

Venetian Villainy

Brunnetti badgers book burglars

Suspended Sentences

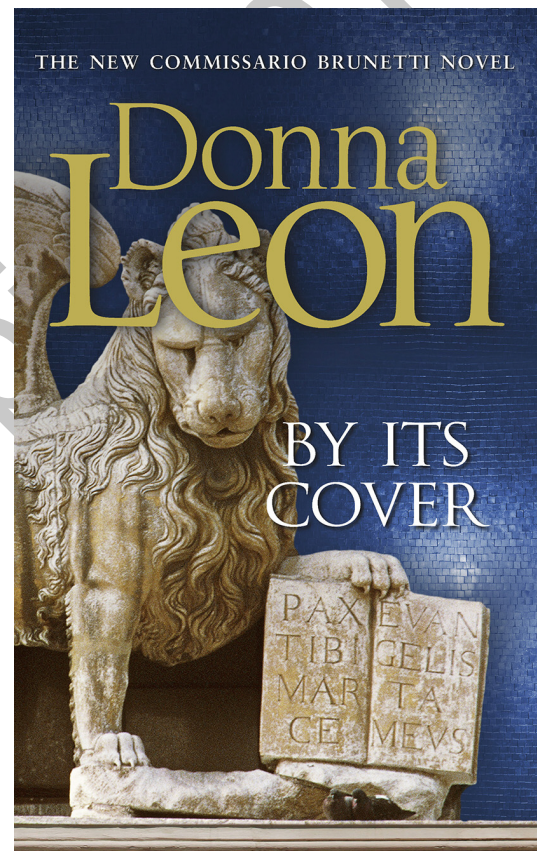
by Jim Napier

For more than two decades American crime writer Donna Leon has been entertaining readers with her bestselling series based on the exploits of Venice's Commissario of Police Guido Brunetti, who, like Oxford's fabled Inspector Morse, seems to have a virtual monopoly on solving crime in his region. Her latest effort marks the 23rd entry in her highly acclaimed and popular series.

The Biblioteca Merula is one of Italy's national treasures. A repository for rare and valuable books comprising much of Venice's history, it is a symbol of Italy's cultural patrimony.

But today it is the setting for a librarian's worst nightmare: over a period of weeks the Biblioteca has lost pages of illustrations from more than a hundred irreplaceable antiquarian books, and a hasty search reveals that entire books have gone missing as well. It's not simply a matter of the dollar value of the works; they are irreplaceable objects of the nation's heritage. Making matters worse, some of the

books in question had been donated by a wealthy Venetian



patron, the Contessa Morosini-Albani from her private collection. If she learns that they're missing she might very well withdraw her generous financial support for the library, with disastrous consequences.

Commissario Guido Brunetti is

assigned the case, and soon finds himself immersed in an unfamiliar world populated by scholars, bibliophiles, collectors, and unscrupulous thieves. Before long inquiries unearth some disturbing revelations about some of the library's recent users: the credentials of an academic re-searcher from America are found to be bogus, and a local resident, a reclusive ex-priest who also frequented the collection, has gone missing.

As in Brunetti's previous outings it seems to be his fate to suffer the meddling of his less-than-helpful superior officer, the officious Vice-Questore Patta, who complicates the investigation with his own half-baked theories. But aided by his assistant, Ispettore Vianello, and Signorina Elettra, Patta's secretary, Bruno navigates his way through

the arcane world of antiquarian book collectors, dealers, auction houses and and thieves who steal to order. All in all, it's a case that challenges even Brunetti's formidable skills.

Three decades of living in Venice has given Donna Leon a keen appreciation for the subtleties of daily life there, as well as for the even more nuanced relations between the various social strata that make up Venetian society. She uses this knowledge to good effect, producing a richly atmospheric narrative of a unique and captivating world, every bit as compelling for its own sake as for its ability to advance the plot. *By Its Cover* is a tale to be savoured, a little gem of literate escape with an intriguing puzzle at its core that will provide readers with hours of pleasure.

Originally published on *Reviewing the Evidence*, May, 2014

Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January* magazine, the *Montreal Review of Books*, the *Ottawa Review of Books*, and *Amazon.com*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com