



## In the Company of the Courtesan: A Novel

By Sarah Dunant

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### In the Company of the Courtesan: A Novel By Sarah Dunant

My lady, Fiammetta Bianchini, was plucking her eyebrows and biting color into her lips when the unthinkable happened and the Holy Roman Emperor's army blew a hole in the wall of God's eternal city, letting in a flood of half-starved, half-crazed troops bent on pillage and punishment.

Thus begins **In the Company of the Courtesan**, Sarah Dunant's epic novel of life in Renaissance Italy. Escaping the sack of Rome in 1527, with their stomachs churning on the jewels they have swallowed, the courtesan Fiammetta and her dwarf companion, Bucino, head for Venice, the shimmering city born out of water to become a miracle of east-west trade: rich and rancid, pious and profitable, beautiful and squalid.

With a mix of courage and cunning they infiltrate Venetian society. Together they make the perfect partnership: the sharp-tongued, sharp-witted dwarf, and his vibrant mistress, trained from birth to charm, entertain, and satisfy men who have the money to support her.

Yet as their fortunes rise, this perfect partnership comes under threat, from the searing passion of a lover who wants more than his allotted nights to the attentions of an admiring Turk in search of human novelties for his sultan's court. But Fiammetta and Bucino's greatest challenge comes from a young crippled woman, a blind healer who insinuates herself into their lives and hearts with devastating consequences for them all.

A story of desire and deception, sin and religion, loyalty and friendship, **In the Company of the Courtesan** paints a portrait of one of the world's greatest cities at its most potent moment in history: It is a picture that remains vivid long after the final page.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

*Starred Review.* Renaissance Italy enchants in Dunant's delicious second historical (after *The Birth of Venus*), as a wily dwarf Bucino Teodoldo recounts fantastic escapades with his mistress, celebrated courtesan Fiammetta Bianchini. Escaping the 1527 sacking of Rome with just the clothes on their backs (and a few swallowed jewels in their bellies), Fiammetta and Bucino seek refuge in Venice. Starved, stinking, her beauty destroyed, Fiammetta despairs—but through cunning, will, Bucino's indefatigable loyalty and the magic of a mysterious blind healer called La Draga, she eventually recovers. Aided by a former adversary, who now needs her as much as she needs him, Fiammetta finds a wealthy patron to establish her in her familiar glory. Through Bucino's sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued narration, Dunant crafts a vivid vision of Venetian life: the weave of politics and religion; the layers of class; the rituals, intrigue, superstitions and betrayals. Dunant's characters—the steely courtesan whose glimpse of true love nearly brings her to ruin; the shrewd and passionate dwarf who turns his abnormalities into triumph; and the healer whose mysterious powers and secrets leave an indelible mark on the duo—are irresistible throughout their shifting fortunes. (Feb.)

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From [The New Yorker](#)

Dunant's latest historical romp follows the fortunes of a beautiful, flame-haired courtesan, Fiammetta Bianchini, who, after escaping from the 1527 pillage of Rome, sets up shop in Venice. The novel, narrated by Fiammetta's servant, a dwarf, chronicles the pair's horrific scrapes and their dizzying triumphs, which include Fiammetta's becoming Titian's model for his "Venus of Urbino." Along the way, Dunant presents a lively and detailed account of the glimmering palaces and murky alleys of Renaissance Venice, and examines the way the city's clerics and prostitutes alike are bound by its peculiar dynamic of opulence and restraint.

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Her debut novel, *The Birth of Venus*, explored 15th-century Florence; Sarah Dunant's latest offering—what *USA Today* calls "both a business thriller and a historical love story"—delves into 16th-century Venice. Dunant paints a remarkable portrait of Venice, from its corruption to its class tensions, filthy ghettos and mansions, and virtues and vices. Critics fell in love with the deformed Bucino, an intimate, tender companion with a deep bond to Fiammetta. A few quibbles: the dearth of explicit sex scenes titillated some critics while disappointing others, and a few complained that Dunant's descriptive prowess overwhelmed a meandering plot. The novel is worth a read, however, simply for its rich set pieces.

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**Virginia Boone:**

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