



When We Were Strangers: A Novel

Pamela Schoenewaldt

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Introduction

"If you leave Opi, you'll die with strangers," Irma Vitale's mother always warned. Even after her beloved mother's passing, 20-year-old Irma longs to stay in her Abruzzo mountain village, plying her needle. But too poor and plain to marry and subject to growing danger in her own home, she risks rough passage to America and workhouse servitude to achieve her dream of making dresses for gentlewomen.

In the raw immigrant quarters and with the help of an entrepreneurial Irish serving girl, ribbon-decked Polish ragman and austere Alsatian dressmaker, Irma begins to stitch together a new life . . . until her peace and self are shattered in the charred remains of the Great Chicago Fire. Enduring a painful recovery, Irma reaches deep within to find that she has even more to offer the world than her remarkable ability with a needle and thread

Questions for Discussion

1. Irma's practical skills and world knowledge seem so limited, even compared to those of her brother Carlo. What abilities and traits help her navigate the difficult passages from Opi to Naples and then west?
2. Irma's mother devoutly believes that "If you leave Opi, you will die with strangers." How does this assertion shape Irma's experience and how does she ultimately refine it in a way that allows her to move forward in her journey? How does this family assertion compare to others you may have encountered?
3. Opi, real and remembered, is a powerful force for Irma's self-image and world-view. How does her conception of Opi change through the novel?
4. Unlike many fictional heroines and perhaps many young women, Irma initially has little interest in a romantic union. Why not and what must change for her to have a satisfying intimate relationship?
5. At various times in her journey, Irma makes choices which she herself feels are at odds with the Irma Vitale that she "really is." Is she accurate in thi

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