

Susan Swan obsessed with life, love and travel
By Natalie St-Denis

Susan Swan writes about the things that obsess her. Her latest novel, *What Casanova Told Me*, represents her more recent obsession in life, balancing one's right to pleasure with personal responsibility. Throughout the novel, which cleverly links two women from different centuries through a long-lost journal, Swan captures life's unpredictable moments and the experiences gained through love and travel.

Although Swan writes out of personal experiences and her characters often emerge from ancestors she has never met to people still living today, her stories are not autobiographical. She uses her life and surrounding events as a starting point and then dives into the imaginary and develops fictitious lives. "All of my characters are parts of me although they cross a line that I can't or wouldn't dare breach," says Swan.

Swan's novels and short stories have been published in sixteen countries and the film *Lost and Delirious*, based on her novel *The Wives of Bath*, has been sold to 32 countries. *The Wives of Bath*, a novel about a murder in a girl's boarding school, was recently picked by a US reader's guide as one of the best novels of the nineties. And since the release of the movie, Swan's characters have taken a new form on the Internet through Web sites in which people act out the roles of the adolescent rule-breakers in the novel.

What Casanova Told Me was recently translated into a 5-minute film, a BookShort – it's the first of its kind to be produced and made its television debut on BravoFACT Presents! on September 8th. "This BookShort attempts to capture the spirit of the novel, it doesn't duplicate the novel," says Swan. The BookShort is to be used as a marketing tool in television, web casts, and as an interactive device on computer screens in national bookstores. "It's a way to introduce readers to the book and potentially reach a bigger audience, the way mass market paperbacks did a few decades ago," says Swan.

Swan began her writing career as a journalist for newspapers and magazines. "I was quite successful in my career as a journalist, but the constant demand of deadlines and unpredictable nature of the work didn't allow me enough time to write fiction," says Swan. This reality enticed her to start teaching at York University in the mid 1980s where she is now associate professor in the Division of Humanities.

Swan may write to voice her "obsessions" but always has her audience in mind. When she writes she thinks of her "best reader", Nancy Wells, who was a close friend during high-school. "She stands for all the adolescent girls I knew in the late 1950s when it felt as if nobody was paying attention to our struggle to become people. That has changed, although safe passage into adulthood is still weirdly complex for young women who are expected to be beautiful, sexy, nurturing mothers and have brilliant careers," says Swan.

Swan has exposed gender issues in most of her books but her recent work, *What Casanova Told Me*, has taken a new path – a different outlook on the world. "My new novel is a big shift for me. At least four of my last five books have satirical feminist

critiques but *What Casanova Told Me* is a celebration of life, creativity and the human spirit and the way we express it through passion, friendship and love,” says Swan.

This important shift in Swan’s writing reflects a profound renewal in her belief system. It started when she travelled to Greece in her early forties. “Greece has always been a transforming landscape for the western imagination and during my travels there, I realized that a lot of what I’d been taught about what mattered in life wasn’t true, that appreciating the gift of physical existence is what gives profound metaphysical meaning, and our search to fulfill some rigid ideal often keeps us from enjoying the world of experience,” says Swan. Over time, this new awareness allowed Swan to fall in love, heal an estrangement with her family and to gradually feel more at peace.

Through this process Susan Swan has altered her message but the voice and the forum to share and express her “obsessions” with the world have remained just as powerful – and perhaps even more so as it embraces all of humanity. “I hope my writing brings many readers pleasure and that *What Casanova Told Me* encourages people to travel and celebrate the romance of cultures instead of the clash. We don’t know enough about one another. As Casanova says, Go now and at once. Another world is possible!”