

Surprised by Love: Two women visit Venice with Casanova as their companion

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What Casanova Told Me

by Susan Swan

(Knopf Canada, 324 pages, \$34.95)

If you were an 18th-century traveller on a journey of adventure, exploration and love, could you choose a better tour guide than Giacomo Casanova?

Casanova travelled widely throughout Europe and Byzantium as a soldier, a spy, a writer, a musician, a diplomat, a political prison escapee and, most memorably, the author of an autobiography called *History of My Life* (1787), which documents his dalliances with some 122 women. It is that work that made "Casanova" a synonym for the worst sort of libertine, a philanderer, a roue, an out-and-out womanizer.

But in Susan Swan's elegantly sensual new book, *What Casanova Told Me*, he is something else: He is a feminist, a man who adored women not just for the bodily pleasures they could provide, but also for the pleasures of their wit and intelligence.

He was also a man who never separated the emotion of love from the act of love: "Real love is the love that sometimes arises after sensual pleasure," he once said. "If it does, it is immortal; the other kind inevitably goes stale for it lies in mere fantasy."

In Swan's book, two women visit Venice with Casanova as their companion. One, a shy archivist named Luce Adams, is travelling in 2000. The other, Asked For Adams, her Puritan ancestor and (fictional) cousin to U.S. President John Adams, is travelling in 1797. Both are fulfilling duties for their parents, albeit quite different ones.

Luce is there with her late mother's lesbian lover, Lee Pronski. They are on their way to Crete, where a memorial service will be held for Dr. K.A. "Kitty" Adams, an archeologist who fell under the spell of goddess worship and died in a car accident while doing research on Minoan cultures.

Luce, who is bitterly unhappy and feeling much put upon by Lee ("the Polish Pumpkin," she calls her disparagingly), seeks refuge in Asked For's journal, which had recently been returned to the family along with some letters from Casanova and a manuscript in what appears to be Arabic writing. She is stopping in Venice to leave the letters with a library.

Asked For was in Venice on a trade mission with her father and her prospective fiance Francis Gooch, a rough-hewn boy from home. Upon their arrival on the public barge, there is a scene involving a large old woman with a towering wig and a mischievous terrier named Finette – the "woman," of course, turns out to be the Chevalier de Seingalt, better known as Giacomo Casanova, who is in disguise because he is wanted by the authorities.

Years earlier, he'd been imprisoned by the Inquisition and held in the "leads," the brutally hot lead chambers under the roof of the Doge's Palace. He'd managed somehow to escape, and for the rest of his life dined out on the story throughout Europe – everywhere except his hometown of Venice.

The Puritan girl and the European rogue become the unlikeliest of friends, and when Asked For's father dies in the midst of a French invasion, it is Casanova who finds him a burial spot and rescues her from Gooch's brutish advances.

He also entertains Asked For with the romantic story of his one true love, Aimee Dubucq, sister to the French Empress Josephine, who was captured by Turkish pirates and is languishing in the sultan's harem. He is going to Istanbul to rescue her; would Asked For like to join him on the journey?

Alone in the world and longing for adventure, Asked For agrees. They travel from Venice through Greece and on to Turkey, a journey Luce follows some 200 years later.

For both women, it's a journey overshadowed by loss and surprised by love. As with any trip, there is discomfort and frustration, fallings out and resolutions, and the great joy of discovery that only comes when one travels to distant places.

A year after Asked For's journey, Casanova is dead of an infection and she has become a travel writer. Two years after Luce's trip, she is the author of *An Archivist Looks at Her Family Papers*. Both women, it seems, are guilty of what Casanova called "blackening paper" – indulging in his greatest love of all, the love of words.

In blackening paper herself, Swan has created an exotic romance, a rollicking adventure, a work of prose that could almost be poetry.

Like the scribes of old conjuring images with their brushes, she evokes past and present and place – whether it be Venice or Istanbul, a cavern in Crete or a Victorian house in Toronto – all infused with the spirit of one of history's most mysterious characters.

Casanova was a librarian and a lover, a soldier and a sentimentalist, a fearless adventurer and the most vulnerable of men, and better than Baedeker at guiding the reader through Swan's romantically historical journey.

This magnificently sad and funny and exciting trip is, indeed, one you'd be very sad you missed.

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