

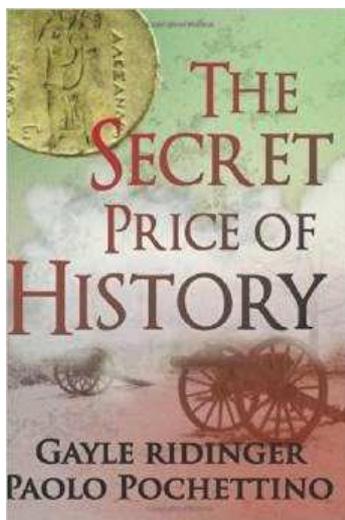
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The Secret Price of History



THE SECRET PRICE OF HISTORY combines historical saga with a modern detective story. Set both in the 1800s during the American Civil War and Italian Risorgimento and in the summer of 2008 during the breaking economic crisis, it is linked together by a mysterious medallion inherited by Angie, a TV weather-girl who is shot in the arm while attending a Gettysburg re-enactment.

Last year I had the pleasure of working with the authors: **Gayle Ridinger** is an American who teaches English and translation at a university near Milan, an award-winning translator of modern Italian poetry whose children's book *A Star at the Bottom of the Sea* was published in five languages; and **Paolo Pochettino** is a native of Milan who worked for years as an industrial manager in various countries.

The book has just been published and is available on Amazon.com, and their website, still under construction, is well worth a look: www.secretpriceofhistory.com

It's interesting that you decided to write this book together, being a couple, one of you American and the other Italian. Can you tell us a little about that?

Well, first of all, we are both international types who know each other's culture very well. I'm of Italian origin on my mother's side and have lived in Italy for 30 years. Paolo has worked and traveled in America. But in some ways we are fundamentally 'marked' by our native countries, and we wanted that to resonate in the book. Above all, we wanted the parts about America to

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emerge in an American voice and the parts about Italy to emerge from an authentically Italian point of view. Some playful irony perhaps, but no false nostalgia.

And then there was the realization that we counter-balanced each other in terms of our passionate interest in history. I had devoured Civil War novels as a teenager and knew Gettysburg well for family reasons; now here in Italy I was enjoying Paolo's readiness to narrate at the drop of a hat all the battles that had taken place for Italian unification; he'd point out the car window at the countryside and I could see it all happening before my eyes. The realization that the Risorgimento and the Civil War occurred around the same time started our minds going. The fact that President Lincoln asked Garibaldi, the hero of the Italian Risorgimento, to lead Union troops in the Civil War whetted our imagination.

Where did the whole idea begin - when did you first think you wanted to write this book?

One day in 2007, when I was enjoying summer vacation at my parents' place in America and not in any 'book-writing phase', Paolo wrote me an email about his idea. There was already a young American reporter reporting on the Italians who fought in the American Civil War. There was the old suitcase full of relics connected to a treasure, which put her life in danger. In short, the start was similar to that of our final book. The ending, however, was a battle between the occult powers within the Catholic Church and some other secret forces. Fortunately this Dan Brown sort of thing got dropped immediately. In any case, Paolo was launching a proposal and a sort of challenge. A novel about Italians and Americans not done in the usual way and under the guise of a best-seller *whodunit*. I found it interesting.

What was the process of writing the book together - how did you go about it?

Generally speaking, Paolo was the 'imaginator' (*l'imaginatore*), as we termed it. Certainly, there were parts that I wrote independently (especially regarding the ending) and in general it was my job to flesh out the characters, but usually he wrote a first draft (or summary) of each chapter in Italian, which I expanded on in English. I had to really work at the historical parts, whereas the action in the modern plot was often fine already. To make it all come to life, however, I obviously had to imagine my way into the events. "In my mind are other people's thoughts; in my heart are other people's emotions." That's what I wrote in my diary; it was how I spent many a day. One other thing: I would never have been able to write these crime or battle scenes on my own!

Are there any interesting stories about the writing of the book? How long did it take? What was the biggest challenge in the editing process?

If we count from the very beginning to now and include the re-writes and editing, it took about seven years! The biggest challenge in the editing process was figuring out how not to get bogged down in detail and yet not skip over too many years at one time. Also, we had to deal with the complicated nature of the Italian Risorgimento—it really did take place over twenty-some years in three separate wars. And if on the one hand it was astonishing to realize how so many men and women rushed back to fighting for the cause of liberty and unification even after years had passed, on the other hand, the daily experience of one war tended to resemble that of another (as wars do), and that was a writing challenge. Still another challenge was how to stitch invented characters into scenes with real historical ones and then make the whole come alive.

As for interesting stories, the best has to be the adventure we had while visiting Montiglio Monferrato, the little hill-top town with the castle from where the Marquis of Monferrato, Boniface I, briefly and literally ruled the world. Our car broke down and the block on the alarm system (which had already been damaged by thieves) was such that it couldn't be restarted in any way. We were so helped and cared for by the townspeople, especially in the person of Signor Francesco from the Tourist Office, that we will never forget it. And this affection for the town is why Paolo and I have chosen it for our wedding in July.

Would you call it a historical novel? How much of the story is fact and how much fiction?

It does tend towards a historical novel but it isn't one completely. It's a "genre mix", as much as publishers and agents would like to pretend such a thing doesn't exist. Thanks to this mix, certain parallels between those times in the 1800s and our world today are bound to stand out to readers—striking chords that wouldn't otherwise be possible.

Without taking back what I've just said. I have to admit that others are as intrigued as we are by the historical figures in the book. We have had many a dinner with friends full of lively questions and comments about the ones we mention...like the great French writer Alexandre Dumas on his yacht with his teenage mistress in the port of Naples, having hired an army of tailors to come on board to make more red shirts for Garibaldi's volunteers.

How did you piece together all the stories - was there a great deal of research involved?

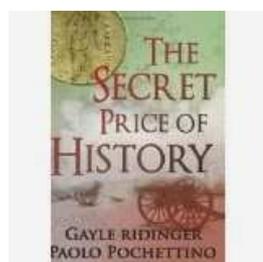
We had to keep Excel sheets of all the dates to make sure we weren't altering history or suggesting the impossible. As for the research, oh yes, there was quite a lot involved and it was utterly enjoyable. In Rome we toured the battle sites up on the Janiculum as well as the underground mithraeums. We spent a day out at Ostia Antica, We explored the Monferrato area and Asti where the *casane* were located. We went to the chalk mines in Gesso and over to see Bassignana, where Paolo's great-grandmother was from. We visited the Risorgimento museums of numerous cities. There was the national celebration of the 150th anniversary of Italian Unification in course and we took advantage of the many events planned. We went back to the fabulous Gettysburg Battlefield Museum. And then there was also the sort of research one does reading books or articles online. We spent a lot of time putting together the part about Mithraism as well as the story of Alexander the Great's 'third treasure'. It is very very plausible!

What are your biggest literary influences?

Certain books I've read over the last few years—for the tone of voice, irony, or way of dealing with criminal minds. PURE by Andrew Miller, THE ORPHAN MASTER'S Son by Adam Johnson, THE LOVELY BONES by Alice Sebold, and THE GOOD HUSBAND OF ZEBRA DRIVE by Alexander McCall Smith. And then all the films, thrillers, and graphic novels Paolo has seen or read over the years.

What are your hopes for the book?

That lots of people for lots of reasons buy and enjoy the book. We also hope they will be intrigued by our website, where old pictures and photos of sites connect the characters and events in the book with real history. We'd like to see it translated into Italian and French at the very least. And of course, given its plot, we think it'd be perfect as a film!



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Writer, editor and agent. Love food, walking, the sea, books. Owner of gregarious dog. Usually based in Greece but temporarily drinking my ouzo in Oz.

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- ▼ [2014 \(3\)](#)
 - ▼ [June 2014 \(1\)](#)
 - [The Secret Price of History](#)
 - ▶ [May 2014 \(1\)](#)
 - ▶ [March 2014 \(1\)](#)
- ▶ [2013 \(12\)](#)
- ▶ [2012 \(5\)](#)

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