Most of my readings in European History have been large in scope, covering periods rather than specific countries. Thinking that I really did not have a good, continuous picture of Italian history---other than the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, some idea of the Renaissance, and then Garibaldi to Mussolini---I decided to remedy the situation with Cronins volume. Im glad I did. I found it excellently written in clear language without a huge number of kings, dates, and battles to wade through. The continuity or discontinuity of Italian history is very well discussed and Cronin brings in social, economic, and cultural life often---not emphasizing purely the political as some older historians were wont to do. The volume is profusely illustrated with pictures of the art and architecture of various periods. While this is definitely a plus, I would have liked to sacrifice a few of these pictures for some more maps; there is only one general map of Italy in the front. I was particularly impressed by the way the author covered Rome in about 50 pages. Thats obviously just a beginning, yet I found there many patterns and trends that had never been clear to me before. Equally his coverage of the Dark Ages and the transition to City States and the Renaissance got right to the point. He picked Florence as a model of how things developed in the Italian Renaissance and delved more into that city than the others, an effective method when you are describing 2,500 years of history in 217 pages. The reasons for Italys north-south divide became clear to me for the first time. Finally, the twentieth century got short shrift. The book really comes to an end around 1950. Never mind. For a person looking for a succinct book on Italian history, written in popular style, this is a good candidate. I give it five stars because it is an excellent example of what it is meant to be---not the comprehensive, earth-shattering history of Italy, but a useful addition to a non-academic library. I strongly recommend it.