

## WHY I BECAME FASCINATED WITH CASANOVA?

BY SUSAN SWAN

An unresolved argument ignited my interest in Casanova. My uncle-in-law, the late Jack Crean, argued that only non-fiction captured the truth of human experience. I, of course, argued for fiction. One evening, Jack brought out a new example: the 12-volume memoir by Giacomo Casanova, *History of My Life*, and challenged me to top it. He said the passage describing Casanova's escape from the Leads, the Venetian prison next to the Bridge of Sighs, was the best suspense narrative in Western literature.

Somewhat disdainfully, I took away the memoir and began to read it. All I knew of Casanova was the man who had been passed down in public myth. An infamous womanizer, in other words, one of those playboys your mother told you to avoid. I'd also seen Fellini's movie, *Casanova*, which cemented the womanizer myth. This film is a masterpiece but it doesn't show the literary side of Casanova – the European man of letters who had translated *The Illiad*, written poems and operas and essays and engaged in scientific discussions.

Of course, Jack Crean ended up winning the argument (if such arguments can really be won) because I was transfixed by Casanova's description of his escape from the Leads. I went on to read most of the 12 volumes and I was struck by the fascinating paradox of the man who didn't appear to resemble the public perception of him. Here was a legendary rake who insisted on seeing women as people and once famously said: "I cannot make love to a woman unless I can speak to her in her own language because I like to enjoy myself in all my senses at once."

Inspired by his memoirs, I visited Venice, Casanova's birthplace, and was struck by the city's atmosphere of longing, which must have its origin in the thousand-year separation from the Italian mainland. This atmosphere gave me my insight into Casanova, a man who visited all the great places of Europe and never settled in any of them. But he was able to dwell creatively in a permanent state of transit and longing and that may be the reason for his enormous capacity to appreciate life. In my novel, he pays homage to longings:

"Our longings provide us with the text of our lives and lead us to the faiths we need to enact our destinies. And our paradox is this: the true art is not to satisfy our longings, but to learn how to cherish them."

Who really was Casanova? Born April 2, 1725, he was the son of lower-class actors. His mother was beautiful, remote and celebrated on the stage of

Europe and he grew up equating women with creativity and intelligence as well as beauty, love and sexual conquest. A master of role-playing, he had many careers, as a law student, a preacher, a novelist (he wrote a science-fiction fantasy, *Icosmeion*), an alchemist, even the director of a state lottery. He met Voltaire and Catherine the Great; he was imprisoned in Venice in 1755-56; he returned after eighteen years in 1774, and went into second exile in 1782. He wound up as a librarian for Count Waldstein at the count's castle at Dux in Bohemia and died there on June 4, 1798.

Most of the facts in his memoirs appear to be true. The English scholar Arthur Symons found Casanova's papers in boxes at the castle in Dux 100 years after Casanova's death and in those boxes were letters from many of the 122 women he had affairs with because he continued to be friends with them after the love affair was over. Sometimes he found them rich husbands who provided the security he was never able to offer himself.

In my novel, Casanova is an old man returning for a last look at the city he loves when he meets Asked For Adams, a descendant of Puritans and the young cousin of American president John Adams. A mellower, wiser Casanova than the young man described in his memoirs, he espouses travel as a form of love and emphasizes the romance rather than the clash of civilizations.

His own memoirs only go up to the year 1774, and I was conscious of choosing a time in his life that he didn't write about. The blank periods in the lives of historical personalities are more interesting to a novelist because these gaps leave room for invention. Although it may seem odd to write a novel about Casanova during a time troubled by terrorism and fundamentalist religious zeal here and abroad, I think his way of moving in the world is a good antidote to the current climate of fear. And I've always liked the critical notion that historical novels are written out of the Utopian hope that new stories about the past create fresh possibilities for the future.

Susan Swan teaches English in the Faculty of Arts. *What Casanova Told Me* has just been published by Knopf.