



Incontinent on the Continent: My Mother, Her Walker, and Our Grand Tour of Italy

Jane Christmas

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Incontinent on the Continent: My Mother, Her Walker, and Our Grand Tour of Italy Jane Christmas Since the beginning of time, mothers and daughters have had notoriously fraught relationships. "Show me a mother who says she has a good or great relationship with her daughter," Jane Christmas writes, "and I'll show you a daughter who is in therapy trying to understand how it all went so horribly wrong."

To smooth over five decades of constant clashing, Christmas takes her arthritic, incontinent, and domineering mother, Valeria—a cross between Queen Victoria and Hyacinth Bucket of the British comedy *Keeping Up Appearances*—on a tour of Italy.

Neither has been to Italy before, but both are fans of ancient art, architecture, and history. Will gazing at the fruits of the Italian Renaissance be enough to spark a renaissance in their relationship? As they wander along the winding Amalfi Coast, traverse St. Peter's Square in Rome, and sample the wines of Tuscany—walkers, biscuits, shawls, and medications in tow—they revisit the bickering and bitterness of years past and reassess who they are and how they might reconcile their differences.

Unflinching and frequently hilarious, this book will speak to all women who have tried to make friends with their mothers.

Incontinent on the Continent: My Mother, Her Walker, and Our Grand Tour of Italy Details

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From Reader Review Incontinent on the Continent: My Mother, Her Walker, and Our Grand Tour of Italy for online ebook

Kristina says

The best possible reason to read this book is if you want to visit Italy, but there's some overriding reason that you really shouldn't. Read this book, and talk yourself out of making the trip in the first place - because if Jane Christmas is to be believed, 90% of the experience really isn't worth it, at least not on the trip she took.

Great food? Forget it - it's all pig swill. The two worst meals she's ever eaten in her life.

Also, in Italy, you will fail to find hospitality, human kindness, any consideration for the aged and disabled, common civility, any logic or manners.

It might surprise you to know that the vast amount of artwork is sure to disappoint you, and that your reaction to the Sistine Chapel might be a disgruntled, "I've seen better."

I don't know what more to say. I've never read a more bitter and hateful travelogue. I thought Bill Bryant could make a trip more depressing than anyone could reasonably imagine, but Christmas took it to a whole new level.

Ah, yes, I've neglected to mention, in my dismay over the incessant whining, just how profoundly unkind and unloving she is towards her elderly and disabled mother.

The book struggles toward a profoundly unconvincing resolution in the last few pages, but as patiently and hopefully as I turned page after page, any enjoyment or happiness during the trip was profoundly lacking. Italy appeared to be a hell-hole the likes of Calcutta, with the occasional pleasant vista viewed from the autostrada.

She might have done better to have actually RESEARCHED her trip, or booked something in advance, but instead, she takes an almost defiant pride in her lack of preparedness. Her style would have been more appropriate for a seventeen-year-old than a woman in her fifties taking her elderly mother on a six-week trip to Italy.

The back cover billed the book as "frequently hilarious." It really isn't. It's a non-stop ranting, whining misery of a trip that would be enough to put me off completely, if her ineptitude in planning and executing the trip weren't so patently obvious.

Debra says

Please do not approach this as a travel book (although it is that secondarily.) Instead Canadian Jane Christmas seeks to mend a life-time of bad relations with her mother by taking a long trip to Italy. Mainly it is about mothers and daughters.

Yes, Jane whines. Her aged and semi-disabled mother is not up for the trip - a planning flaw. Realistically an honest person will have to admit to some sympathy with Jane, as much as we all wish that we are better people. (Yes, I have been there more than once.) between the kvetching, though, she writes with flair and humor.

I read it dead tree. I wish photos had been included- especially of Jane and her mother. I could easily find pictures of trulli etc as desired. Ditto a map, again though easy to find.

Now that I have read all the J. Christmas books in my library system, I find that I do still want to accompany her on the Camino de Santiago.

Denise DeSio says

I really enjoyed Jane Christmas's audio version of *Incontinent on the Continent*, and I'll tell you why: I have a sense of humor. For those without one, pass on this book. It wasn't meant to be a travelogue. Christmas has issues with her mother (who doesn't?) and erroneously hopes (like all of us) that doing something fabulous together (like a trip to Italy) will be just the vehicle to wipe away the past and bring them close together. Instead, it's a major disappointment and more trouble than it could possibly have been worth.

While the rest of us (who may find ourselves in this position) wallow in our misery and create even more of rift between us and our parents, Christmas uses humor and sarcasm to create art, and finds in the end that accepting her mother's foibles and inadequacies is the only way to get closer to her. But in the meantime, she allows the reader access to her every hilarious gripe and disenchantment, as she tries to cope with an infirm mother in a country that makes absolutely no allowances for anyone but the fully abled.

Perhaps some of the humor is too absurd for the comedy impaired, like the reviewer who explains his one star review by boasting about taking BOTH his or her 85 year old mother AND 93 year old mother-in-law to Italy and still managing to find "magic." I'll be waiting for that book to hit the stands...NOT! So let me explain about the absurdity factor in humor to that reviewer:

When Christmas asserts that she "hates" her mother's walker. Seriously, who in their right mind would begrudge anyone a handicap accessory? It's absurd! That's what makes it funny, and sure enough, when an Italian waiter kicks the walker, the author suddenly becomes the walker's ally. Ha ha! That's funny, people. Maybe the audio book, read by Eileen Barrett, might be a better choice for people who need emoticons to get the joke.

Eileen Barrett was a brilliant choice to represent the author's over the top humor. Her voice is oh so quirky, with slightly exaggerated pronunciation and a weird propensity to over-articulate words with double t's - definitely the voice of a stand-up comic, and perfect to throw around a few F-bombs!

Underneath all this comedy is not meanness. It's a poignant plea for the love of a parent who doesn't know how to express it without making her daughter feel inferior. If you listen hard enough, you will hear it throughout the book, and in the end it's the daughter who must create a new paradigm to be able to love her mother as she is, while the mother gets a free pass. That's not so funny and it doesn't seem fair to deny the author some harmless comedic venting.

Kudos to Christmas for the courage to be human and giving voice to what so many of us may think but leave

unsaid.

Lisette Venselaar says

Ik heb haar eerdere boeken 'The Pelee Project' en 'What the psychic told the pilgrim' werkelijk verslonden. Dit boek pakte mij iets minder. Wel weer geschreven in haar herkenbare en eerlijke schrijfstijl. Het idee alleen al, om met haar moeder op leeftijd deze reis te ondernemen, schreeuwt "WHY?".....

Mocht je nog geen boek van Jane gelezen hebben, dan zou ik deze overslaan en één van de andere twee hierboven genoemde boeken pakken. Als je dan, net als ik, Jane in je hart gesloten hebt - lees dan ook dit boek. Zonder de voorgeschiedenis van haar persoonlijkheid, kan je dit boek als zeurend en schreeuwerig ervaren. Ik kan het inmiddels prima van haar hebben en had ook niet anders verwacht. Ik ga zeker ook nog haar 4e boek 'And then there were nuns' nog lezen.

Conclusie: Aanrader voor echte Jane Christmas fans. Voor diegenen, die Jane nog niet kennen - lees eerst één van haar eerdere boeken. Doet dat verlangen naar meer, lees dan pas dit boek...

John says

First of all, six weeks was *way* too ambitious a project for this pair in the first place, although they did cut the trip short a week eventually. It's later revealed that the mother had arranged for seats at Easter mass at the Vatican, which happened around the fourth or fifth week, so they really couldn't have left any earlier.

Initially, they stay at a rented holiday house (or *trullo* in Italian - a term that got grating as affected on audio after a while), with a side trip to Sicily. Unfortunately for Jane, the weather was unseasonable cold and rainy during that time, so she got cabin fever being cooped up with her mom, except for occasional forays to nearby towns. Here we got the first glimpses into how badly Jane's expectations were going to be unmet on the trip; she later raves about how Italians handle road construction in such a civil manner, as opposed to North American mega-project upheaval, but sadly for her, guess who handles disabled travelers better? Tiny streets are not the greatest places to stop, unload a mom and walker, and then get back in the car to find a parking place. She really, really needed to have done some homework on disabled travel in Italy, but then again, she seems to have done little advance planning besides renting her *trullo* from a friend-of-a-friend back in Canada.

It struck me that she felt so put upon because she saw no other families with a disabled member. I came away largely inferring that not-so-able Europeans don't go out much, as opposed to Americans who don't let that get in their way. Christmas is quite grouchy about the prices, especially in tourist areas. How naïve. Overall, I think we were suppose to laugh at some of her misfortunes, such as the weather, which I did. The mother-daughter dynamic itself just doesn't work here I'm afraid as up to the end, she keeps hoping to have some sort of "closure" for their past distance, which just wasn't going to happen. I ended up feeling kind of sorry for Jane in being so unrealistic about it all, and for her mom who might've managed a shorter trip that included Easter mass, but not one for several weeks of sightseeing.

Audio narration was quite well done, making the story come alive more than a print copy would have likely managed. It was a bit jolting to hear distances in miles and temperatures in Farenheit from a Canadian writer in Italy, but nice that we Americans were so accommodated!

So, would I recommend this one? Maybe. I'm not sorry I read it, but I cannot fault readers who gave up on Jane as "whiny" -- if you feel that way partway through, it won't "get any better", so just cut your losses. As a travel narrative, it's not bad if you set your expectation a bit low, assuming she's not as ... wordly as she might have assumed she was starting out.

Roberta says

Light, frothy and a very quick read. The book has its moments, some quite funny, but overall Jane Christmas comes across as mean spirited, impatient and whiny. I kept getting flashes of her stalking around Italy like an outraged adolescent, rolling her eyes and snapping out sarcastic comments. Maybe that was the point. Was she trying to say that our mothers can reduce us to our worst selves? I also found her description of her mother's various ailments intrusive and mean.

Laurel says

A sometimes funny, bittersweet account of a fifty-something daughter taking her aging, incontinent mother on a six week driving tour of Italy. Many readers have criticized the author for being impatient, whiny and unsympathetic to her ageing mother and her constantly changing medical and mental issues. Anyone who has cared for a parent over the long haul, including ever-increasing senility, incontinence and a lack of awareness by that parent of his/her ever-increasing limitations, should cut this author some slack. It is especially difficult to contemplate the notion that you are looking at what lays in store for you in the next 20-30 years. This isn't really a travel book. It's about facing your own mortality, and preparing you for the difficult path of caring for a parent who lives for a really long time, as you watch the decline, powerless to halt it, but to make it as smooth as possible, even when the parent doesn't realize what is taking place. Regarding the travel element of this book-Italy at the time of publication, is not easily accessed by disabled people, needing wheelchairs or walkers.

Jennifer says

I expected to really like this book after hearing Jane Christmas interviewed on The Final Chapter. I didn't.

Have travelled with my mother who sounds not unlike my own in terms of interests, I was ready to slap her for her self-centredness.

Yes, Jane, you too will get to this age and be unsure on your feet, undecided, tired and unable to keep up on all activities. Let's hope your kids are more tolerant.

In fact, about half way through the book, I was about to give up on it as I was so tired of the whining and mood of the author regarding the carrying of suitcases, etc. That's what younger people do for older people - or just generally for others. It's called being polite and generous.

In any case, I did continue to read and finished the book not feeling quite so displeased with Ms. English. She appears to have become a little more tolerant through the process of the trip and perhaps sees herself in 30 years through her mother.

I haven't read her other books and now am hesitant to do so. I'd hate to have the Camino ruined for me.

Donna Jo Atwood says

I'm not too sure I would have the nerve to schedule a six week tour of Italy with someone that I had a slightly rocky relationship with, but it makes an interesting book. Christmas and her mother were on their own for a trip that would exasperate, annoy, and yet entertain the two of them. It was not a trip of their dreams--it rained, it froze, it snowed (This was in the spring), the food was not always good, the service was often not what they expected, but still it was an eye-opening experience.

I really enjoyed this book. Being of a certain age, I found myself relating to both the author and her mother. And I'd still like to go to Italy.

Arminzerella says

Just before he died, Jane's father asked her to try to have a better relationship with her mother. They weren't exactly estranged, but they'd never been terribly close. Jane felt her mom was overly critical and had never expressed any affection for her children. Jane's mom, on the other hand, felt that Jane was single-minded, stubborn, and foolhardy. Jane thought she and her mother might bond over a trip abroad – to Italy – where they could reconnect, work on their relationship, and enjoy the art, architecture and culture of a foreign country. Although Jane's mom agreed to the trip, Jane wasn't aware of just how much her mother's health had deteriorated over the past few years. When it came time to plan and pack for the trip, Jane discovered exactly how much space medications, walkers, canes, and adult diapers take up in one's luggage. She also learned how inhospitable Italy is to the disabled – very few attractions are set up to accommodate wheelchairs, and most are inaccessible. Jane's mom also became tired quickly, needed bathrooms immediately (or 5 minutes ago), and went to bed as soon as the sun set. There were no rambling walks through the countryside, or piazzas. And Jane's mom often became upset and confused if Jane left her on her own for any period of time. Instead of bonding with her mother, Jane had to become her caretaker – learning to be more understanding of her mother's frailties and quirks.

At times laugh out loud hysterical, this journey with mom is sure to bring tears of amusement and frustration to readers' eyes. Anyone who has had to care for an older parent will recognize themselves in Jane and will sympathize with the challenges she faced. It's not all about mom, however, as Jane includes information about the sights, sounds, and culture of Italy – which she returns to experience on her own later on.

Wanda says

This is the choice of my book club for November, but I got mixed up about which book was next and ended up reading it early. I've heard Jane Christmas interviewed on CBC radio (although not about this book) and had been curious to read some of her writing.

I came away from this volume wondering a bit about what kind of person Christmas actually is. She reveals herself to be impatient, intolerant, and overbearing and I'm not sure that was her intent. Mind you, we can all behave badly in stressful circumstances and she seems to find her mother's presence to be one of the most stressful circumstances. I came to the conclusion that both women lacked a certain amount of self-awareness.

On the other hand, I see many of my friends in my age range dealing with some of the same problems. For instance, can my parent still drive safely? Are they trustworthy in the kitchen or are they potential fire hazards? If we go to such-and-such a place, will they be able to make the required walking distance? If so, how quickly? It's a fraught situation, as you want to make sure they are safe and comfortable, but you also want them to retain as much choice as they can. I have elderly friends and I see them clinging to the last remnants of independence. One shopped around for a doctor who would renew her driver's license—I had to make a stand several years ago and tell her that I would no longer be a passenger in her car and I think the doctor that granted her request ought to have to ride with her a few times. But she's not my mother (or any other relative), so it's not my call and her sons seem to be willfully blind about the whole matter. Another friend was absolutely determined to stay in her house, until a health emergency landed her in hospital—because she had not chosen to move, she had to take what was available, thankfully a very nice, new facility. One can't always end up in such happy circumstances. I've been travelling with both of these ladies, in fact I think I was along for each of their last international trips—and they experienced difficulties along the road (including altitude sickness, and yes, incontinence). About that, they are both realistic—one has limited herself to North America, the other will probably not ever leave our city again. The desire to take "one more trip" led to convincing themselves that they could do whatever the younger tour members were planning.

I can also see this from the perspective of someone who is starting to experience physical limitations of her own--arthritis in the knees, cataracts in the eyes, and much less stamina than 20 years ago. I've begun to use walking poles and choose my international tours carefully. I'm travelling as far afield as possible right now, while I still can do it and will restrict my destinations as my difficulties increase. I'm trying to use the examples of older friends as a guide and not end up being a drag on my travelling companions and tour groups.

Maybe I'll have to do what one of my aunts did—a very religious lady, she decided to pray about whether she should continue to drive and she asked God to give her a sign. The next morning, she found her car had been stolen—sign received, and she quit driving and sold the car when the police recovered it. We should all be so lucky that the universe gives us that clear a message.

Laura says

This was thoroughly disappointing and overwhelmingly annoying. The author should have titled the book "That time I dragged my elderly, incontinent, ataxic mother around Italy and bitched at her for being elderly, incontinent, and ataxic."

What was presented as a mother-daughter bonding story, turned out to be an immature, selfish rant by the author. She slams Italy up one side and down the other (rude people, bad food, long lines, etc.) and is so ignorant/intolerant of her mother's infirmities, it was almost abusive. I mean, there were so many snide remarks about the walker it was ridiculous.

The thing that irked me the most was how the author never took any responsibility for the outcome of the trip itself. It was her bright idea to take her mother on this trip and yet she did minimal if any research as to the accessibility of their various destinations for her mother. Ultimately, I felt sorry for the mother. She spent more time in the car or in the hotel than actually out enjoying the sights.

I hung on to the end in hopes of a 'reconciliation' between mother and daughter - a mutual understanding and appreciation of one another after the shared experience of Italy... that didn't happen.

Give it a miss.

Marie says

I sympathize with Jane, I really do, but her attitude towards her mother lacks charity and grace and left me wondering why she EVER thought a 6-week trip through Italy together would be a good idea.

Also not a good idea: undertaking this trip with only the barest of planning. So many of the disappointments they encountered would have vanished with proper planning.

Heather says

I loved the author's book "And Then There Were Nuns", so I borrowed this one from the library hoping for more of the same. Unfortunately I was disappointed. Firstly, this was not a travelogue: I hadn't expected it to be one, so that was OK, but I did find her descriptions of dour Italians and dodgy food unnecessarily grim, being as they were colored by her own frustration (this did not match my own - admittedly brief - experience of Italy at all). Secondly, is it really necessary to broadcast to the entire book-reading universe that your mother is incontinent? We got the point, she is disabled, but we could have been spared some of the undignified details. Initially I sympathized greatly with the difficulties she had with her mother, but about half way through the book she started to sound like a sullen, spoilt, selfish brat and I really cannot reconcile this persona with the one in the nun book. I gave this book two stars for the flashes of humor, but otherwise I would say: approach with caution.

Leah says

I heard an interview with the author on the radio and thought that this would be an interesting and humourous read. I expected some rough patches on the trip taken by Jane and her older mother who suffers from several medical conditions. What I did not expect was almost 300 pages of negativity and whining (the book totals 303 pages, so I'll give her a few pages for positive descriptions).

I will now be in search of more books about travel in Italy in order to remove the sour taste left by Incontinent on the Continent. To believe Jane Christmas, Italy holds in store bad weather, bad hotels, horrible food, long lines, underwhelming sites, rude locals, horrible service, and a burning need to return home.

I finished the book with hope of some sort of redemption. The mother and daughter would either reconcile (as was the author's father's death-bed wish) or Jane would, at least, come to realize that they are who they are and she would grow up and learn to live with their relationship as it was. That did not happen. The writing of this book seems to have been a self-indulgent exercise in voicing her discontent with a childhood that didn't live up to her expectations and an adult mother who would never morph into the person Jane longed for.

The one positive to reading this book is that I'll take is as a warning to avoid What the Psychic Told the Pilgrim... leaving my love of Spain intact!
