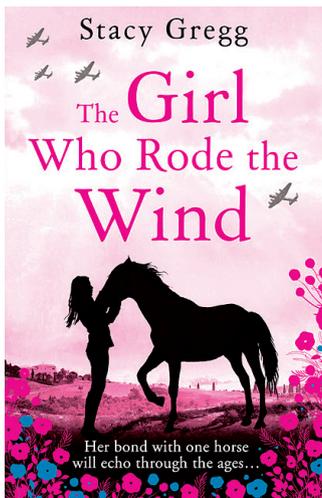


# The Girl Who Rode the Wind by Stacy Gregg

RRP: \$24.99 in Australia and New Zealand (Hardcover) Best suited ages 8 – 14+



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An extraordinary and powerful novel from the prolific pen of award-winning writer Stacy Gregg, *The Girl Who Rode the Wind* is made even more captivating by being based around the Palio – often described as the most dangerous and most emotionally charged horse race in the world. Centuries old, this famed horse race still takes place twice a year in Siena's Piazza Del Campo, a large shell shaped square in the centre of the city. But the Palio is more than a horse race, and Stacy Gregg's meticulous research and compelling writing style brings to life the amazing relationships and rivalries between the seventeen incredibly partisan neighbourhoods in Siena called Contrada who take part in the race. It is described as more like gladiatorial combat than a race and focuses on the almost fanatical bonds of each contrada. Even today, as in the past, so strong are these bonds, that marrying into another contrada is considered a renunciation of your larger neighbourhood family. As well as personal bonds, the novel explores the deep attachments between two girls and their horses, both of whom win the Palio, albeit seventy years apart. Twelve year old Lola from a horse training family in New York is taken on holiday by her grandmother, Loretta to Siena. She slowly discovers the tempestuous and often tragic past life of Loretta (Nonna) during WWII which culminated with Nonna starting a new solo life in New York after winning the Palio, and falling in love with Marco from a rival contrada, who did not follow her to America. During the visit to Siena, Lola's understanding and love of horses leads almost inevitably to her riding for her contrada and winning the race, just as her grandmother had done all those years before. *The Girl Who Rode the Wind* is about passion and adventure and is impossible to put down.

## Story synopsis

Twelve-year-old Lola is part of a horse training family living in the Ozone Park area of New York. She is strong-willed, very bright and has inherited her love of and skill with horses from her grandmother Loretta (Nonna) who arrived, aged 16, by herself in New York from Siena in 1945 to start a new life. Nonna never talks about her past life in Italy even though Lola is curious. She is excited to be asked to accompany Nonna back to the empty family villa in Siena where she hopes to learn more about her grandmother's past. When Lola shops in the nearby village, an old man shouts "Scavezzecolla" (daredevil) at her and chases her with scissors. This frightening experience convinces Loretta to tell Lola about her past. Lola learns about the fierce rivalry and hatred existing between the 17 contrada (separate districts of the city) that dates back many centuries and how this bitter rivalry is now expressed in a dangerous bare-back horse race called the Palio, held every year in the Piazza Del Campo. Lola learns each contrada has a name and all members live in the same district, their contrada name is Lupa – the Contrada of the Wolf, and the old man who chased her was the Prior or head of a contrada who had never forgiven Carlo, Loretta's beloved brother. As Lola looked the same as a young Loretta, all the bitterness and hatred came flooding back to him. When Italy declared war the Palio was cancelled. Carlo and other anti-fascist Blackshirts became freedom fighters. Loretta secretly liaised with Carlo and the freedom fighters carrying messages and bringing food. Carlo and his men were eventually captured and Carlo hanged in the Piazza. Loretta tells Lola she believed she had inadvertently given away his position and she had blamed herself for his death for over 70 years. Loretta tells Lola of her thrilling victory in the reinstated Palio in memory of Carlo, the angry reaction her family had to her plans to marry Marco from another contrada, planning a new life in America with Marco, and her great sadness when he did not come. Meanwhile Lola had been spending time with Signor Fratelli's family, who were independent of the contrada, bred and trained horses for the Palio. Signor Fratelli's family and eldest grandson Frannie are particularly impressed with Lola's understanding of horses and her ability to bond with them which allows them to give even more than their best, so Lola is chosen to ride a horse in the Palio representing the Lupa. Signor Fratelli takes Frannie along on a special visit to see Loretta. Lola and Frannie are totally surprised to find out that the Signor is Loretta's first love – Marco. They mend the hurts of the past and Marco tells Loretta that the Blackshirts were taken to the freedom fighters hideout by Carlo's lost dog. He assures Loretta that she had absolutely nothing to do with the death of Carlo. Loretta at last experiences forgiveness after 70 long years. In a spectacular race Lola wins the Palio for Carlo bringing glory once again to the Contrada of the Wolf. She and her grandmother are the only two female Palio winners ever.

## Setting the scene and motivational activities

- Tell students that the book is based around the most dangerous, exciting and often brutal horse race in the world – the Palio. Use Google Earth to fly to Siena's Piazza Del Campo to see where the race is run. Research the history of the Palio at: [www.discoveruscany.com/siena/palio-siena.html](http://www.discoveruscany.com/siena/palio-siena.html) and [www.thepalio.com](http://www.thepalio.com) Google 'Palio', select images for dramatic pictures. Play action videos of the race at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GYvns0ejV4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GYvns0ejV4) [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GYvns0ejV4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GYvns0ejV4) & [www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqNmPK-U94](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqNmPK-U94)

## During and post-reading activities

- Identify the characteristics of a winning horse that Nonna Loretta taught Lola to look for when she told her to look beyond the shiny coat and pretty face and look deeper – look at the heart.
- Identify the ambitions that Lola's Dad had for her future. Did these conflict with ambitions that Lola had for herself? Can students find any examples to support the idea that Nonna Loretta may have had different ambitions for her? Do students think that it was always inevitable that horses would play a large part in her life? Why?
- Have students describe the relationships that different contrada had with each other. What were the causes of these often bitter relationships? Do they think the Palio helped the different contrada exist fairly peacefully together or did it mean that the conflicts would always exist in the future?
- Tell students that Il Duce (meaning the leader) in the story was a dictator and head of the fascist party that ruled Italy called Benito Mussolini. Have students research what life was like under Il Duce and the Blackshirts at: [www.historylearningsite.co.uk/modern-world-history-1918-to-1980/italy-1900-to-1939/life-in-fascist-italy](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/modern-world-history-1918-to-1980/italy-1900-to-1939/life-in-fascist-italy) and [www.ducksters.com/history/world\\_war\\_ii/benito\\_mussolini.php](http://www.ducksters.com/history/world_war_ii/benito_mussolini.php)
- Have students identify reasons why Loretta's brother Carlo and thousands of others became freedom fighters during the war. What freedoms were they fighting for?
- Discuss the meaning of propaganda and the reasons children at school had to salute 'Il Duce's achievements' every day and identify how people who opposed the dictatorship were treated by the Blackshirts.
- Have students discuss the reasons why Marco did not accompany Loretta to America in 1945. Have students write two lists – one justifying the decision he made and one list opposing his decision. Have students speculate on how different their lives would have been if he had accompanied her.
- Have students write an imaginary diary entry for Loretta describing how she must have felt after receiving the news from Marco that she was not responsible for the death of her brother Carlo.