

The City of Falling Angels by John Berendt (Sceptre).

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In his best-selling *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, John Berendt took the lid off the city of Savannah, Georgia. What he found was intriguing enough to put the book on the *New York Times* best-seller list for longer than any other book in history. If Berendt can do that with Savannah, what could he not do with Venice, that most fabled of cities? The answer is, oddly, not that much, given the potential of the most romantic city on earth. Still, *The City of Falling Angels* is unfailingly interesting, and manages to be so without trotting out any of the over-familiar facts, figures and fantasies surrounding the city.

Berendt's is very much an account of present-day Venice; though, Venice being Venice, almost every current event needs to be traced back to a Byzantine past. Berendt shows himself in apparently effortless command of both present shenanigans and past convolutions.

Falling Angels has no single focus; or rather, its focus is Venice, as exemplified by a clutch of disparate intrigues. At the centre of these intrigues stands the fire that destroyed La Fenice, Venice's fabled opera house, on 29 January 1996. Berendt happened to arrive in Venice three days after the fire, and whereas one assumes that he must have been aghast at the tragedy, it certainly provided him with excellent copy for the book he was in Venice to write.

He rose to the opportunity, and he gives us, amongst many other things, a full and fascinating account of the vicissitudes bedevilling the inquest into the fire. We are, by the end of the book, given two culprits; but most readers will wonder whether this was justice being done or justice being over-eager to be seen to be done.

In any case, the intrigue of the Fenice fire, though it provides Berendt with a useful central thread, may interest him less than the people of Venice, especially the non-natives, the Anglo-American expatriates who have staked off their sometimes overlapping claims on Venice, and are defending them with long tooth and jewelled claw. There are indeed portraits of "real" Venetians here – the Seguso glass-manufacturing dynasty, for instance, or Mario Stefani, "the man who loved others" – but in essence *Falling Angels* is a consummate piece of gossip, and the people it most gossips about are rich and aspiring-to-be-rich Americans, with the odd Brit thrown in for a touch of class. Probably the darkest intrigue in the book concerns an Anglo-American couple, Philip and Jane Rylands, who through what one of Berendt's informants calls "selective gerontophilia" have advanced to a position of some influence in Venice: he as director of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, she as the power behind the throne. Having successfully cultivated Guggenheim herself in her last days, the Rylandses extended their care and protection to Olga Rudge, at the time the nonagenarian ex-mistress of Ezra Pound, and owner of a vast store of extremely valuable documents pertaining to her long life with Pound. Somehow Olga, who by now was suffering from memory loss, was persuaded to sign away property in these papers to the Ezra Pound Foundation, which in effect comprised Jane Rylands and a lawyer of her choice from her home town of Cleveland.

The *New Yorker* magazine, in its review of Berendt's book, referred bluntly to "the seduction and swindling of Olga Rudge ... by the director of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection". Interestingly, a few weeks later it was obliged, by person or persons unnamed, to retract this charge as "inaccurate". More circumspect than the *New Yorker*, Berendt himself does not attach labels like seduction and swindling; but readers are certainly given a do-it-yourself kit in label-making.

Another particularly virulent Venetian strain of rivalry originates in, or batters upon, the ostensibly noble aim to save Venice – or Save Venice, as the organisation dedicated to this end calls itself. Save Venice makes its money through organising lavish galas in Venice at \$3000 a head (except for royalty, who get in for free to lure the moneyed commoners) Berendt traces in understated but devastating detail the power struggle between Bob Guthrie, the president of Save Venice, and Larry Lovett, its chairman. Guthrie, a New York plastic surgeon, collected the money and Lovett, leisured heir to the Piggly-Wiggly grocery chain, collected the titles – mainly bargain-basement royals like Princess Michael of Kent, always ready to trade her title for a free meal, but valid tender nevertheless in the devalued currency of present-day Venice.

The struggle for supremacy between these two philanthropists makes for fascinating reading, as gossip usually does. But these people are not movers and shakers: they are crawlers and climbers, and it is difficult to share their sense of their own importance, or even Bob Guthrie's sense of outrage at being snubbed by Princess Michael. Venice, like a hardened old harridan servicing an eager GI, tolerates them with a shrug and a painted smile; but whether Bob Guthrie or Larry Lovett saves her is to her a matter of supreme unimportance. Indeed, she does not really feel in need of saving. As one cynical Venetian says to Berendt: "I don't know why Americans can't come to Venice and just have a good time, instead of coming here and beating their breasts. ... Why must they come to Venice to save it?"