

## About the Author



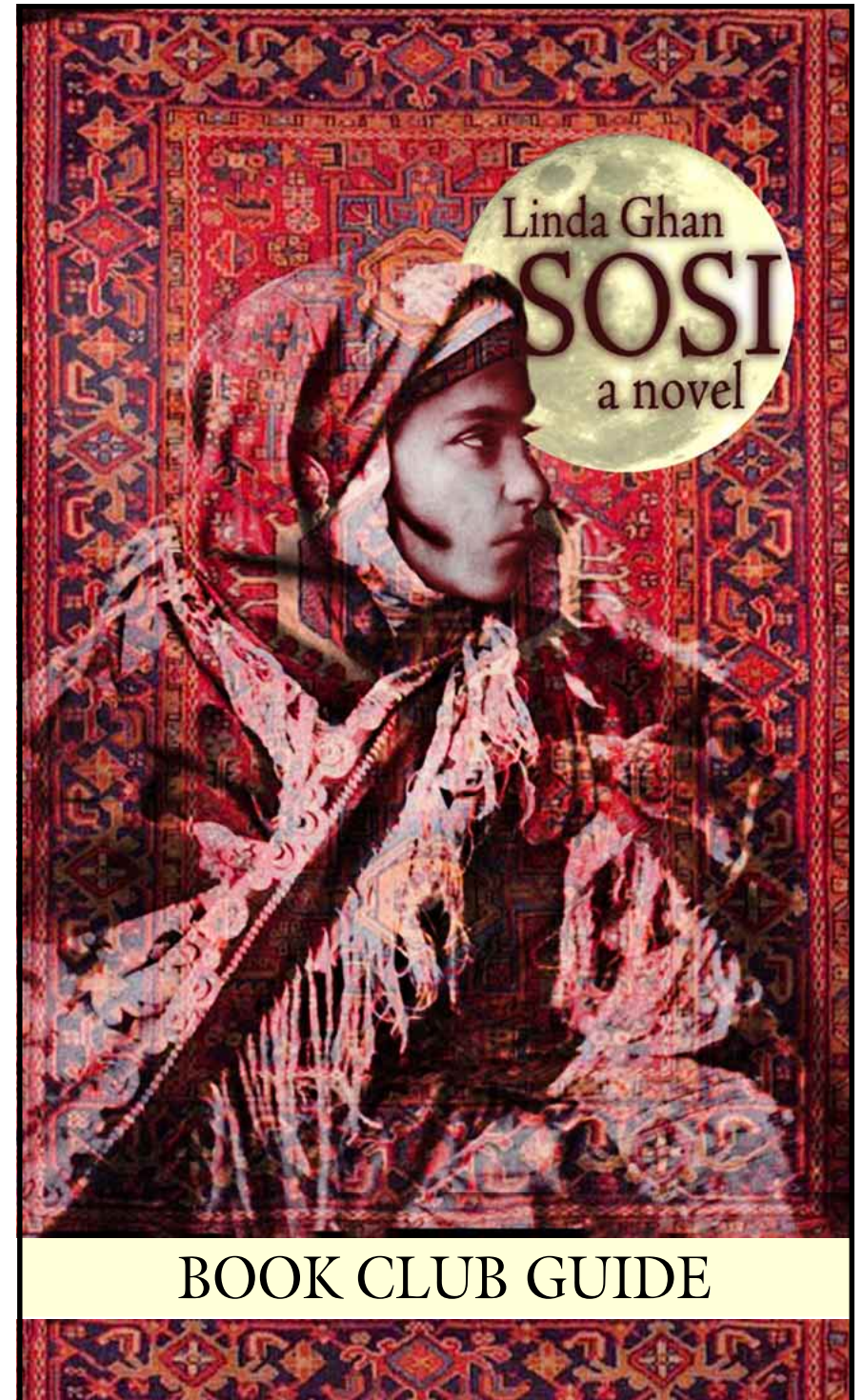
Linda Ghan grew up in a Jewish farming colony near Weyburn, Saskatchewan, just north of the Canadian/American border. After obtaining her MA in English literature, she left the prairie for five years of teaching, writing, and scuba diving in Jamaica, West Indies. On her return to Canada, she settled in Montreal.

In Montreal, Linda continued teaching and writing, and added radio production. She taught creative writing at Concordia University. Two of her plays were produced by Black Theatre Workshop, one a children's play which toured Montreal schools, and the other a one-man show which played in Toronto, Montreal, and Edmonton. She also wrote plays for CBC radio. Her first published novel, *A Gift of Sky*, was set on the prairie (it was later also published in Japan in Japanese translation).

Linda has been an active participant in Montreal literary life, serving as fiction editor of *Matrix* magazine, sitting on the boards of Playwrights' Workshop Montreal, Black Theatre Workshop, QSPELL and FEWQ (Federation of English Writers of Quebec), as well as completing a term as president of FEWQ. She has also been a consultant for McGill University's Department of Education, participating in the design of creative writing courses for the education of Cree teachers in James Bay.

In 1996, Linda moved to Japan to head the Canadian Studies programme at a national university, and continued to write, focusing on literary journalism for national English daily newspapers in Japan. This included interviews with Canadian writers such as Tomson Highway and Carol Shields; Japanese writers such as Haruki Murakami, and the Nobel Prize winner, V.S. Naipaul. *Gaston Petit: The Kimono and the Cross*, a biography of a Canadian artist-priest living in Japan was published in 2002.

Yet, throughout Linda Ghan's time in Japan, she continued the research for *Sosi*, the story that continued to haunt her.



## An Interview with Linda Ghan

**You've lived in at least seven different cultures – rural, urban, Canadian prairie, West Indian, Quebec, Japan, Nunavut. How do you think this has affected your writing?**

It's done two things that probably sound contradictory. My first experience off the prairie was after I graduated with my MA in literature and found I wasn't good for anything except to do a PhD or to teach in a university or college, and, frankly, I wasn't ready for that, even if there had been a job. So I applied to CUSO, Canadian University Students Overseas, and was sent to Jamaica, a dream job, actually. I could see the sea from my backdoor, and from my classroom.

I had arrived with no preconceptions about the West Indies or people except that Trinidadians and Jamaicans didn't like each other much: I'd had West Indian and African friends at university, and this dislike seemed a lot like the prairie thing of Weyburn and Estevan people not liking each other much. Saskatchewan people have a multitude of backgrounds, so I pretty much experienced and believed that we're all basically the same.

When I went to Jamaica, I refined that only slightly, i.e., we're all the same except that some of us have stayed home and some don't. There are nice people everywhere.

Finally, though, at about my fifth year in Japan, I had to admit that culture does make a difference to who we are and how we behave.

**Do you think that your background on the prairie has influenced your writing?**

Absolutely. I believe that our primary geography is the geography we grew up in. It's the period of our strongest impressions. I was lucky enough to live the first eighteen years of my life with nothing between me and the sunrises or sunsets. No other houses, no sidewalks. Silence, wind, stars.

After I left the prairie, I was no longer "home"—and as a result, no matter where I was, I was dislocated. In Jamaica, I was in the Jamaican room, in Quebec, Montreal, another room that was urban, primarily French, but also very mixed culturally. But my geography affected how I saw everything. In Jamaica, the only time I was comfortable was when I was on the sea, the openness, the horizon, the wave action which is exactly what fields of wheat do in the wind, and this was true throughout my five years there.

Armenians. American Protestant missionaries, did the most to save the wretched remnants of the death marches, the orphaned children.

Despite Turkish denial, there is no doubt about the Armenian Genocide. For example, German ambassador Count von Wolff-Metternich, Turkey's ally in World War I, wrote his government in 1916 saying: "The Committee [of Union and Progress] demands the annihilation of the last remnants of the Armenians and the [Ottoman] government must bow to its demands." German consuls stationed in Turkey, including Vice Consul Max Erwin von Scheubner-Richner of Erzerum who was Adolf Hitler's chief political advisor in the 1920s, were eyewitnesses. Hitler said to his generals on the eve of sending his Death's Heads units into Poland, "Go, 'kill without mercy men, women and children of the Polish race or language. Only in this way will we get the living space we need. Who after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?'"

Henry Morgenthau Sr., the American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, sent a cable to the U.S. State Department in 1915: "Deportation of and excesses against peaceful Armenians is increasing and from harrowing reports of eye witnesses it appears that a campaign of race extermination is in progress under a pretext of reprisal against rebellion." Morgenthau's successor as Ambassador to Turkey, Abram Elkus, cabled the U.S. State Department in 1916 that the Young Turks were continuing an "unchecked policy of extermination through starvation, exhaustion, and brutality of treatment hardly surpassed even in Turkish history."

Only one Turkish government, that of Damad Ferit Pasha, has ever recognized the Armenian genocide. In fact, that Turkish government held war crimes trials and condemned to death the major leaders responsible. The Turkish court concluded that the leaders of the Young Turk government were guilty of murder. "This fact has been proven and verified." It maintained that the genocidal scheme was carried out with as much secrecy as possible. That a public facade was maintained of "relocating" the Armenians. That they carried out the killing by a secret network. That the decision to eradicate the Armenians was not a hasty decision, but "the result of extensive and profound deliberations." Ismail Enver, Ahmed Cemal Pasha, Mehmed Talât Bey, and a host of others were convicted by the Turkish court and condemned to death for "the extermination and destruction of the Armenians."

The Permanent People's Tribunal recognized the Armenian Genocide on April 16, 1984. The European Parliament voted to recognize the Armenian Genocide on June 18, 1987. President Bush issued a news release in 1990 calling on all Americans to join with Armenians on April 24 in commemorating "the more than a million Armenian people who were victims." The Russian Duma voted on April 20, 1994, to recognize the Armenian Genocide. Israel officially condemned the Armenian Genocide as Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin proclaimed on the floor of the Knesset, on April 27, 1994, in answer to the claims of the Turkish Ambassador, that "It was not war. It was most certainly massacre and genocide, something the world must remember." [Canada recognized the genocide in 2004.]

The Armenian genocide is similar to the Jewish holocaust in many respects. Both people adhere to an ancient religion. Both were religious minorities of their respective states. Both have a history of persecution. Both have new democracies. Both are surrounded by enemies.

# Fact Sheet on the Armenian Genocide

Knights of Vartan Armenian Research Center, University of Michigan–Dearborn

The Armenian Genocide was carried out by the “Young Turk” government of the Ottoman Empire in 1915–1916 (with subsidiaries to 1922–23). One and a half million Armenians were killed, out of a total of two and a half million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Most Armenians in America are children or grandchildren of the survivors, although there are still many survivors amongst us. Armenians all over the world commemorate this great tragedy on April 24, because it was on that day in 1915 when 300 Armenian leaders, writers, thinkers and professionals in Constantinople (present day Istanbul) were rounded up, deported and killed. Also on that day in Constantinople, 5,000 of the poorest Armenians were butchered in the streets and in their homes.

The Armenian Genocide was masterminded by the Central Committee of the Young Turk Party which was dominated by Mehmed Talât, Ismail Enver, and Ahmed Djemal. They were a racist group whose ideology was articulated by Zia Gökalp, Dr. Mehmed Nazim, and Dr. Behaeddin Shakir. The Armenian Genocide was directed by a Special Organization (Teshkilati Mahsusa) set up by the Committee of Union and Progress, which created special “butcher battalions,” made up of violent criminals released from prison. Ottoman officials who did not comply with the extermination campaign were dismissed. Any common Turks who protected Armenians were killed.

The Armenian Genocide occurred in a systematic fashion. First, the Armenians in the army were disarmed, placed into labor battalions, and then killed. Next, the Armenian political and intellectual leaders were rounded up on April 24, 1915, and then killed. Finally, the remaining Armenians were called from their homes, told they would be relocated, and marched off to concentration camps in the desert between Jerablus and Deir ez-Zor where they would perish of thirst and starvation in the burning sun. On the march, they were not only denied food and water, but many were brutalized and killed by their “guards” or by “marauders.” The authorities in Trebizond, on the Black Sea coast, loaded Armenians on barges and sank them out at sea.

The Turkish government today denies that there was an Armenian genocide and claims that Armenians were only removed from the eastern “war zone.” The Armenian Genocide, however, occurred all over Anatolia [present-day Turkey], and not just in the so-called “war zone.” Deportations and killings occurred in the west, in and around Ismid and Broussa; in the center, in and around Angora; in the south-west, in and around Konia and Adana (near the Mediterranean Sea); in the central portion of Anatolia, in and around Diyarbekir, Harpout, Marash, Sivas, Shabin Kara-Hissar, and Ourfa; and on the Black Sea coast, in and around Trebizond, none of which were in the war zone. Only Erzeroum, Bitlis, and Van in the east were in the war zone.

The Armenian Genocide was condemned at the time by representatives of the British, French, Russian, German, and Austrian governments—all the major powers. The first three were foes of the Ottoman Empire, the latter two allies. The United States, neutral towards the Ottoman Empire, also condemned the Armenian Genocide and was the chief spokesman in behalf of the

In fact, the first chapter of *Sosi* came to me on the Anatolian plateau in central Turkey precisely because I recognized it. It was exactly like the Saskatchewan prairie, the same clarity of air, the silence. I was able to connect with my character Sosi to a large extent because of her experience of the geography, and even, believe it or not, with her experience of winter. Which is definitely a geography. Gilles Vigneault is correct when he says, “Mon pays, c’est l’hiver.” My country is winter.

**There is the common belief that you should write about what you know. Yet you’ve set a novel in eastern Turkey, in Jerusalem, in a period that has nothing of your experience.**

Yes, write about what you know, but first, there are ways to find out what we don’t know. It’s called research, and many writers love the research part of writing. Guy Vanderhaeghe wrote a novel set early in the pioneer period of Canada. Michael Ondaatje’s *Skin of the Lion* is set in a period and a part of Canada completely new to him – he comes from Sri Lanka.

Secondly, we all know a lot more than we think we know. An artist’s job is to see, and to present. We have all experienced childhood, loss, love, fear, death of a loved one. We transpose. If we’ve experienced panic while scuba diving, we can transpose that understanding/experience of panic to another situation—a fire in the house, for instance, the disappearance of a child.

**So you wouldn’t say that any of *Sosi* is autobiographical?**

Absolutely not. I don’t write about myself, mostly because it’s boring. Part of what’s fun about writing is finding out what’s going to happen. Characters say and do things that you don’t expect. When I sit down to write my discovery drafts, things happen that I didn’t expect, and certainly didn’t plan. Often, if you plan, as soon as you sit down to write, it disintegrates. It doesn’t go anywhere.

**Yet a lot of readers and critics—maybe unless it’s a murder mystery—look for evidence of a writer’s life in what they read.**

You can get an emotional map from a writer’s life in their writing, but that’s it. By emotional map, I mean, for example, you can assume that the writer, if they are writing about love, has had some experience of love. If the main character’s mother dies, it doesn’t mean the writer’s mother is dead: it means that the author has experienced loss. It could be the loss of their cat.

### **Do you feel that there is nothing of you in your character Sosi?**

Two things. Her feeling of dislocation. Once I left the Jewish farming community we lived in until I was ten, I was never again truly “home.” When we lived in that community, we were the majority. We were “normal.” School closed on Jewish holidays because thirteen of the sixteen children in the one-room school were Jewish. As was, frankly, the teacher. We moved to Weyburn when I went into grade five. My first teacher was anti-semitic. In a town of ten thousand, there were only three Jewish families. Suddenly being Jewish was no longer normal. As soon as Sosi leaves her mountain village, she no longer “belongs.” She spends the rest of her life—at least her life in the novel—looking for a solution to this dislocation. The second aspect I share with Sosi is that geography is extremely important to her. It’s part of her identity. Yet, by the time she is nineteen, she has gone through three major dislocations, the first coming out of the mountains to a hot coastal city, the second, the move to Jerusalem, and the third, the move to Montreal. Along the way there are the emotional dislocations.

### **Why did you choose to write about the Armenian genocide?**

It was partly an accident. My first novel was an accident as well: my mother said “Why don’t we do a family cookbook?” and I said, “Okay.” And it turned into the novel *A Gift of Sky*.

This one was the result of a two friendships. One with a student of mine at Concordia University who came up to me one day and said, “I’m Armenian,” and I said, “What’s that?” I was so horrified and embarrassed by my ignorance, not only of the fact of the genocide, but the relationship/similarities between the genocide and the holocaust, which certainly, being Jewish, I knew plenty about, that I was immediately drawn into the story.

I became quite close to her and her family—both her parents were survivors of the 1915 genocide. Her father and two small brothers—ages three to five, if I remember correctly—somehow got to Beirut and survived by begging on the streets. Their parents and the rest of their family were dead; they’d either been shot or had died on the forced marches through the deserts out of Turkey to Syria. Her father grew up to become a highly successful photographer in Beirut, and one of his brothers is a recognized painter.

### **What relationships did you see between the genocide and the holocaust?**

The Armenian genocide was the first technological genocide of the twentieth century. The Germans were allies of Turkey in World War I, and were in Turkey as advisors. The genocide was ordered by the Turkish

7. Author Linda Ghan has lived in a variety of countries and cultures. How do you think this helped her in the writing of the book? Do you think she could have written the book if she hadn’t?
8. Emily Dickinson wrote universal poems—yet, basically, she never left her backyard. The truth is that we live all of the major aspects of life—birth, love, fear, friendship, loss—no matter where we are. Aunt Gracia is perhaps an example of someone who experiences life in her backyard, yet certainly there has been plenty to write about. Can you give examples of from her life that illustrate this? What aspects of your life do you think you could write about?
9. The time frame for *Sosi* is just at the end of World War II until the mid 1950’s. Why do you think Linda Ghan chose this period? Do you think *Sosi* could take place in the present decade?
10. We often “bond” with characters we meet in a book. Which of these characters would you like to have coffee with? Can you imagine yourself as a character in this book?

## Notes

## Questions for Discussion

1. One of the themes of this novel is dislocation, a dislocation which can be caused by something as large as war, or, from an adult point of view, as small as being moved to a new school. What triggers Sosi's sense of dislocation? Does it ever end? Can you relate to this experience of dislocation?
2. A second theme is memory. Where do you see this in the novel? What memories from your childhood do you treasure?
3. Landscape is very important to Sosi: to some extent, she defines herself by landscape. Which landscape continues to haunt her? Do you think that our childhood landscape is the defining landscape?
4. Sosi grows up in a multi-cultural environment. While many of the characters promote difference, she is experiencing commonality. What does Sosi's multi-cultural upbringing teach her about human nature?
5. By the end of the novel, Aunt Gracia goes through some major changes in the course of raising Sosi. Gracia, who is so sure of everything, would not have expected these changes in herself. What are some of these changes? What does this say about our ability to grow and change throughout life? Have you experienced change in yourself that has surprised you?
6. Photography, something that most of us take for granted, becomes important to Sosi. Why and how is it important? If cameras disappeared today, what would you do, in terms of preserving memory, to compensate?

government in 1915, although, actually Ataturk, considered the father of Turkey, and revered even today, tried some of the Turkish military for war crimes in 1919.

The Germans took back some of the lessons of the genocide to use in World War II: when Goebbels objected to Hitler that "the world will never let you get away with exterminating the Jews," Hitler's response was, "Who remembers the Armenians?"

Genocide is a human problem. It is not something reserved for Jews or Armenians. We have to look at genocide as a human problem if we are to stop it. Otherwise, it is too easy to ignore—the genocide in Darfur, in Rwanda, we can ignore it.

The Armenian genocide in Turkey—conservative estimates say one and a quarter million, and less conservative estimates put it at two million, i.e., half the Armenian population in Turkey—has an extra dimension. It has never been recognized by Turkey, and was only recognized by Canada in 2004. The Western powers in general have supported Turkey in denying the genocide because Turkey has some very important borders for us—Russia, for one, and now, for instance, Iraq.

In the beginning, while the genocide was going on, there was sympathy and concern about the genocide. By the 1920's, the rhetoric was changing. And that was precisely because of the need among the Western Allies for Turkey's eastern borders.

### **You said two friendships. What was the second?**

This was with Kerop Bedoukian, to whom I have dedicated the book. I met him when I interviewed him for a radio programme I was doing on the arts in Montreal. He was an expert on Oriental carpets—started the first carpet shop in the city, which still exists where he started it, on Park Avenue just above Sherbrooke. He had also written an autobiography of his experiences as a ten-year-old boy surviving the marches.

In the 1950's, he sponsored, personally, both financially and by representing them in Ottawa, two thousand Armenian families who were fleeing another wave of pogroms in Turkey. These can all be seen as land grabs, or property grabs.

Kerop was full of stories, of humour—you would never have known that he had gone through such horrific experiences, or that he was constantly working to pull people out of trouble.

We were researching together—and one of the things that coming out at the time was that there were many Turkish people learning of their Armenian heritage. Approximately 100,000 Armenian children were taken in, saved, either adopted, as servants, whatever, but in general,

treated exactly like their own children. This was causing trauma, as you can imagine, among, sometimes, the children of these survivors, who had had no idea of their heritage, and which, of course, causes you to look at the history of your country in a different way. In Turkish history, there was no genocide. Just a few thousand people who died in a civil war. Well, there was no war. The Armenian people were unarmed. The men and older boys were generally taken away and shot, and the women, children, and old people marched into the deserts to die.

**So *Sosi* comes out of that research?**

Yes. My character, Sosi, is the daughter of a survivor who was taken in and raised by a Turkish family.

This was a new story. Now there is more attention—recently there was a radio documentary on CBC, for instance, focusing on a young woman whose grandmother was a survivor. Orhan Pamuk, a Turkish writer who has been hauled up in court in Turkey and had death threats because he has said publicly, Yes, there was a genocide.

The story of good that the Turkish people did has to be told as well. As long as it isn't, then there is nothing but guilt for Turkey to deal with. Most people don't want to spend much time feeling guilty.

**You finished the novel *Sosi* while you were living in Japan. Was that hard? You were, after all, nowhere near any of your three locations for the novel.**

Sometimes the distance helps. In fact, though, I went back to Montreal every summer, so I did do some research if it was necessary while I was in Japan—I met people, for instance, who had escaped Turkey in the 1950's. I did more interviews with survivors. Only recently, I met the granddaughter of one of the few survivors of the genocide. He's 96, and lucid. At the age of five, he was also begging on the streets of Beirut. There are so many, many stories. Many I wasn't able to use.

I did research on Montreal in the 1950's, but it had been an era that had interested me earlier—Montreal was the major hot city in North America in the 1950's.

In some ways, the location I had experienced the most was the hardest to write, because there was so much detail that I knew so well. There was a lot of selection. My research in Turkey and Israel, on the other hand, was over several visits, a few months each, and impressions were sharp. When I went back the second time to Turkey and Jerusalem, I was writing, so I knew which holes I had to fill in and what to look for.

**Do you plan out your novels before you write?**

No, I don't. I can't. I only knew for this novel that I wanted Sosi to go from Turkey, to Jerusalem, to Montreal. I didn't know why I wanted her to go to Jerusalem, though, until I got there.

In the old city of Jerusalem, there is an Armenian quarter which has been there for well over a thousand years. I didn't know that until I got there. There was also a rich history concerning the genocide: many of the survivors of the genocide ended up in Jerusalem, and there was a divide between the "old Armenians" and the "refugees" who remained "refugees" for decades. It reminded me of the prejudices between my mother's and my father's families, the German Jews not liking the Russian Jews. Really, we are all so human, it's ridiculous.

**You don't even plan the characters?**

No. They create themselves, generally. They make me laugh, and sometimes they make me cry. Often, they are smarter than I am. They say things better than I can.

I do, usually, have a seed for a character from someone I know—a lot of them were my students, actually—but when you put them in different situations, they become themselves. Varti, one of my favourite characters, is based on a university student I had. But I moved this character to Israel and married her to a nice Jewish boy and had her driving a taxi after she left her husband, so of course she becomes her own and a different person.

I never use a seed for a character from someone I don't like. I don't want to spend that much time with people who have been negative for me.

**Do you think you will write out of your experience in Japan?**

Yes. I am now. But it is a very different novel, not just in story, but in writing style. My character, Sosi, for instance, has, in a sense, been traumatized by the moon, and as a result, many of her images and comparisons are based on the moon, to the point, actually, that her husband calls her "moon-mad". There is no moon in this new book. Although the narrator does scuba dive, and there is nothing more gorgeous than the moon reflected on the sea.