

# THE GLASSBLOWER OF MURANO

by Marina Fiorato

## **A**bout the Author

- A Conversation with Marina Fiorato

## **B**ehind the Novel

- “The History of Murano”  
An Original Essay by the Author

## **K**eep on Reading

- Recommended Reading
- Reading Group Questions

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## A Conversation with Marina Fiorato

*Could you tell us a little bit about your personal and professional background, and when it was you decided to lead a literary life?*

I was born and educated in the north of England and at university I studied history. I then rebelled against my parents' academic background by going to art school and entering the film and music business! I began by generating onscreen graphics and I was lucky enough to work on films like *Tomb Raider* with Angelina Jolie and *Proof of Life* with Russell Crowe. I shifted into rock music and worked with U2 and the Rolling Stones and Aerosmith, but when I became pregnant with my first child I took maternity leave. It was then that my old life found me again, and it was after I had my son that I had the idea for the story for *Glassblower*. I wrote the book while I was on leave and never returned to my job. I think I had been trying to be something I was not, and then, when I had a child of my own, ideas of heritage and my Venetian origins became enormously important. My old interests had found me with a vengeance—it was like being tapped on the shoulder by my past.

*Is there a book or author that inspired you to become a writer?*

I grew up reading Pamela Kaufman's books about Alix of Wanthwaite and her wonderful earthy writing and sense of period really inspired me—she invokes the sounds, sights, and even smells of the past so well! In more recent writing I love the prose of Thomas Harris. In the Florentine section of *Hannibal* I think he really manages to evoke the beauty but also the brutality of Italy at the same time. It's a modern tale but so Renaissance in spirit.

*“My old interests had found me with a vengeance—it was like being tapped on the shoulder by my past.”*



*You studied history at Oxford University and the University of Venice, where you specialized in the study of Shakespeare's plays as an historical source. How has your education influenced your writing?*

I studied a lot of Shakespeare in school and was inspired by both the language and the sheer drama of his storytelling. I'm like a magpie when I write; I steal shiny bits of the work of my betters and weave them into my own prose! There is so much Shakespeare in *The Glassblower of Murano*, from pieces of plot to direct quotes. I was particularly inspired in this case by *The Merchant of Venice*, which is one of the plays I studied in detail for my master's degree, but I also lifted a plotline from *Romeo and Juliet*. There's even a quote from *The Tempest* in there somewhere. At least I steal from the best!

*Do you scrupulously adhere to historical facts in your novels, or do you take liberties if the story can benefit from the change?*

I do try, as far as possible, to be reasonably accurate—I think because of my training in historical research that any blatant inaccuracies would really jar. If push came to shove, though, I would sacrifice total accuracy for the cause of the story. It's not my job as a novelist to create a piece of historical documentation. What I'd like to think is that my books might serve to interest people in a certain period or character, and serve as a jumping-off point for them to then go away and research their interests from proper historical sources. My historical hero, Corradino Manin, is fictional so I wasn't bound by the constraints of writing about a real person; that gave me a certain amount of freedom. The context, though, the world in which he lives, does have to be accurate. There are real historical figures in the book, like Louis XIV, but as they tend to be marginal there is not the obligation to feverishly research them.

*About the  
Author*

*“I love the way  
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*Are there any parallels between you and Leonora? Can you tell us a bit about your own travels in Venice and experiences with glassblowing?*

There are a number of parallels between myself and Leonora, mostly to do with our heritage. Like her, I have a Venetian family. I was actually lucky enough to study at the University of Venice for six months and I lived on the Lido, taking the *vaporetto* into Ca' Foscari every day, which was wonderful. While there I remember taking a tourist trip to Murano, where I saw a glassblower make a tiny, perfect crystal horse in about sixty seconds. I remember that it seemed like a miracle, and the episode stayed with me; in fact it's included in the book when Giacomo makes a glass horse for the young Corradino. I returned to Venice years later to get married, in a little church on the Grand Canal. The whole wedding party was in eighteenth-century dress, which was fabulous, and we took boats out to the islands for the reception. It was unforgettable.

*You've mentioned that one of your favorite blown-glass windows in Venice is at Ca' Foscari, a palace on the waterfront of the Grand Canal. What do you see when you look at that window, in particular, and all blown glass, in general? What is it about Venice, blown glass, and the process of glassblowing that you hoped to reveal to your readers?*

There are hundreds of beautiful windows on the Grand Canal, but Ca' Foscari has a special resonance for me because of studying there. Originally a palace, Ca' Foscari is now used as a university and stands in a particularly beautiful bend of the canal; what fascinates me is that the window itself is as beautiful as what you can see through it. I like the way that these windows also tell the story of Venice's history—they are a wonderful hybrid of western and eastern design and exemplify Venice's identity, a republic standing astride two empires.



Blown glass fascinates me because, like most great crafts, it's incredibly difficult to achieve a good result. I used the word *miraculous* in the book and I think it's deserved. I love the way glass is such a shifting entity. In many ways it has as many faces as Venice itself, and I think that nature of changeability, of having many faces, is what I wanted to reveal about the city. Glass begins life as a powder which becomes liquid, then solid; there's only a very short window to work with glass before it hardens, and it takes a true artist to do it. Incredible, too, that such beauty comes from humble sand—true artistry from a quintessence of dust.

Venice is so unchanging; it's essentially the same place architecturally as it was in the seventeenth century. There are few places in the world about which one can say this, because most cities have changed to accommodate roads and sprawling suburbs. But because Venice as a “character” was the same then as now, I thought it would be really interesting to take a look at ideas of heritage and continuity of a particular Venetian family, with a peculiar creative genius. I was interested in whether or not a skill like glassblowing is passed down in the same way that, say, facial characteristics are. Is glassblowing in the Venetian DNA? Are these skills built into the Venetian genome, and how much does the city itself create artists by a kind of osmosis which has nothing to do with the century they are in? These are the kinds of questions which interested me.

## About the Author



Geoff Budd

Marina's wedding kiss



## *The History of Murano*

*An Original Essay by the Author*

*“Murano is the  
glass heart of  
Venice.”*

When writing the historical strand of *The Glassblower of Murano* it was important to me to get some sense of the significance of glass in Venice at the end of the seventeenth century. And when you visit, the evidence is before your eyes; the city seems to be almost made of glass. As well as boasting the most beautiful windows in the world, exquisite chandeliers hang from the frescoed ceilings of every palazzo, the basilica is clothed in jewel-like mosaics comprised of nuggets of glass covered in lapis and gold; and at the other end of the scale the streets in the Merceria dell’Orologio behind San Marco are crowded with bijoux little shops crammed with glass fancies, beads, and bonbons.

But it is Murano, one of the trio of islands set far into the Venetian lagoon, which is and was the glass heart of Venice. In 1291, an edict of the Great Council, Venice’s ruling body, decreed that all glass furnaces should be moved to the island after a series of serious fires which threatened the city. In the Renaissance period, glass was a priceless monopoly for the Republic of Venice, and at the heart of their mystery was the closely guarded secret of how to make mirrors. The manufacture of mirrors of reasonable size and reflectivity was deeply problematic until the glassblowers of Murano stumbled across the optimum method through an accident of glassblowing. Thereafter they began to make mirrors brighter, clearer, and larger than any in the world. Venetian mirrors quickly became the Republic’s most valuable commodity, more precious than saffron; more costly than gold.

The Council of Ten, the vicious ruling junta of Venice’s Great Council, quickly realized the value of the glassblowers of Murano, and threatened them with death if they ever divulged their methods. Often, the glassblowers’ entire families were kept as hostages by the state. Venetian law was very clear on the matter:

*If any worker or artist should transport his talents to*



*another country, and if he does not obey the order to return, all of his closest relatives will be put in prison.*

Incredibly, despite such threats, some of the glassblowers of Murano did betray their secrets and their city. In the 1680s, Louis XIV, the Sun King, was in the throes of his Grand Design: the Palace of Versailles, for which he planned to construct a great chamber made entirely out of mirrors, and needed assistance from the best of the best. Thus, many of Murano's glassblowers were secretly transported to Paris. Recruited by Pierre de Bonzi, the French Ambassador to Venice, they were tempted by tales of foreign lands, exotic women, and great riches. By the autumn of 1665, twenty Murano fugitives had been spirited away to Paris where they began work upon the task of making the dream of a king a reality.

*Behind the  
Novel*



At Buangsuwon

Fiorato beads. Image courtesy of Ann Mitchell and Karen Mitchell of AnKara Designs, [www.ankaradesigns.com](http://www.ankaradesigns.com).

*“It’s great to be,  
in some small  
way, part  
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As we now know, the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles was built and remains for all to see—a cathedral of glass that is undeniably one of the modern wonders of the architectural world. Not only does the work mitigate the treachery of those brave souls from Murano, it is also a tribute to the craftsmen of France, who would someday become the forerunners for the genius of Baccarat and Lalique.

On a more personal note, I made a discovery of my own while researching the history of glassmaking in Murano: I was delighted to discover that *Fiorato*, my Venetian family name (which means “floral”), is also the name for a type of Murano glass. Fiorato glass features tiny glass flowers enameled and fused into beads. Fiorato beads are tiny, but they are beautiful. It felt great to be, in some small way, part of such a wonderful tradition.

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## *Recommended Reading*

### *The Count of Monte Cristo*

by Alexandre Dumas

A wonderful epic tale of a man who comes back from the “dead.” A direct influence on my historical plotline.

### *The Comfort of Strangers*

by Ian McEwan

An extremely dark take of Venice, in contrast to the way in which the city is usually portrayed in literature. McEwan creates a wonderful sense of unease throughout. Here, the city is dangerous; it can kill, and it does.

### *Brideshead Revisited*

by Evelyn Waugh

One of my favorite novels. Tucked in the central section is one of the most golden, languid portraits of Venice ever written. Entirely seductive, the city here is the polar opposite of the one in *The Comfort of Strangers*.

### *Hannibal*

by Thomas Harris

Another one of my favorites. Not a Venetian setting but half of the novel is set in Florence and it’s a wonderful portrait of a city which has never left the beautiful, brutal Renaissance. Everything is here; the art, the corruption of those in power, and, of course, the bloodletting.

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Group  
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*Keep on  
Reading*

*Through a Glass, Darkly*

by Donna Leon

Donna Leon knows Venice so well that every detail places you in the city. I'm a big fan of her Guido Brunetti detective novels, but this is my favorite; a great tale of murder set in the glass factories of Murano.

*Death in Venice*

by Thomas Mann

Another wonderful portrait of Venice, this time seen from the Lido (where I used to live). In this novella the city is sick; death stalks Venice in the shape of a mysterious disease, in a marked contrast to the youthful perfection of the Adonis of the Hotel des Bains.

*The Merchant of Venice*

by William Shakespeare

Not a novel, I know, but a wonderful play and a direct influence on my book. *The Merchant of Venice*, as the name suggests, is proof positive that trade was the lifeblood of the city in Shakespeare's day. Interesting too, that *every* section of society engaged in trade, even the nobility; in other Renaissance kingdoms, nobles thought trade was a dirty word.



## Reading Group Questions

Reading  
Group  
Gold



1. Glass and Venice are both metaphors for change in the novel. How do they mirror the changing reflections of the characters? In particular, discuss this facet of the novel in relation to the roles of Leonora and Corradino.
2. Marina Fiorato uses imagery of glass: its beauty yet changeability; its strength yet fragility, throughout her novel. How does this portray an unfamiliar, dark, and sinister side to the most romantic European city?
3. Do you think Corradino Manin did the right thing by his “betrayal”?
4. Discuss the narrative structure of *The Glassblower of Murano*. In what ways do the two intertwined strands of the novel, the story set in the Renaissance and Leonora’s modern-day narrative, shape the story?
5. Marina Fiorato says in her acknowledgments that having a child is like letting your heart walk around outside your body. Discuss the various relationships between parent and child in the story. How do they vary, and in what ways are they similar? What do you think is signified by Leonora’s gift of the glass heart pendant to her child?
6. How important was it for Leonora to leave everything behind and move to Venice, and what do her discoveries teach her about family?
7. Think about the male-dominated *fornace* on Murano. Leonora has an uncertain relationship with the *maestros* in the factory because she is a woman in what remains a man’s world. How do you think this relationship affects her view of her own femininity?
8. Is it acceptable—because of the importance of glassblowing to Venetian heritage—for Leonora to be treated as an outsider by the *maestros*?

Keep on  
Reading

9. The story of *The Glassblower of Murano* is centered around Corradino's secret and Leonora's search for the truth. Discuss the various elements of mystery in these pages. What types of narrative devices does Marina Fiorato use to keep the reader guessing?
10. Few places are as romanticized, celebrated, and praised as Venice. Have you traveled to Venice? If so, do you agree with the portrayal of Venice in the story? If not, how did reading this book confirm or deny your preconceived notions of one of the world's most famous places?