

Locating Myself in the Casanova Craze

By Susan Swan

INTRODUCTION

Writing my latest novel about Casanova, I discovered that I wasn't alone in sharing a fascination with the legendary eighteenth-century Venetian lover. At least ten other male and female writers in the last five years have published books about Casanova (1725-1798). As I wrote, I read their books, wondering why so many women and men are writing about him now. Do we feel starved for sensual enjoyment in the 21st century, I asked myself. Certainly, we live in a culture where new technologies like email mean that many of us work almost a month more a year than we did in the 1970's. I came to the conclusion that Casanova is the Dionysian figure whose interest in freedom will redeem us in a work-obsessed Apollonian age. The master of self-invention, he enjoyed performing whatever role the situation required and he showed little interest in acquiring power or wealth. Eloquent, self-confident and fashion-conscious, Casanova spent most of his life outwitting social controls of any sort. He appears to have become a symbol of liberty for contemporary writers and readers because he lived as if pleasure and adventure are as worthy of our time as money and fame, believing that the greatest aphrodisiac of all is happiness.

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ESSAY

I didn't notice the Casanova craze until I was half way through my own novel about the celebrated Venetian. I'd scoffed when an aging family member recommended Casanova's 12-volume memoir, *History of My Life* and said the passage describing Casanova's escape from the prison in the Ducal Palace was the most gripping escape narrative he'd ever read.

Somewhat disdainfully, I took away the memoir and began to read. All I knew about Casanova was his reputation as the most notorious rake the world has ever known. One of those playboys, in other words??your mother told you to avoid. I'd also seen Fellini's movie, *Casanova*, which cemented the womanizer myth. This film doesn't show the intellectual and literary side of Casanova, the European man of letters who had translated *The Iliad*, written poems and operas and engaged in scientific discussions.

I read most of the 12 volumes of Casanova's *History of My Life* and decided my family member had been too stinting in his praise. Casanova had written brilliantly about his escape from the Leads, the famous Venetian prison. But as far as I was concerned, *History of My Life* was one of the great works of Western literature. Soon I was writing my own version of Casanova's tale, a novel about him returning as an old man to Venice for a last look at the city he loves and running off to travel in the Mediterranean with Aske Adams, a descendant of Puritans and cousin to president John Quincy Adams.

A belief that your own book is unique shores up the creative trance writers need to work. But somewhere in the midst of writing my novel, I stuck my head above my desktop and noticed that I shared my Casanova obsession with a host of fellow authors. By last count, at least eleven other books have dealt with Casanova in recent years.

I decided to interpret the cultish interest in my protagonist as a positive sign. Why did we all need so ardently to write about him? Clearly our fascination with Giacomo Casanova (1725-1798) masked a contemporary yearning dressed up in the clothes of historical fiction. I started reading recent books about Casanova as part of my research. The views of their authors tell us as much about ourselves in our time of relentless search for celebrity and wealth as they do about the author of *History of My Life* who lived in the age of eighteenth century decadence.

Who was Casanova? Born in Venice on April 2, 1725, he was the son of lower class actors. His mother, Zanetta, was celebrated on the stage of Europe and he grew up equating women with creativity and intelligence as well as beauty, love and sexual pleasure. After all, Casanova is the libertine who once famously said: "I've never made love to a woman whose language I didn't speak because I like to enjoy myself in all my senses at once."

A master of role playing, he was, among other things, a law student, a preacher, a novelist, alchemist??even the director of a state lottery. He met Voltaire and Catherine the Great; he was banished from Venice twice for upsetting religious authorities. He ended up as a librarian in a castle in Bohemia and spent his last years writing his memoirs. He died there on June 4, 1798 after taking the story of his life up to 1774??the year he returned to Venice for the last time.

While researching other Casanova books, I discovered that our mutual enchantment with him cuts across the gender divide. Female authors are writing about Casanova with an unabashed gusto. Most of the books by male authors aren't as celebratory. Their portraits of Casanova don't stray too far from the traditional notion of him as an unfeeling predator, and a few cast aspersions on his character. Perhaps they were envious of Casanova while voyeuristically recreating his exploits in narrative. Or they feared charges of exploiting women if they are seen as too approving. Casanova did write candidly and romantically about his 122 affairs (hardly an impressive figure when you consider the exploits of some contemporary basketball players.) But no surprise??it's possible men aren't as free as women when it comes to writing about sexual tropes in this post politically correct age.

One of the most enjoyable books about Casanova uses verified historical documents, some of them written by Casanova and assembled by Italian journalist Andrea di Robilant. In *A Venetian Affair*, Casanova appears as himself in this non-fiction account of doomed love with its rich historically detailed recreation of Venice and eighteenth century Paris.

Di Robilant's book is based on a true story described in letters written by di Robilant's own ancestor, Andrea Memmo who was in love with the low born Giustiniana Wynne. Giustiniana's letters form the core of the narrative and the author's recreation of her as an original and clever Venetian woman who later becomes a public author is further testament to Casanova's lively interest in brilliant and beautiful women.

In di Robilant's story, Casanova perseveres until he finds a solution to Giustiniana's unwanted pregnancy. At one point, Casanova tricks her into having sex on the pretext that his medicinally annointed "steed" will procure an abortion. When that ploy fails, he finds her a place in the convent where she can give birth to her child undetected. Although di Robilant's documents show that Casanova could be a cunning cupid, his letters prove he stayed a friend to both Andrea Memmo and Giustiniana for most of his life.

Casanova is less loveable in *Casanova in Love*, a novel with beautifully evocative descriptions of London by British author Andrew Miller. Recovering from a bout of syphilis and missing Venice passionately, Casanova experiences his first stirrings of self-doubt when he fails to woo a famous English courtesan named the Charpillon. He also befriends Samuel Johnson and attempts a fresh start in England without knowing its language, first as a laborer on a London bridge; later he flirts with the idea of becoming a writer on London's Grub Street.

In contrast, the novel, *Casanova in Bohemia*, is a hagiography anchored in Casanova's last years at the Bohemian castle. It's written by essayist and raconteur Andrei Codrescu who uses the pretext of Casanova looking back on his life to recreate some of the great moments in *History of My Life*. Codrescu lets Casanova live on into the twentieth century so he can see the first publication of a fully unexpurgated edition of his memoirs. In Codrescu's story, Casanova has to watch as others edit and rewrite his memoirs to support Victorian prudery. His persona symbolizes literary genius in a dumbed down culture.

In the charming *Night Letters*, a non-fiction account by Australian writer Robert Dessaix, Casanova is described as a troubled soul whose search for bliss fuels his travels. Dessaix recounts that Casanova, "zigzagged through time in search of timeless moments, blissful instants when the past and future ceased to exist for him? the only kind of spiritual perfection he could conceive of." Dessaix has no use for those who travel to gather business information? which is how Dessaix understands the travels of another famous Venetian, Marco Polo.

Perhaps it's no accident that the books about Casanova by female authors are the most favorable. After all, pleasing women was the central preoccupation of Casanova's adventurous life. And in many of the books by women, the bestowal of Casanova's affection can empower the heroine, much like the prince's kiss in the fairy tale brings Sleeping Beauty back to life. He appears in some of these books to be a model for the new twenty-first century lover whose Old World origins mean he will never debauch or degrade women; instead his eighteenth century enjoyment of their minds and bodies encourages them grow to full potential.

Casanova's belief in the omnipotence of women is one of the themes in *Casanova: the Man Who Really Loved Women* by French psychoanalyst Lydia Flem. Part biography, part poetic prose and part psychological investigation, her book of non-fiction leaps from theme to theme in chapters with intriguing titles like "The Stratagems of Voluptuousness" and "The Backstage of the Body".

Flem argues that Casanova's near death experiences as a child inspired him to live as if everything that happened to him was a magnificent afterlife. His mother, Zanetta Casanova, was a beautiful, celebrated actress. After the death of her actor husband, she spent her life performing in Vienna. The boy stayed in Venice, raised by his grandparents. He saw himself as the outlaw son of a magical mother, and the idea of harming women was abhorrent to him, Flem says. He stayed friends with many of his lovers, often finding them rich husbands. Letters found one hundred years after his death testify to the truth of these ongoing friendships.

In *Carnevale*, an earthy, longwinded novel by M.R. Lovric, Casanova helps the young daughter of a Venetian merchant become a famous portrait painter. She paints his portrait and later the portrait of Byron, another lover. Lovric states why it was a fine thing to be desired by a man like Casanova. "...when he had conquered well, the women were the true winners, for he devoted himself to our pleasure with the intensity of a vocation. Indeed he believed fervently in female pleasure, thinking it greater than his own."

Obviously, Casanova's appeal is multi-layered. But in the end, why are so many authors rehabilitating his persona in modern literature? Perhaps we are starved for sensual enjoyment in a disciplined culture where advances in technology like email mean that many of us work almost a month more a year than we did in the 1970's. Historians and theorists like Foucault have argued that societies such as ours are run by "moral regulation", a term for social mechanisms like education and the law that keep each individual controlled within a hierarchical grid.

Casanova, the master of self-invention, didn't play by Foucaultian laws; he enjoyed performing whatever role the situation required and he had little interest in acquiring power or wealth. Nor did he make moral judgments about himself and his peers. Eloquent, self-confident and fashion-conscious, he spent most of his life outwitting social controls of any sort.

In the end, Casanova is a Dionysian figure who tells our Apollonian age that there is more to life than restraint and self-discipline. Never apologetic or self-serving, he affirms that pleasure and adventure are as worthy of our time as money and fame and the story of his life suggests that happiness may be the greatest aphrodisiac.

RECOMMENDED READING

Here is a list of books for those with a further interest in Casanova:

A Venetian Affair by Andrea di Robilant. Knopf, hardcover; Vintage Books, Paper, 2005.

Casanova in Love by Andrew Miller, Harcourt Trade, paperback, 2000.

Casanova, The Man Who Really Liked Women by Lydia Flem, Farrar Straus Giroux, hardcover, 1997; paperback, 1998.

Casanova in Bohemia by Adrei Codrescu, The Free Press, hardcover, 2002.

Carnevale by M.R. Lovric. Virago Press, Paper, 2002.

Night Letters by Robert Dessaix, Picador, hardcover, 1997; Harcourt Trade 2002.

The Story of My Life by Giacomo Casanova, Penguin Classics, paperback; also *History of My Life*, by The John Hopkins Press, 1997.

What Casanova Told Me by Susan Swan. Bloomsbury Publishing US, Hardcover, 2005