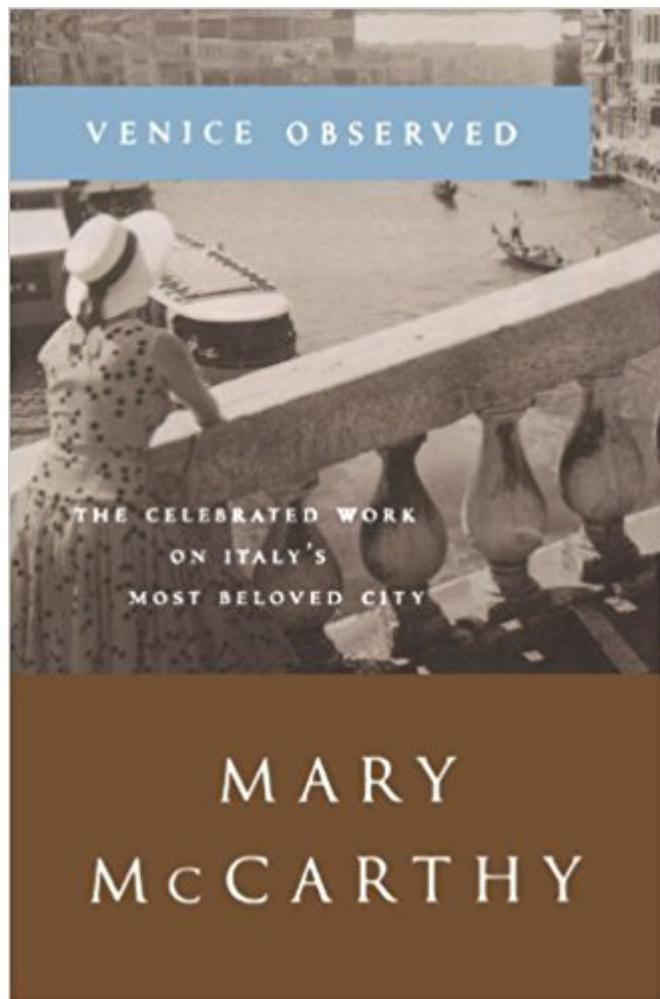


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Venice Observed (Art And Places)



Synopsis

A penetrating work of reportage on Venice. "Searching observations and astonishing comprehension of the Venetian taste and character" (New York Herald Tribune).

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

MARY MCCARTHY (1912–1989) was a short-story writer, bestselling novelist, essayist, and critic. She was the author of *The Stones of Florence* and *Birds of America*, among other books.

Very nice

Talk about taking the joy out of an experience. I read this book prior to a week-long trip to Venice. This book quite simply accomplished none of its objectives. It is a poor "guidebook" and is poorly written and uninteresting in terms of a travelogue. The history and art of Venice are covered better in books from those genres. The only upside is that it is short. Yuck, what a waste of time. My advice is: get a novel about Venice if you like novels, a guidebook if you want that, an art book, or a history book. At least you'll get something out of those--this one tries all of these and fails. Actually, in terms of a travelogue, "Vendela in Venice" far surpasses any other Venice book I have seen. Although I originally bought it because it is considered a children's book, it is not dumbed down at all and adults will enjoy it...

While this seems less known than its 1959 predecessor *The Stones of Florence*, I liked it more. McCarthy reveals in framing vignettes more about where she stays, and the irascible, over-familiar

family she resides with. Also, the book is set up thematically in chapters that don't just roam over the abundant art, but focus on characters and topics that let this erudite author convey information better. I am reviewing a large-format illustrated edition of this 1963 book. With end-notes on the art photographed, and short essay by an art professor, it better meets the needs of readers who are not as familiar with the considerable context necessary for appreciating the displays written about and shown. She starts by noting that no corner of Venice can be kept from the tourist, and that residents must share its passageways with all, for all must walk its labyrinth. She then tells of how the ideally placed port gained its "loot" and why it prospered and then declined. The fate of its Jews in the ghetto and the rise of the Most Serene Republic's "only thinker" the friar Paolo Sarpi enliven the tales told. Its glory years with Giorgione and Carpaccio, Titian and Tiepolo follow. A trip to the islands of Murano and Burano conjures up their appeal, or the limits of such. McCarthy regales us from a time fifty-plus years ago when Burano's fisherfolk looked different than Venetians, and when beggar children still could be found in the ghetto. Her Venice already feels very distant to a traveler today. This is dated, of course, but for the way it conjures up some of the theme-park ambiance of Venice, recommended. It's an elegant but accessible introduction, and with the notes, one can learn about the artists and architects responsible for forging this island kingdom out of marble against the salty sea.

Venice Observed is a short, but by no means a light read. Mary McCarthy packs a huge amount of detail and thought into her highly polished narrative dealing chiefly with the painting and politics with which Venice was traditionally associated over the ages. But be warned, she does not always wear her scholarship lightly and some parts of this book can be a real slog. In amongst the erudition are some delightful anecdotes such as the story of Veronese's recasting of his famous painting - initially intended to be the Last Supper but now known at the Wedding Feast of Cana - to conform with Vatican prescriptions. Best taken in small sips and savoured like fine wine as you toast La Serenissima in all her glory.

Written in 1956, "Venice Observed" was a precursor to "The Stones of Florence" (1959), one of the better travel books ever written. As in "The Stones of Florence," McCarthy weaves a tapestry of art, history, literature, sociology and cogent observation, but this earlier effort is not as well organized as the later book, leaving the reader to dig out the gems that lay within. Apparently the original hardback versions of both books contained high-quality photographs, and were experiments in presenting the two modes of communication together. Depending upon which edition you buy, the

paperback versions either lack photographs altogether or contain low-quality reproductions. While that obviously detracts from the experience, the text standing alone bears witness to an extraordinarily well-disciplined and fine mind at work. Since McCarthy was born in 1912, she would have been 44 at the time this book was written, hardly the ingenue that other reviewers suggest. In fact, after reading both books, one suspects that this woman was born mature. It is interesting to note that throughout this book, McCarthy refers to John Ruskin's "The Stones of Venice," which explains her choice of title for "The Stones of Florence."

This is one of McCarthy's most delightful books, although it may also be her least controversial. VENICE OBSERVED might be the best single travel book ever written on Venice, and McCarthy's tone is leisurely and informative, her style witty and engaging. Her asides about her personal experiences in the city complement her grander historical and artistic musings: you never feel alienated from her prose (the way you can in her earlier THE STONES OF FLORENCE). Her anecdotes about the doges, Tintoretto, Veronese, the Councils, etc. greatly enhanced one's understanding of the city, and her musings on the art are thoughtful and illuminating.

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