

FICTION BOOK REVIEW

The Courtesan's Lover

Gabrielle Kimm. London, UK: Sphere (Little, Brown Book Group), 2011. ISBN-13: 978-0-75154-455-8. Price: £6.99. Pages: 512 (paperback)

The Courtesan's Lover is a wonderfully crafted, historical novel set against a backdrop of mid-16th century Naples. The author, Gabrielle Kimm, has chosen one of the most turbulent times in early modern European history, with opposing factions in both politics and religion battling for power.

The Catholic Church was reeling from the impact of Henry VIII's Reformation and what were viewed as the other heretical challenges of Luther and Calvin, while kingdoms, principalities and dukedoms fought for territories and crowns. Much of the change was brought about by the discovery of new, distant lands and the opening up of trading routes. Greed, passion, desire and brutality often walk hand in hand with rapid change, and Naples in 1564 was no exception. In fact, Naples was even more of a cauldron under the hottest of hot Italian skies as her busy port attracted vast numbers of strangers. Merchants and spies rubbed shoulders in the crowded, narrow streets and ports have always been the busiest of pitches for prostitutes of all classes.

The ambitious heroine of this work, Francesca Felizza, high-ranking courtesan of beauty and considerable erotic talents, fornicates her way to fortune and power. The pinnacle of her profession is to become a *cortigiana onesta* (an honest or intellectual courtesan), a title only a few attained.

Francesca is presented to the reader as being very much in charge of her own destiny and able to control her many admiring clients, thus enabling her to provide a glamorous lifestyle for herself and her two young daughters. She is portrayed as a merchant with a commodity, who does business in a matter of fact and professional way. Then along comes unexpected love at the hands of a young client who disarms Francesca as he is so unlike her other clients, with a sense of innocence and boyish charm about him. A fatal passion develops and all starts to unravel.

The ending must remain in the book, where it belongs, to be found by the reader who by the later chapters is likely to be so immersed in the characters that they are sure to start believing these people actually existed, so skilful is the storytelling.

For me, as a historian, this book is extraordinary. I usually have little patience with historical novels as they can be a constant irritation of glaring inaccuracies and boring clichés. 'Courtesan with heart of solid gold finds heartbeat in innocence' sounds about as clichéd

as one could get, but in the case of this book that would be an untrue and unfair judgement.

The Courtesan's Lover is brilliantly researched, and page after page it paints an accurate picture of the time, place and social attitudes of the period. It is clear the author has spent considerable time and effort looking at records, paintings and speaking to people who know a great deal about mid-16th century European history. For readers from the medical professions, I suspect that they too will be impressed with the research, and there is reference to some fascinating practices such as the *castrati*, choirboys castrated to hold notes and produce an odd, almost unearthly sound. I should know, having heard one of the last wax tube recordings ever made of a *castrati*, who possessed a human voice that was unlike any other I have ever heard, with the brutality of the practice remaining with me as a memory ever since.

This book is one for the airplane, the conference cool-down and the beach. It is also for any time you want to read a novel that is both captivating and historically excellent.

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