

*Indian Summer*, William Dean Howells (1886) (available in the Bellingham Public Library)

Howells is an author whose grounded, ethical realism I've always admired. You may have read *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, perhaps his best-known novel, but few people seem to remember his work today, and he's certainly not fashionable in university circles. Nevertheless, if you enjoy reading earlier literature from time to time, I think you'll find this story of a middle-aged American in Florence amusing and thought-provoking.

Our hero is Theodore Colville, who is 42. Offended by the failure of his campaign for Congress, he gives up his respected newspaper in Des Vaches, Indiana, and revisits the place where, as a young architect, he wooed and was rejected by the love of his life. In Florence he meets a woman who was that love's best friend and companion, now widowed, living in Florence with her very young daughter and hosting the beautiful 20-year-old daughter of an American friend. Colville, a witty and charming man, knows a lot about art and architecture but almost nothing about his own mind. He gets into exceedingly embarrassing situations through a mixture of consideration for others, foolish macho display, and an inability to see what's in front of his nose.

Happily, this is more than a messed-up-love story. It also considers differences between American and European mores, a theme that may be familiar to you from many novels by Howells' friend, Henry James, but here treated with a lighter touch. It also presents American expatriate society in all its affectations. Through the character of a retired pastor who has lost his Calvinist beliefs but not his God, Howells gives us provocative views of our purposes and ends. And if you have been to Florence, Howells' elegant and vivid descriptions will awaken memories. Throughout, his narrative voice is that of an amused but ultimately forgiving spectator. This is humane writing, in the best of senses.