

What Casanova Told Me

By Susan Swan Knopf Canada, 321 pages (\$34.95)

By Candace Fertile

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Susan Swan's new novel, *What Casanova Told Me*, transports its readers through time and space, creating whole new worlds offering both newness and familiarity. Swan uses two time frames – the present day and the late 18th century – and, with two main characters on similar journeys, the book takes on the lovely complexity of mirrored paths. In the present-time story, a young American woman named Luce Adams travels to the Mediterranean to attend a memorial service for her mother, Kitty. She is accompanying her mother's lesbian lover, Lee, and the two have difficulties to work out. The earlier time frame is sparked by Luce's reading of an ancestor's journal. This woman, oddly named Asked For Adams, is travelling much the same path with her father and fiancé. Then Asked For meets the legendary Casanova, who changes her life forever. The novel has various voices, and Swan – who will be appearing at the Vancouver International Writers & Readers Festival – nails each one perfectly. Asked For tells us: "My betrothed took my arm, and we strolled together as if we were the loving couple my parent wishes us to be. Meanwhile, Father lectured us on the advantages of married life – the delightful business of acting as gardeners to small children, the wifely safety for a plain female like myself, and a husband's need for a female companion who will nurse him in his old age – an earthly blessing denied Father." Watching her push through the limitations society imposes on her is inspiring. Luce is captivated by this ancestor and goes to great pains to try to find out what happened to her after the end of the journal. Two hundred years apart, the two women visit some of the same places: Venice, Greece, and Turkey. As they travel, they learn about the world and themselves. Asked For says in her journal: "I have feared the power of men too much to see them. So today, as I write, I rejoice in the beauty of men." Luce finds herself "holding her breath in astonishment" at this entry. Her voice, too, is unique and realistic. At the risk of gushing, I have to say that all of the characters are fascinating. Swan places the two main players at opposite ends of the spectrum. Asked For must cope with the patriarchy, while Luce has to deal with her mother's goddess theories and lesbian relationship. Kitty Adams had a worldwide following, including Lee, a strident feminist. Luce dislikes Lee, presumably because of jealousy. The one wobble in the book is the resolution Lee and Luce reach. Luce starts off being somewhat whiny and self-centred, but she grows and gains sympathy over time. This novel has a sense of place. About Venice, Asked For comments one day: "The day is dank and cool and the lagoon tide has overflowed, wetting the feet of peevish Venetians obliged to cross the Piazza San Marco on raised planking." Two centuries later, the description holds. And what of Casanova? At the heart of the novel stands the man whose name is synonymous with sensual love. Swan's Casanova is a remarkable creation, drawn from his letters and her magnificent imagination. Swan explores travel, home, love, sex, culture and communication in this splendid book. You will probably want to read it more than once, for the suspense of the story and the beauty of the language. Susan Swan will appear in writers' festival events Wednesday and Friday. Candace Fertile is a teacher and writer in Victoria.