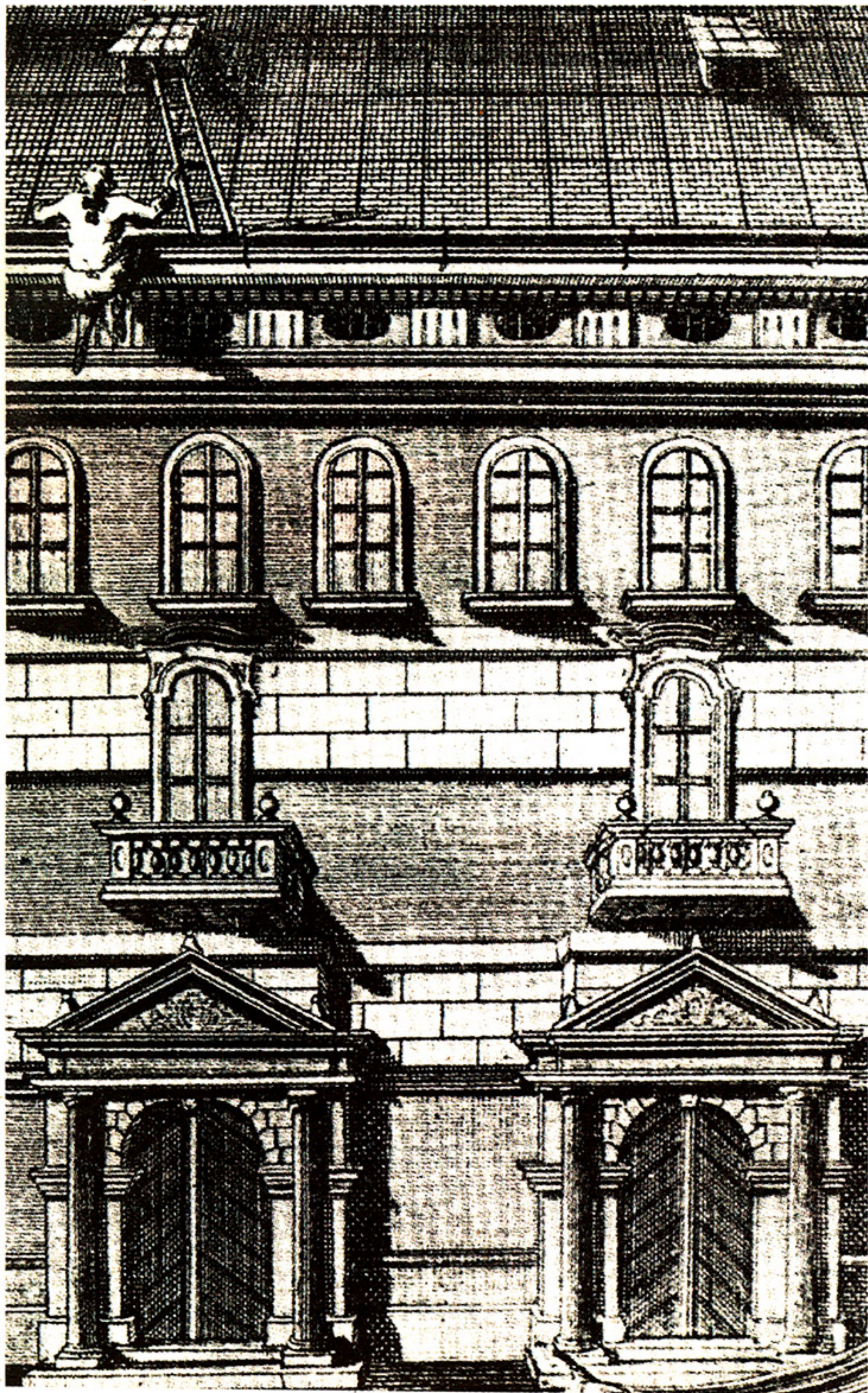


THE MAN WHO LOVED WOMEN

A biography of Casanova points out there was much more to the man's life than sex. (But let's not forget the sex.)



BY TONI BENTLEY

OH, the noble task of the righteous to resurrect the debauched! To roll those in the gutter (the righteous, of course, put them there, while Oscar Wilde put us all there) up to Calvary is indeed a Sisyphean ordeal, one in which the depraved, on principle, rarely cooperate, dead or alive. So just when I was feeling pretty good about the incredible, extraordinary, brilliant, charming, sexy, insanely energetic Giacomo Casanova, we find out, in Ian Kelly's entertaining and highly readable new biography, that he knowingly slept with his own daughter in the grotto of her husband's garden. He repeated the exploit "only two or three more times" before leaving her pregnant with a much-wanted heir for her impotent

CASANOVA

Actor Lover Priest Spy.

By Ian Kelly.

Illustrated. 403 pp. Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin. \$28.95.

husband, the Marchese de C. Years later Casanova met his 21-year-old grandson — and, most likely, son — and praised the young man's wisdom. Is this too much for you? Well, there's more.

This flagrant incest happened only a few years after Casanova, unknowingly, almost married this daughter. Upon being apprised of his involvement in her parentage, he gave her a 5,000-ducat dowry to marry someone else (the marchese) and settled instead for having her be a participatory witness to a repetition of the act of her own procreation between himself and Donna Lucrezia, her mother. This story is so transgressive that Kelly has chosen to doubt it, and declines to quote the amazing, tender, disturbing details of "the moment which leads Lucrezia to the death of love," wherein their daughter "sends her mother's little soul on its flight." By questioning the story's veracity — he takes most others at face value — Kelly not only attempts to clean up Casanova's behavior, but swiftly avoids the profound implications of the intriguing, and troubling, vein of incest that runs throughout his subject's life. Kelly gives us Casanova lite. But it's still a marvelous story.

There is risk involved, however, even in just reading about Casanova from your armchair: you are left, inevitably, with the feeling, if you're a man (I'm guessing here), that you are lazy beyond measure in all things and have missed out entirely on the meaning of woman, which is the meaning of life; and if you are a woman (not guessing here), well, you simply missed out on the greatest lover you will never have and thus also the meaning of life.

While Kelly, a British actor and writer, and the author of biographies of the English dandy Beau Brummell and the French chef Antonin Carême, is clearly no prude and loves his subject, he does make a few meager attempts — witness his subtitle for "Casanova" and its telling order: "Actor Lover Priest Spy" — to hitch his wagon to the resurrection idea of Casanova's being not only misunderstood as a lover but oh so much more. He was a linguist, writer, poet, librettist, philosopher, notary, translator, lawyer, military officer, duelist, gourmand, healer, mathematician, bibliophile, government informer, theater manager, pimp, violinist, matchmaker, cabalist, wit. Whew! All this and the perpetual skirt-chasing, a pursuit Casanova lifted to a high art. Did they simply have more time in the 18th century, or just no TV?

An engraving of Casanova's escape from prison in 1756, an adventure that became famous in his own lifetime.

But does one really have to be more, or other, than one's hard-earned infamy? Seriously. The "he's more than you think" conceit, while true on one level — Casanova really was quite the intellectual, though subject to constant distraction — remains a capitulation to propriety (or puritanical publishing). Besides, it is worth noting one significant thing about this magnificent man: aside from his voluminous memoirs, which are a uniquely intimate self-portrait and an equally enthralling portrait of 18th-century Europe, and his indisputable success as a lover, he was not particularly successful — consider his frequent imprisonments and perpetual state of debt — at any of his other numerous professions. He was a con man, a rogue, a thief, a charlatan, an opportunist, a bon vivant — and a lifelong Roman Catholic.

And while we're setting the record straight, Casanova was no Don Juan, either. The two are constantly, incorrectly, conflated. Casanova was real and was Venetian, he adored women, and he bedded, according to his own testimony, a paltry 122, give or take a few depending on how you count orgies, and a handful of men. Don Juan is a mythical figure, was Spanish, did not, by all accounts, love women in the least, and had, according to Mozart's catalog aria, 2,065 conquests — all female. Women were indeed merely notches on Don Juan's bedpost, while Casanova's lovers simply held on to his. But Casanova does appear to have had, perhaps, maybe, sort of, a hand, more like a fingerprint, in the libretto of Mozart's opera. He was definitely in a box in the theater for the premiere of "Don Giovanni" in Prague on Oct. 29, 1787. But then Casanova managed to be just about everywhere, like Woody Allen's Zelig, during the Age of Enlightenment.

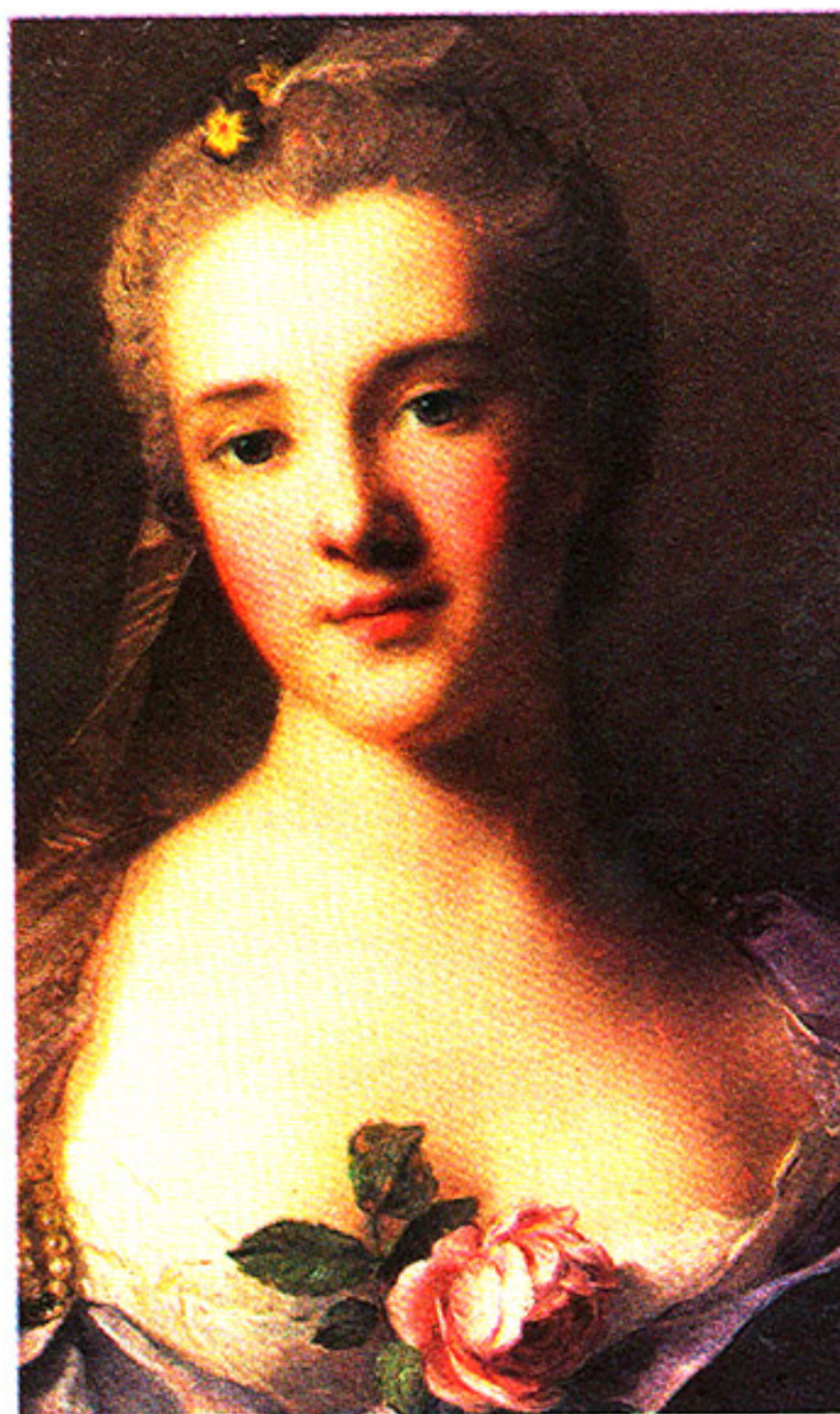
Born in the Republic of Venice in 1725, Casanova was the first child of Zanetta Farussi, an actress known as La Buranella, and her actor-dancer husband, Gaetano Casanova, though Casanova insisted that his real father was the Venetian patrician Michele Grimani. The theatrical aspect of Casanova's life, which Kelly rather overplays — every chapter is titled as the scene of an act in a comedy — had begun. A sickly child, little Giacomo was brought up by his grandmother; Zanetta was a popular comedienne, with a very busy love life and several other children. On his ninth birthday Giacomo was shipped off to Padua for an education and left in a lice-infested hostel. Casanova retained a lifelong bitterness toward his mother, writing that she "got rid of me." Hello, Dr. Freud.

In Padua, a girl named Bettina, a few years older than young Giacomo, introduced into the boy's heart "the first sparks of a feeling which later became my ruling passion." He was 10 years old at the time, though he didn't lose his virginity proper until two sisters, Nanetta and Marta, ages 16 and 15, conspired to lure the eager 16-year-old into their bed for a kissing game. He told them there was no risk in his sleeping naked with them, as "you are two and I am one." Apparently, one could handle two quite well. Casanova the rapacious lover, and gambler, won the Preakness in his first race out and never looked back.

Casanova's lovers — Donna Lucrezia, Donna Ignazia, Teresa Imer, Teresa Lanti (who posed as the castrato known as Bellino), C.C., M.M. (two M.M.'s, actually, both nuns), Esther, Hedwig and her cousin Helen, Marguerite Astrodi and her sister Rosalie, Baroness de Roll and Pauline, to name but a few — populate his story like sweet angel fairies, co-conspirators, teachers and often intellectual equals, and one senses that wit and tenderness arrived in equal doses with the passion. He was constantly helping women to get married (to someone else), to evade an abusive husband or father, or just to bide their time calmly in a convent — all before, after or during his affairs with them.

There were lavish dinners, lavish dinners in convents, three-ways, four-ways, the passing of oysters from mouth to mouth, the blowing up of English sheep-gut condoms (which tied with a pink bow) and verses written in the

Toni Bentley's most recent book is "The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir." She is the recipient of a 2008 Guggenheim fellowship.



Smitten: Manon Balletti, a onetime fiancée, in 1757.

condoms' honor. Despite Casanova's enthusiasm for these reusable devices — "so precious," he wrote with piquant wit, "to a nun who wants to sacrifice herself to love" — he left at least eight children in his wake and suffered as many as 11 bouts of venereal disease.

The tales he tells are fantastic. What one might call, aromatically speaking, "The Curried Abortion" is one of my favorites: Giustiniana Wynne, "a beautiful half-English, half-Venetian adventuress," in Kelly's words, was preg-

Reading about Casanova leaves you with the feeling that you have missed out entirely on the meaning of life.

nant with her lover Andrea Memmo's child when her mother arranged for her to marry a rich old man. The timing was terrible. She needed an abortion, both illegal and dangerous, so she wrote to Memmo's friend Casanova to ask for help. "I am putting my life, my reputation, my whole being in your hands," she pleaded. "You are now my guardian angel."

Casanova consulted his alchemical and cabalistic books and found a recipe for an abortifacient that called for saffron mixed with myrrh, applied with a "cylinder ... three or four times a day for a week." Ever sympathetic to a damsel in distress, he told a giggling Giustiniana that the remedy also required fresh semen and generously offered his own "cylinder" for the delicate operation. The potion didn't work, so feel free to try this one at home.

And then there was "Henriette," the woman history has deemed to have been his great love — for even Casanova must have had one, *n'est-ce pas?* To have had many "great" loves is socially incorrect and offends those with merely one or less. An older, married, aristocratic Frenchwoman, Henriette was on the run from her horrid husband and father-in-law and attired as a soldier when the 24-year-old Casanova first met her. He was especially charmed by women *en travesti*.

"Her intelligence enslaved me," he wrote, even "more than her beauty." He claimed that their three months together were the happiest of his life. "They who believe that a woman is incapable of making a man equally happy all the 24 hours of the day," he wrote, "have never known an Henriette." How joyously we all might recall affairs that ceased at three months! Perhaps Casanova's sense of timing in this respect, as in others, is a mark of his wisdom as a lover: he took the best and left before the worst.

AFTER they parted company, he found the words "Tu oublieras aussi Henriette" ("You will also forget Henriette") scratched on the window of their room with the diamond ring he had given her. It was still there decades later. "No, I have not forgotten her," Casanova wrote as an old man, "and it is balm to my soul every time I remember."

Several years after Henriette, things began heating up for the young man when, in the spring of 1755, Contessa Lorenza Maddalena Bonafede, draped only in her name, ran through the Campo San Pietro screaming Casanova's name. He had not even slept with her, just borrowed money. A few months later, the Venetian Inquisition, which had had spies watching him for several years already, sent "nearly 40 men" to arrest Casanova in his rooms, accusing him of "a question of religion." His dabbings with cabalism, women above his station (as the son of an actress), gambling and endless con games made him a person of constant suspicion. He was sentenced to five years in prison without a trial.

Incarcerated in the upper level of the Doge's Palace, he began his famous escape, after nine months of imprisonment, by digging a hole under his bed at night, toward Tintoretto's "Paradiso," below, with an iron spike he had smuggled into his room, honed to a point and hidden in his chair. Only days before his planned escape, he was moved to a new cell and the hole was discovered.

Housed in a different part of the prison, he joined forces with a renegade monk and smuggled the spike to his clerical friend in the spine of a huge Bible, camouflaged under an enormous plate of gnocchi "swimming in butter" — an optical diversion, for the prison busboy, from the spike, which protruded one inch on either end of the Bible. If commedia dell'arte had not already been invented, the buttered gnocchi, alone, would have done it. The monk dug through his ceiling and broke through to Casanova's cell; the two climbed onto the roof of the Doge's Palace under a full moon. They scrambled across the roof and back down into the building through a skylight. Many ladders and bedsheets ropes later, they found themselves free but locked in with the Tintoretto. (Prison escape just isn't the cultural experience it used to be.) Disguised, they made their way out of the building at dawn in full view and grabbed the nearest gondola for a speedy getaway. They parted company, and Casanova, exhausted, ended up having a good long sleep at the house of the local police chief, who was out looking for the escaped prisoners. Casanova was not allowed to return to Venice for almost 18 years, and when he did he wept.

He began his multiyear sojourn back and forth across Europe — St. Petersburg, Berlin, Paris, Madrid, London and every town in between — traveling by the end of this life close to 40,000 miles and meeting with such notables as Frederick the Great, Mme. de Pompadour, Rousseau, Voltaire, two popes, Benjamin Franklin and Catherine the Great. He tried to sell each of them something.

During his time in Paris, Casanova served as the director of the French lottery and became a millionaire virtually overnight. For years he was a close adviser to the Marquise d'Urfé, one of the richest women in France. Her faith in him finally dissipated when his last attempt to help her reincarnate failed. He told her that the complex ritual required that she give birth to herself, impregnated by him with three consecutive orgasms. Despite the naked danc-

Continued on Page 65

THE MAN WHO LOVED WOMEN

Continued from page 45



Casanova in his late 20s, as drawn by his brother Francesco.

ing girl he had arranged as décor for the ceremony, he admitted to faking two of the orgasms, and the 63-year-old marquise did not succeed in giving birth to anyone, least of all herself. Casanova fled France in disrepute. He was never to be rich again.

"I knew that aged 38," he wrote, "I had begun to die." He began calling himself the "Chevalier de Seingalt" for no apparent reason, and in fact he lived for 35 more years. The last 14 were spent as the librarian, at the Castle of Dux in Bohemia, for a fellow cabalist, Count Josef Karl Emmanuel von Waldstein. It proved to be the only steady job he ever had, and he hated it. But it was here, with little to do, that he began his memoirs to amuse himself. He died in 1798, sitting in his armchair with thousands of pages of his memories about him. His grave is lost — though his armchair remains.

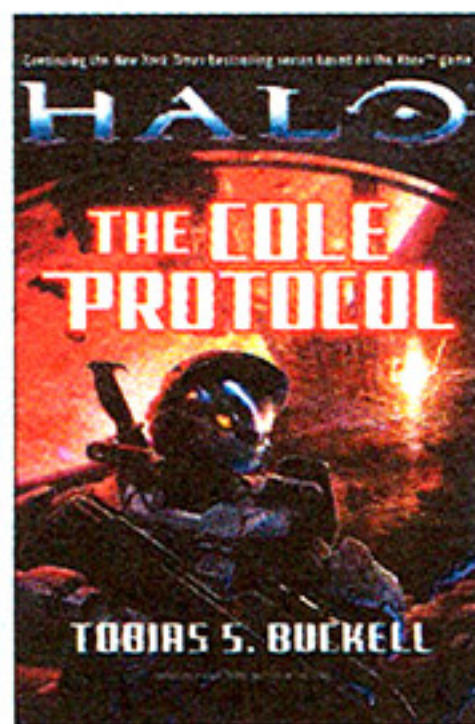
In Kelly's telling, Casanova's story rushes by like a Nascar travelogue of an 18th-century libertine, written in sprightly, though not particularly insightful, prose. "His apparent sexual compulsion may be explained then less by appetite and opportunity," Kelly writes in one of his brief attempts to dig below Casanova's surface, "as by a damaged or hungering psyche that found balm only in companionable sensuality." Lydia Flem's 1997 book "Casanova: The Man Who Really Loved Women," is far more provocative on Casanova's fascinating psychology and offers many more quotations of a self-revealing nature from the man himself. (Everyman's Library has an excellent abridged version of the memoirs, pub-

lished last year.) Prince Charles Joseph de Ligne, Casanova's great companion during his last years, read some early drafts of his friend's writings, Kelly says, and reported that "he could not read a single chapter without envy, amusement, astonishment or an erection."

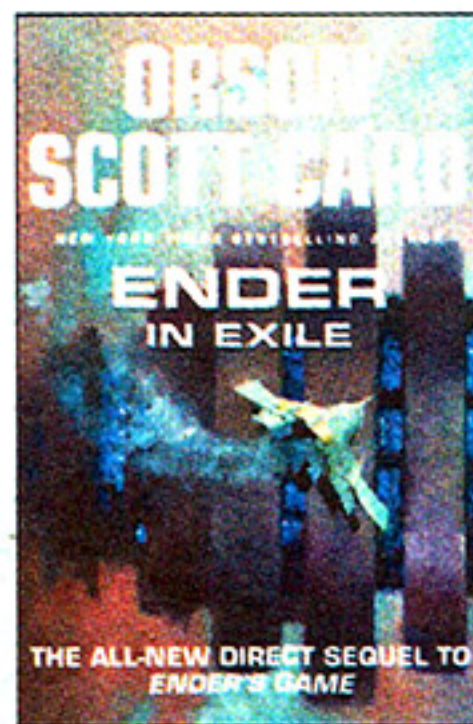
At his death, aside from his already published works — which included a five-volume science fiction novel, a history of Poland, a translation of the "Iliad" and a treatise challenging Voltaire — he left, according to Kelly, "1,703 letters, 50 drafts of dialogues, 150 memos, 67 printed items, 390 poems as well as nearly 500 pages of un-categorized writings; more than 3,000 manuscript pages of various works in progress, in addition to his memoirs, that ran to nearly 4,000 folio pages, and existed, once, in multiple hand-copied versions." His memoirs were not published accurately, in their entirety, until almost two centuries after his death — starting in 1960 in French (their original language), and in 1966 in English. One feels the force of the sheer energy of this man — as did perhaps his lovers — catapulting him through history and onto our doorstep. I, for one, will invite him in.

CASANOVA'S story is a moving testament, easily overlooked while one is in the thrall of his oversize tale, to the sheer power of the written word. We know of him now only because he wrote it all down; there is precious little corroboration, and none, as Charlie Rich crooned, for the love that goes on behind closed doors. We think it is about the women, but it is really about how Casanova wrote about the women and how he loved them, quite a different thing. "The pleasure I gave," he said, "made up four-fifths of mine." Thus, he has attained an immortality even he could hardly have imagined. His name is now a descriptor. He would have been so delighted. Casanova will forever be the archetype of the boy-man whose overwhelming ardor for women and passionate pursuit of sexual connection symbolize every man's eternal, always thwarted, attempt to go home. □

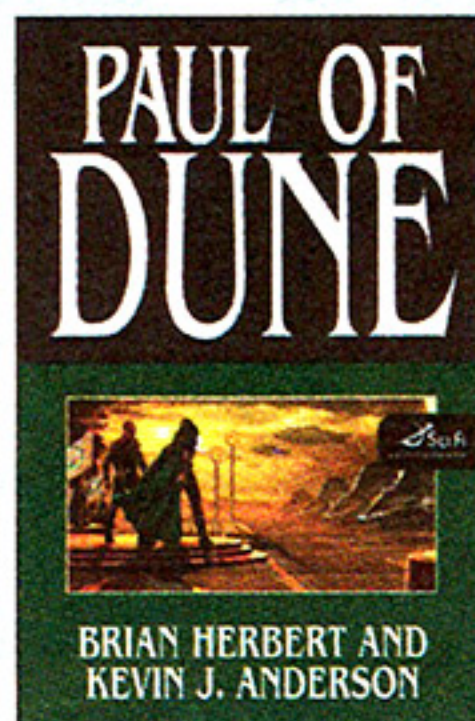
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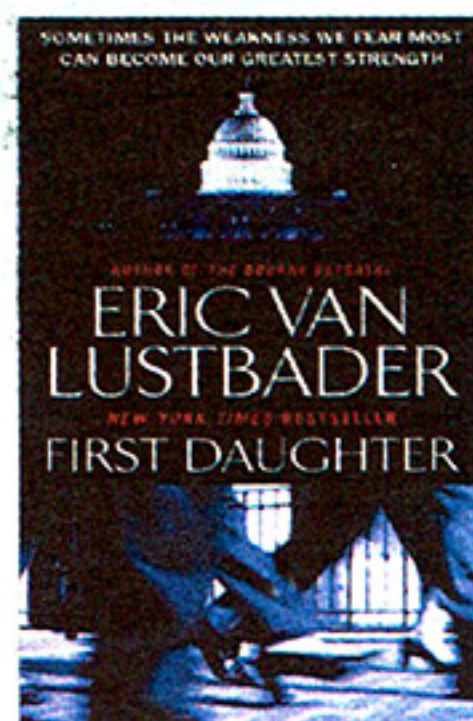
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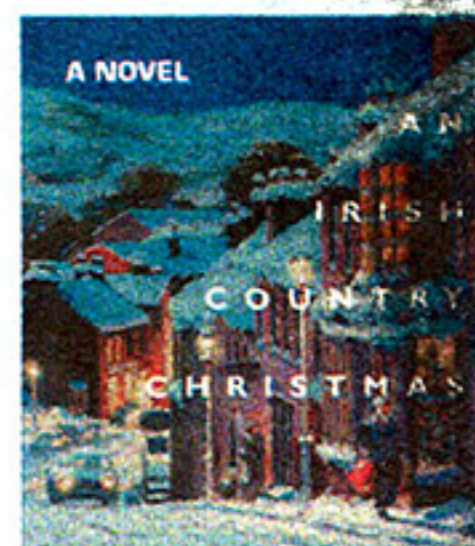
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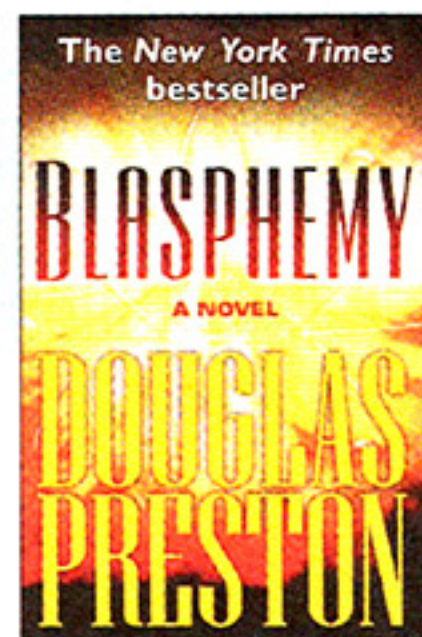
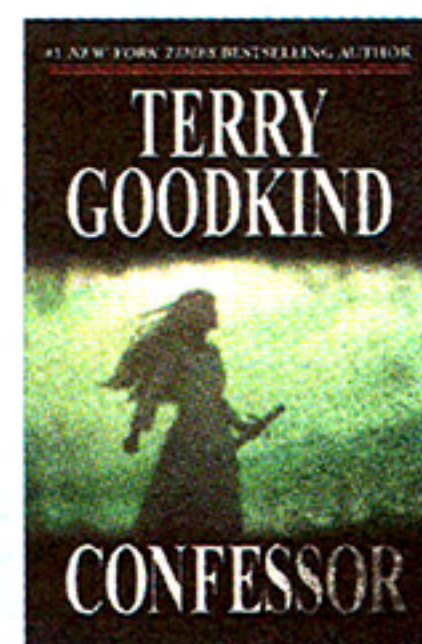
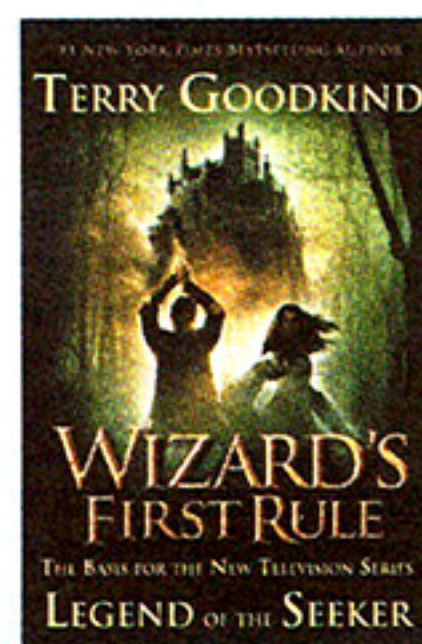


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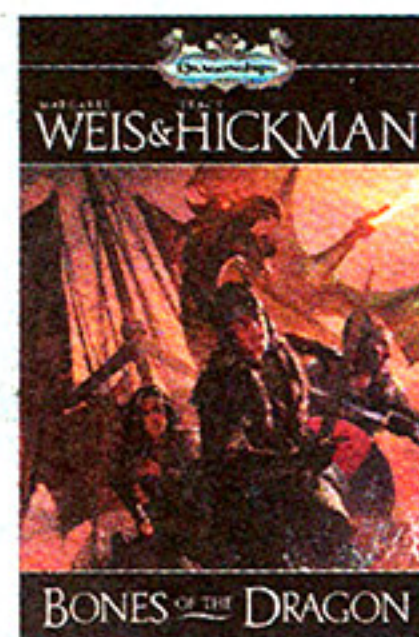
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