

## Lust on the run

By ARITHA VAN HERK  
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### What Casanova Told Me

By Susan Swan

Knopf Canada, 324 pages, \$34.95

Susan Swan's fiction famously dances with an almost oblique veil of desire, her characters seeking not romance so much as a robust atomization of the body and the psyche. Her characters inevitably embark on a quest, and she is one of the finest Canadian chroniclers of inveterate fictional travelers, lusty women who look down on the world from a superior height, unafraid of encounters in dark alleys or caverns, but less sure about their own shadows.

What *Casanova Told Me* is no exception. A story that ranges across centuries and continents, it takes the reader on a version of pilgrimage that propels two women from two completely different eras toward a congruent transfiguration — of personal coherence and of sexual satisfaction. In its inventive range, its playful engagement and tantalizing mystery, *What Casanova Told Me* is breathtaking, a tour de force that detonates echoes of the past within the present.

Luce Adams's mother, a Canadian archeologist famous for her work on Minoan goddess worship, died in a car accident a year and a half before. Now Luce, an awkward archivist who seems to have breathed in the dust of old paper for a little too long, must accompany her mother's lover to Crete to attend a memorial service in honour of her mother's life. Luce's grief for her charming and well-loved mother is acted out in the company of her mother's rather unattractive life companion, Lee

Pronsky (a most unfortunate name). Resentful of every student and acolyte that her mother attracted, Luce is particularly resentful of her mother's lesbian lover, and her unease treads heavily in the wake of her memorial journey with that lover.

But Luce's mother has left her more than a legacy of unease. Luce's aunt Beatrice has discovered, in a box in an old family cottage, a sheaf of letters, an old journal and a leather-bound Arabic manuscript, all dating from around 1797, and presumably brought to Upper Canada by another ancestor, "a temperance reformer who lost touch with the Boston branch of his family after he walked north by foot from Albany, New York, looking for a wilderness where the poor weren't ruined by drink."

Or where the reticent aren't tempted by lust.

The letters have indeed been authenticated as being written by one rather infamous Jacob Casanova, and the journal is identified as being by an ancestor of Luce's, a cross-dressing woman of restless tastes whose name is Asked For Adams. Despite her rather sheltered life in America and her relative inexperience as a traveller, Asked For Adams's journal reveals that she is a quick study at the challenges of both love and vagabondage. These intriguing documents accompany Luce; she is in charge of depositing Casanova's precious letters safely in Venice's Sansovinian Library before she

proceeds to Crete to take part in the celebration of her mother's life. And her journey, which moves from Venice to Greece and then to Turkey, follows the earlier path of Casanova, a man better known for his amorous escapades than his skill as a wandering diplomat.

Along the way, Luce encounters strange surprises and seraglios, discovering that her journey brings her closer and closer to that long-ago ancestor, eager adventuress Asked For Adams, who, it turns out, disguised herself to divagate with Casanova through the Mediterranean, his last great love in a long torrent of loves and lovers.

Every writer secretly wants to uncover a treasure trove of letters by a famous character, someone who will offer infamy and fame as well as the delicious frisson of secrecy and lust. Susan Swan's *What Casanova Told Me* enacts exactly this conspiratorial connection to a figure of myth larger than the mists of time, with Casanova as the sender of tantalizing messages, a word or two full of portent, and romance drifting across the centuries. And it is a measure of Swan's writerly skill that this creation is utterly plausible and utterly seductive.

Perhaps because of its historical reach, this novel dips and rises, ebbs and flows. *Asked For Adams* is wonderfully drawn, resonant with Yankee good sense, and Casanova is deliciously portrayed as an aging roué with an extraordinary knack for seduction and satisfaction. By contrast, the contemporary characters seem awkward, even bloodless, far more laden with care and strangled with doubt than the historical characters are.

Luce seems to duck her head at the door of the very novel, and Lee is hennish and fussy to a fault. But Swan is surely commenting on our contemporary puritanism, our rubber-glove approach to the sweetest journey of them all, desire. The freedom that the historical fiction accords the characters is a freedom that the contemporary characters handle awkwardly, as if today we must blush at sexual desire, as if old-fashioned lust and lasciviousness are unacceptable even within fiction.

It is a relief, then, that Swan pushes her characters over the brink of their own Canadian reticence and propels them toward the historical landscape that they long to inhabit. Her textured atmosphere and beautifully evoked settings give the novel a lush, tapestry-like feel, and *Asked For's* journal and Casanova's letters are jewels of invention.

Best of all, Swan understands and translates the temptations of travel, the exquisite joy of being footloose and feckless, of discovering a different moment around every corner of every jet-lagged day. The fourth travel principle of Casanova — "What you desire always awaits you if you are brave enough to recognize it" — should be a credo for every Canadian with a homesick maple-leaf flag stitched to that ubiquitous backpack.

The lesson learned here is simple: Leave home, fall in love and believe in the accidents of pleasure and freedom.

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