

FICTION

# This girl's life

By Malcolm Forbes

Sometimes it pays to give books rejected by publishers a second look. After being shunned by scandalized editors and disparaged by two leading Italian critics, Sicilian-born Goliarda Sapienza locked her novel, "The Art of Joy," in a chest for two decades, giving it up for dead. In 2005, nine years after Sapienza's death, a French publishing house discovered it, was magicked by it and took it on. The book has since achieved overdue recognition in Europe; now, finally, Sapienza's masterpiece is available in English.

"The Art of Joy" is a bildungsroman of sorts that tracks the life of Modesta, a Sicilian woman, from poor and uneducated 9-year-old girl to feisty, fiercely independent adult. As Modesta was born on Jan. 1, 1900, Sapienza simultaneously charts the history and upheaval of her heroine's native country, both that of Sicily and the Italian mainland (or as each Sicilian terms it, "the continent") during the first half of the 20th century. Personal travails run parallel or intersect with political turmoil; individual standpoints clash with social constraints and cultural mores; and affairs of the heart play out against Fascist demands of unswerving allegiance to the state.

We follow Modesta in the first of four parts as she escapes fire and rape at the hands of her father for the haven of a convent. But although her childhood innocence is ruined, Modesta refuses to find solace in a life of chastity. She meets Beatrice, and friendship boils into romance. So begins a second, more formative sexual awakening, which in turn is strengthened, though complicated, by the appearance and manipulations of the lustful Carmine, her horseback-riding instructor.

When we reach the 1920s, Modesta is living with her son,



**The Art of Joy**  
By Goliarda Sapienza;  
translated from the Italian  
by Anne Milano Appel  
(Farrar, Straus and Giroux;  
685 pages; \$30)

Prando, in Catania. City life provides the intellectual nourishment she has craved: Soon she is mingling with communists, devouring books, decrying marriage and flouting rules. Family vendettas and false lovers are in time overshadowed by war and a new kind of enemy. As comrades switch to become Mussolini's minions, loyalties are tested, suspicion rife. Modesta herself changes sides, finding Freud a better guru than Marx. La Certa (death) wreaks havoc. Italy falls, the carnage ends, friends die, but Modesta goes on, a fighter, a mother, later a grandmother, and thankfully for the reader, always an enemy to "the limitations of convention."

Sapienza worked on "The Art of Joy" from 1967 to 1976. It weighs in at almost 700 pages, and from its explosive, disturbing opening to the quiet cadences of its lyrical close it is crammed with passion, ideas, adventure and mystery. Sapienza flits from first-person narra-



Archivio Sapienza Pellegrino

## Goliarda Sapienza

tor to third, often on the same page, with stylistic dexterity. Her protagonist shuttles between peasants and aristocrats, party stooges and revolutionaries, male lovers and female. The cast is huge, but not once do we feel that Sapienza is overreaching herself. Anne Milano Appel's expert translation deserves mention, and her illuminating glossary decodes recon-dite Sicilian slang and contextualizes songs, proverbs, historical figures and the many references to Dante.

What ultimately keeps us turning the many pages is the character of Modesta. She doesn't only steer the book, she is it. Through her observations and revelations, both character and country come vigorously alive. It helps that she is consistently candid, particularly when it comes to expressing her desires (it seems strange that certain delicate critics were offended by the sexual antics described so late in the century — masturbating nuns and incest notwithstanding). Out of the bedroom, Modesta has some insightful truths to offer on love, both playful ("we fall in love because over time we get bored with ourselves and we want to enter into someone else") and blunt ("love is neither absolute nor eternal").

In many ways, a rediscovered Sapienza resembles an unearthed Hans Fallada, another lost-now-found writer who

focused on his country's calm before the storm, a serenity shattered by the stomp of jackboots — or in Sapienza's words, "this abnormal burgeoning of skulls and crossbones." In "The Art of Joy," she writes authoritatively and enthralingly on Italy's moral disintegration and seductively on her beguiling heroine's resistance to social norms and opposition to Il Duce's restrictions. As with Fallada, and on the basis of this novel, a release of Sapienza's back catalog would certainly be welcome.

"The Art of Joy" is perhaps too sweeping, too epic — too much of what Henry James termed a loose baggy monster — to usurp Tomasi di Lampedusa's "The Leopard" or the perfectly realized short stories of Giovanni Verga as the best fiction to come out of Sicily. However, Sapienza gives both a run for their money with her original voice and her wonderful lead, who insists on plowing her own furrow.

"But you had to be free," Modesta informs us, "you had to take advantage of every moment, experience every step of the walk we call life." "The Art of Joy" boldly and at times beautifully maps the steps of that walk.

*Malcolm Forbes' reviews have appeared in the TLS, the Economist, the Daily Beast and the Quarterly Conversation. E-mail: books@sfgchronicle.com*