

Traveler's deLite
John Berendt delivers a scrupulously low-carb dessert

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THE CITY OF FALLING ANGELS
By John Berendt (Penguin, 414 pp., \$26)

Begin with a crumbling, waterlogged port city facing questionable economic times. Populate it with wealthy families who adhere to strict codes of public conduct, but indulge private depravities. From among those less privileged, cull out some colorful characters not quite right in the noggin. Add a complex mystery, something so visible and heinous that an entire city seethes.

Mix well, sauté in stellar prose, add a crisp dialog reduction, and simmer.

There you have it: the John Berendt recipe for a four-year *New York Times* bestseller.

A decade ago, the city was Savannah and the book was *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Now it's Venice, and the book is *The City of Falling Angels*. While Berendt's first effort since *Midnight*—which was nominated for the 1995 Pulitzer Prize in Nonfiction—may not reach the heights of bestsellerdom achieved by its predecessor, it is off to a pretty good start. Published Sept. 27, *City* debuted at No. 7 at Amazon.com and will doubtless climb the hallowed *Times* chart in coming weeks.

In delivering the municipality that Virginia Woolf termed “the playground of all that was gay, mysterious and irresponsible,” Berendt relies on familiar ingredients. In *Midnight* it was a murder within a homosexual love affair; in *City* it's a 1996 fire that destroys a centuries-old landmark— Fenice, the city's storied opera hall—with overtones of Mafia involvement and government corruption. *Midnight* had the creepy Fly Man and the unforgettable transvestite Lady Chablis; *City* has the equally creepy Rat Man and Mario, a drunk who wears a different official uniform every day.

In both books, there are rich old families and richer old family secrets. There are masterfully understated descriptions of lavish mansions and quiet rambles down shady brick lanes. There is, of course, much eating and drinking.

Although Berendt's eye for detail, ear for dialog and flair for character infuse his new book, stacked beside its American counterpart, the Venice version has fewer cliffhangers, less outré scenes, and characters more likely to make readers smile than guffaw. That may be because the new book relies more on an ingredient that Berendt may have skimmed on in the Savannah dish: truth.

Journalists and critics were outraged when Berendt admitted that he had shifted the order of events, changed the names of some characters and combined others into composites in

Midnight. Later editions contained a disclaimer to that effect; the furor over the fudging cost him the Pulitzer when the committee disqualified the book after the revelations. *The City of Falling Angels* opens with a different sort of author's note, unusual for nonfiction: "This is a work of nonfiction. All the people in it are real and are identified by their real names. There are no composite characters."

Berendt defends his earlier reportorial liberties as protecting his sources. "When I wrote *Midnight* I thought I would do a few people the favor of changing their names for the sake of privacy," he said in a recent interview with Amazon.com. "But when the book came out, several of the pseudonymous characters told me they wished I'd used their real names instead... I dispensed with the liberties this time and made it as close to the truth as I could get it."

Whatever one makes of this explanation, most elements of the *Midnight* story held up under criticism, borne out through documentaries, a feature film directed by Clint Eastwood, and countless Savannah tour guides aided by a *Midnight*-fueled tourism boom. *City* is somewhat shorter in outrageous comic behavior and Dickensian coincidence than its predecessor. Whether or not the cause is a more scrupulous treatment of fact than Berendt employed last time around, the new book is richer in history and subtlety, in mood and charm.

Undoubtedly, the book will launch even more Americans into Venice's already tourist-crowded streets. The mystery that cements the plot lacks the narrative thrust of the murder at the heart of *Midnight*. But what *City* loses in plot twists and farce, it gains in quiet sophistication. In terms of interesting fact and graceful prose, this is the better book, more *New Yorker* than *Maxim* in its tone.

Berendt's ability to sniff out interesting characters remains unchanged. There are scheming artists, affected expatriates, closet fascists and the aging mistress of Ezra Pound. The endlessly twisting geography of Venice's streets gradually becomes as familiar to the reader as the constant slap of wake from water taxis in nearby canals. The book's title, taken from a warning sign Berendt once saw on a crumbling Venice Cathedral, perfectly captures the elegant dissipation that infuses the city and its inhabitants.

The City of Falling Angels probably won't find the mass audience of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*—few books could. But readers who give it a taste will find a treat as enjoyable as a good espresso and a biscotti.

Biography

Michael Ray Taylor is a professor of mass media communication and author of three nonfiction books and numerous magazine articles. Recently he has been reviewing books for the *Nashville Scene* and the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, as well as working at the *Houston Chronicle* through the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Institute for Journalism Excellence.