

"WAGNER HITS ALL THE RIGHT NOTES IN THIS DEBUT."

—*LIBRARY JOURNAL*, STARRED REVIEW

# DAVID P. WAGNER

FIRST IN SERIES A RICK MONTOYA ITALIAN MYSTERY

## COLD TUSCAN **STONE**



## READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Rick doesn't have an investigative background. How does this help him as he sizes up suspects? Does it hurt him at all?
2. Both Rick and Commissario Conti judge people on how much they seem to be mourning Orlando Canopo. Do you think you can tell how much someone is grieving just by talking to them?
3. Rick seems torn between identifying himself as an Italian or an American. Do you think he is more one or the other, or can he be both?
4. Rick debates telling Beppo or Conti about his meeting with Santo, because he doesn't want to seem nervous. Do you think he made the right decision to wait until after the meeting? What would you have done in his position?
5. Rick barely seems to entertain the possibility that

Donatella Minotti could be involved with the art theft. Why do you think he dismisses her so quickly? Did she seem suspicious to you?

6. What did you think of the Rudabecks' insistence on "authenticity" in their pursuit of opening their Italian restaurant?
7. Zerbino claims that the "patrimony of Italy" doesn't matter, because the past shouldn't be worshipped. How do you think we should interact with the past? Does it really matter?
8. What did you think of Detective LoGuercio's actions at the theater? Did he use more force than necessary?

## A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

**Food and drink are the stars of several scenes throughout the book. Are you much of a foodie? Do you prefer to cook yourself or go out?**

A big part of Italy's draw for everyone is the food, so it was natural that I would include descriptions of Rick's meals in the books. He has to eat after all. I also wanted to dispel the idea that Italian food is just red sauce. I grew up in a town that had a large Italian-American community, so I had my share of excellent tomato sauce, but when I got to Italy, I found that there is much more to Italian food, and that it is very regional. So I try to show culinary regionalism in the books. My wife and I eat out a couple times a week, and at home, about half our meals could be described as Italian. I cook some things, but my wife is in another league. She took several cooking classes, with Italians and taught in Italian, when we lived there, so she really knows her Italian dishes. But we don't obsess over food, so I guess we're not foodies.

**You write distinctly about Italy and Tuscany in particular. How did you develop an interest in the region?**

In the foreign service, you have to go where they want to send you, so I couldn't protest when they sent me to Milan to work at the consulate and then two more assignments to the embassy in Rome. Somebody had to do it. During those nine years, I got to know Italy quite well. *Cold Tuscan Stone* takes Rick to Tuscany, but in the other books, he goes to other regions of Italy. Each of the towns in which he finds himself are places I've been to several times, either from when we lived there or later visits as a tourist.

**How much research did you do on sculpture and historical art? Did you learn anything interesting that didn't fit in the book?**

When I decided on the plotline, I realized I needed to brush up on the Etruscans, so I read the Massimo Pallottino book, which is considered the best study of those mysterious people. It was filled with fascinating stuff, much of which I would have loved to have included in *Cold Tuscan Stone*. But it is first and foremost a mystery. On the art, I leaned heavily on my wife's expertise, since she took art history courses both in Rome and the University of New Mexico. I would never describe a painting, like Rosso Fiorentino's *Deposition* that Rick sees in Chapter Eleven, without consulting her.

**Do you see yourself in Rick at all? How are you similar or different?**

Rick is his own man, but there may be some similarities, like having a New Mexico connection or being fascinated with languages. It's likely not a coincidence that he won't eat stuff I don't like, so he stays away from liver and thinks grappa tastes like kerosene, albeit a very high quality kerosene. I should note that friends tell me Rick has a sense of humor similar to mine.

Differences? To begin with, he's forty years younger than I am and has the advantage of staying the same age while I get older. He's also totally bilingual. My Italian is pretty good, but he's a professional interpreter after all. Oh, and I don't wear cowboy boots.

**Herb and Shirley Rudabeck seem like surprising additions to a book about mystery and art. What made you include them?**

I've gotten a lot of positive feedback from readers about Herb and Shirley. They started out only as witnesses to the murder, but then I decided they were just too good to abandon, and I worked in a whole subplot for them with Rick. Who says a murder mystery has to be all serious?

**What is your writing process like? How do you keep track of persons of interest, suspicions, and conspirators?**

I create a book in two stages, starting with a general outline of the story, descriptions of the characters, and a list of ideas I want to work into the plot. That pretty much keeps track of everybody. Then I start writing. Sometimes the storyline changes or characters modify their personalities or importance, but mostly I stick with what I came up with initially. When I'm into the writing phase, I'm writing all the time, even when I don't have fingers on the keyboard. Some of my best ideas for the scene I'm working on come when I'm away from my laptop, like on the golf course. I always carry pen and paper to write them down.

**Besides visiting Italy, do you travel much? What is your favorite place to visit?**

We don't travel much at all, since it often means getting on an airplane. Also, we now live in a wonderful town in one of

the most picturesque states in America and are trying to see as much of Colorado as we can. A few times in recent years, I've gone back East, where I grew up and went to college, but I always found that the sky is so much smaller there than here in the Rockies, and there is just too much humidity and humanity for me. Maybe I should get some cowboy boots like Rick's.

**When did you first become interested in writing mysteries? Were there any particular books or authors who inspired you?**

When I retired from the diplomatic service, I started a niche business writing tourist materials for travelers to Italy. After doing that a few years, I decided I wanted to write my own stories to go with the wonderful little towns I'd been describing to my clients. Since I've always liked mysteries, that was the genre I picked. My inspirations were writers I consider the big three of Italian crime fiction: Michael Dibdin with his Aurelio Zen character, Donna Leon's Venetian Commissario Brunetti, and Andrea Camilleri's Inspector Montalbano.

**What are you reading these days?**

For the most part, I read mysteries and histories, with emphasis on the Italian connection in both categories for obvious reasons. The history doesn't have to be recent; if something new comes out about the Punic Wars, for example, I'll probably be on it. I also like books on art and architecture, both fiction and nonfiction, like the ones by Ross King. I'm always on the lookout for mysteries with humor, and I usually stay away from anything that's too dark or violent, just as I do when I write my own books.