



## A Time of Angels

By Patricia Schonstein  
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### Introduction

When Primo Verona's wife, Beatrice, leaves him for Pasquale Benvenuto, their close friend who runs the delicatessen on the corner of Long and Bloem Streets, Primo casts a spell on Pasquale's shoes so that ever afterwards their laces would spring undone as he walked out of his front door. It is an easy enough spell to sidestep. Pasquale, unaware that it is magic he is dealing with, merely curses the quality of modern laces and thereafter wears shoes that did not need them.

Primo Verona, a professional magician and soothsayer, is born with a gift of clairvoyance so strong that he is able to predict his own mother's death while still in her womb. He is brought up on a rich diet of astronomy, philosophy, and storytelling by his watchmaker father and widowed aunt, both survivors of the death camps in Auschwitz. Primo accurately reads the futures of the local Long Street community of Italians and Jews, who pay him in wads of money, honey cake, tiramisu, and other

delicacies.

Pasquale Benvenuto, his close friend since childhood and fellow soldier in the Angolan war, is the owner of a bar and delicatessen favored by local businessmen and gamblers alike. Pasquale is passionate and headstrong, his culinary reputation resting on the recipes for the fruited breads and salamis his father taught him to make -- a love of which he acquired while hiding from the horrors of the Holocaust.

Together Primo and Pasquale form an easy friendship triangle with the beautiful Beatrice, Primo's wife and Pasquale's former girlfriend, but when she leaves her husband for her old love, Primo is devastated. He casts spells to spoil Pasquale's creations and to win back Beatrice, but he inadvertently conjures up an unexpected visitor.

Patricia Schonstein delivers a dazzling and evocative novel that mixes magical realism with the big themes -- war, love, death, betrayal and the afterlife -- to entertaining effect. *A Time of Angels* is spellbinding storytelling that no reader will soon forget.

### Questions for Discussion

1. On page 152 Lucifer explains to Primo, "Evil is indeed the greater force. There is no equipoise, no balance between it and good.... It is a singular force born and nurtured in the human soul." Do you agree?
2. Why does Beatrice leave Primo? Schonstein writes that Beatrice had "no intention of staying with Pasquale more than one night" (Page 46). Why does she then?
3. Does Pasquale's passion for cooking come from a love of good food alone? Why are the exact ingredients of the salami and the fruited bread so important to him?
4. One of the important ideas evoked in this novel is beauty. How do the female characters engage this volatile subject? What about the men?
5. "Are there angels here among us? Are there angels on earth? (Page 194)." How do you see the author's concept of an angel, or something angelic?
6. Pasquale, Primo, and Beatrice have been a threesome as friends since their childhood. Each seems to feel incomplete unless all three of them are, in some way, sharing their lives on a daily basis. How does this need affect each of them?
7. Primo's father is obsessed with time. He believes in a "true time," outside of the everyday version of time, which would have "innumerable dimensions" (Page 125). Why is this idea of a differently structured, transcendent time so important to Primo's father?
8. Were you surprised along with Primo to discover the true nature of Lucifer, the devil? How does his perfect beauty and compassion influence those whose lives he encounters?
9. How did you feel about the end of the novel? Was it satisfying?
10. According to Lucifer, the worst hell of all, war, is of human making. Discuss the ways in which all wars affect history and culture. Do you feel that wars are inevitable or perhaps even necessary? What do you think that Schonstein believes?

### About the Author

Patricia Schonstein grew up in Zimbabwe and now lives in South Africa. Her first novel, *Skyline*, won the Percy FitzPatrick Prize 2002, was long-listed for the International Impac Dublin Literary Award 2002, and came second in the South African *Sunday Times* Literary Award for Fiction 2001. She has a master's degree in creative writing from the University of Cape Town. Her next novel, *A Quilt of Dreams*, will

be published by William Morrow in 2006.