, once again, for a new destination - San Francisco. I have always enjoyed immigration stories! This is no exception. It was well written.

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### **Joy H. says**

Added 1/30/12.

Edit added 2/1/12 - My comment at my group:

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I'm currently reading a good book: When We Were Strangers by Pamela Schoenewaldt. It's a selection of our Sr Cit book club and is VERY interesting, almost compelling. It's about a young Italian girl who emigrates to America years ago from a small town in Italy. The descriptions of her experiences are so well-written, touching and informative as well.

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Edit added 2/11/12:

I enjoyed reading this book. It points out the struggles of some immigrants who left Italy to find a new life in America. According to the author, she did quite a bit of research. So the book can be considered a historical novel.

One of the aspects of this book that especially I liked was that the story is told in a **linear fashion**. There are no confusing time shifts and there is no switching of narrators. The reader can sail right through and enjoy the story as it unrolls.

Five Goodreads stars out of 5! A good read!

A bonus of the book for me was that it prompted me to call my older aunts (96 and 87 years old) and question them about what they remember about our family history. We had wonderful conversations and did a lot of reminiscing. Afterwards, I sent emails to the rest of the family passing on the interesting things my aunts told me.

You might get a kick out of the author description at Goodreads:

Excerpt:

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"Pamela Schoenewaldt lived for ten years in a small town outside Naples, Italy. Her short stories have appeared in literary magazines in England, France, Italy and the United States. She ... now lives in Knoxville, Tennessee with her husband, Maurizio Conti, a medical physicist, and **their dog Jesse, a philosopher.**"

FROM: <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/93...>

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### **Mom2nine says**

The book earns the two stars for the first half of the story. Author's attention to details, such as the steerage

section of the ship would be dark, brought me into her story. I find it difficult to believe that a working class girl could not go anywhere without being mugged or molested. Irma was smart enough to find her way over the ocean and to support herself, but was always unsafe when she stepped foot outside. Possibly the author assumes that men are animals, as even Irma's father could not contain himself. For this reason, the rest of the story was annoying at best.

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### **Lydia Presley says**

When We Were Strangers blew me away.

I mean, it's about time I read a book in 2011 that gripped me as much as this book did and honestly, the binding I got for the Advanced Copy was rough to read, the words were half-faded and still, I didn't mind at all. Not a single bit. Because the story was that powerful.

Irma is a woman with strength, character, and resolve, yet also I found in her innocence, fear, and a sense of loneliness. This character in a story exhibited every trait that I would strive to have when finding myself faced with the challenges she faced. This is an immigration story that, though told on a nearly day-by-day, common occurrences basis, was filled with adventure, longing, hope and more.

Pamela Schoenewaldt writes so beautifully about Italy, about the culture, the food, the scenery. She describes with a brush of truth what life would have been like for a plain girl such as Irma. Without emotion to cloud the story (other than Irma's own emotion), I followed the ups and downs of every event with my heart in my throat. Honestly, this would make for a fantastic book club discussion book and I intend to write it down on my list.

Fantastic, powerful novel and I'm so thankful to TLC Tours for providing me with the opportunity to read it.

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### **Lori says**

I admire how the author moved Irma through events rapidly and seamlessly. And I cared about Irma very much. However, so many bad things happened to her in the beginning and middle sections, I was beginning to panic anytime she left the boarding house. The poor girl couldn't even go for a walk! This was a little too traumatic for me, but I still enjoyed the story and appreciated the un-cliche ending. Two thumbs up to the character of Molly!

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### **Mj says**

When We Were Strangers is the first novel debut written by Pamela Schoenewaldt; however, I think much more experienced authors would take pride had they written it themselves.

It is an historical fiction filled with wonderful characters throughout. Schoenewaldt makes them come alive. None are one dimensional. Each has strengths, flaws and humanness and feels very authentic. They became friends whose company I enjoyed and were the kind of people I like to emulate. The story is particularly rich with strong, females making it on their own.

The story starts in a small mountain village in the 1880's in Opi, Italy where a young woman named Irma has lived all her life, never venturing more than a mile from her childhood home. Long before feminism and the suffragette movement and still not twenty years of age, Irma embarks alone on a journey across the ocean to America – a land that she's heard is full of riches and opportunities.

What a voyage it is! Schoenewaldt creates a very vivid picture of how hard an ocean crossing used to be. You can smell the urine and the vomit and you feel constricted and claustrophobic when the cramped living and sleeping spaces below deck are described. Schoenewaldt immerses you in the immigrant experience – an experience that thousands of North Americans who came before us have undertaken. Irma remains positive throughout. Her strength and kindness is very apparent at a young age. Whatever hardships Irma faces she responds to with resilience, determination, a plan and action!

The well developed plot is Irma's story – the job seeking, pavement pounding, working long days, living in a single room in rooming houses. This is what fills up Irma's new life. She makes many friends and mentors along the way and continues to learn and seek out new knowledge as she lives, works and studies in various cities in the United States. The readers get a sense of what the Midwest and the West Coast were like in the early 1900's in terms of sexism, classism, poverty and long, hard manual labour during the period before the industrial revolution. One also gets a sense of the lawlessness, lack of social supports for the sick, impoverished and unemployed and the lack of workplace regulations. On the flip side, Schoenewaldt also illustrates how entrepreneurship, both the attitude and the results, thrived during this time. It seems that hard work, vision and determination could make a huge difference to people. One could either wait in food lines and works for others or create a better life by trading or exchanging one's strengths with others and becoming your own boss and business owner. Schoenewaldt definitely paints a tough, realistic world but one filled with possibilities and you can feel this energy throughout the book.

There is so much to more I could share but it would be much more enjoyable for you to read *When We Were Strangers* yourself. Savour Irma's story, meet some wonderful characters and spend time immersing yourself in another era when life was so different. I hope you enjoy your time and learn as much as I did.

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### **Agatha says**

Historical fiction. Follows young Irma as she emigrates from a tiny town in Italy to the US, first to NYC, then Cleveland, Chicago, and, finally, San Francisco. She earns her way as a seamstress doing first collar piece work in Cleveland and then fine embroidery and sewing for rich ladies in Chicago.

I think the best adjective to describe this book would be: "uneven." Some parts – brilliant, descriptive, flash of magic in the word choices, descriptions, insight. Other parts – so mediocre or simplistic, they jump out like dull rocks in a heap of diamonds. Did these parts just miss editing? I just don't know. One example is: Irma lay covering her scar for the next few days at the bottom of the ship; but she had just gotten the cut a few days ago; how could it already be a scar? Very weird.

Throughout the book you could also hear the author putting forth her own modern-day lessons and points of view, which was jarring. Example: Irma jumps in to defend the two lesbians on the boat. Umm, really? Not so sure a little Catholic girl from a tiny village in Italy at the end of the 19th century would have done this.

Overall grade: C+.

PS My last bone to pick: what the heck does the title have to do with anything? I am getting tired of nebulous, "female-sounding," titles. Have you all noticed this? So many of books which appeal to females, I feel, are titled something like, "The wisp of the grass in June," or "Winter's pale fog," or "Drifting Dreams." Say wha???? The books themselves are fine, but what's up with these titles?

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### **Brenda says**

I enjoyed this book as I followed Irma from Italy to Cleveland to Chicago to San Francisco. Her trials were real but so were her dreams. An enjoyable read.

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### **Kimberly Ann says**

Can that many bad things happen to one person? I did feel like there was a good theme of forgiveness/atonement? I don't know if I have that right but it was ok.

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### **Patricia says**

It was ok, just ok. Seems like I've read a lot of immigrant stories (1800s) lately. And while I'm always amazed at the grit and courage of immigrants to this new country, this book didn't keep me interested. I did finish it, but found it almost predictable toward the end.

Irma, our heroine, comes penniless, meets her share of cruel people and is the victim of several scams and crimes. She uses her skill as a seamstress to earn her way, and then through a series of events (I won't give away the plot line) she moves into medicine. Irma works her way from Cleveland to Chicago to San Francisco. There is a lot of "plot" in this book, but often it seems crammed in and skipped through brusquely. At times the writing is stilted and seems forced. I think there was a lot more potential for the telling of this tale.

I'm definitely not undermining the difficulties faced by the early immigrants, and certainly not criticizing their efforts to find a better life, or to survive for that matter. I find their stories to be inspiring and praise worthy. But in this case.... the immigrant story deserved a better telling. It didn't draw me in.

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