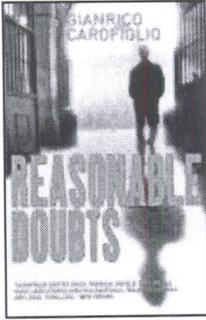


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Reasonable Doubts, by Gianrico Carofiglio



Reasonable doubts, by Gianrico Carofiglio. Bitter Lemon Press, October 2007. 249 pp. \$14.95 ISBN 1904738249

Since the SFHR is usually appealed to when works of merit can't find appropriate reviews, we were slightly mystified to be sent the new legal thriller by Gianrico Carofiglio, which comes adorned with blurbs from the *New Yorker* and the *London Times*. "Carofiglio writes crisp, ironical novels," the *New Yorker's* reviewer tells us, "that are as much love stories and philosophical treatises as they are legal thrillers." *Reasonable Doubts* is his third novel featuring a Guido Guerrieri, a public defender.

Carofiglio knows his subject the way John le Carre knows spies-from the inside. Carofiglio (b. 1961), before retiring to write full-time, was — his publisher informs us — "an anti-Mafia prosecutor in the city of Bari in Southern Italy... responsible for some of the most important indictments in Puglia involving corruption and the traffic in human beings." But, like the early le Carre, he's rather a stylist too. He has won the Bancarella Prize and is translated into more than ten languages.

So, I reflected, one would imagine that *Reasonable Doubts* would be appearing from a major New York publishing house on its way to join Jeffrey Deaver, Michael Connelly, John Grisham, and John Lescroart on the best-seller list. Instead, the volume I unwrapped came from the Bitter Lemon Press in London, which had published two other Carofiglio novels before this. And it had been sent to the SFHR, a scholarly reviewer.

Like a character in a Carofiglio novel, one holds the book in one's hand and says, "What's going on? This doesn't add up." Trying to find the answer to this mystery turned into an interesting lesson in what keeps a book popular in Europe from popularity in America.

But since reviews are not articles and should tell the reader quickly whether he or she wants to read this book, the answer is yes, the educated readers of the SFHR certainly do. But the reason that they want to is precisely the reason that Carofiglio isn't a bestseller in the USA, the reason that the average reader would be displeased with Carofiglio. By the middle of this enjoyable book, I was radically updating my idea of Southern Italy.

The first suspect in such a matter — one always suspects the family first — is Carofiglio's translator, Howard Curtiss. Has Mr. Curtiss, working in London for Bitter Lemon, translated the book into English or into British? That's often part of the answer. On page 13, the American reader, puzzling over a hero who remembers defiantly "I didn't take off my anorak, you fucking Fascists, and I remember your faces. One day I'll get my own back on you," has to do a second mental translation: "one day I'll get even."

Someone has prevented Mr. Curtiss from translating freely; or from providing editorial help. The author's thought remains stuck back over on the Italian side, unable to cross over to us. On page 12, the hero, Guido Guerrieri, meeting his defendant for the first time, recognizes him as "Fabio Rayban... a Fascist thug." "We called him that because he always wore sunglasses at night. Rayban had been part of the military squad that had stabbed to death an 18-year-old Communist who suffered from polio." Given Guerrieri's age, we're not talking about Mussolini's Fascists, as I first assumed. I soon realized that during the nearly forgotten European Culture Wars of the late 60s and early 70s, the right wing was popularly called "fascist."

Guerrieri himself had had a long-ago run-in with Fabio. He had wandered into an area which the Fascists controlled wearing “a green anorak that I was very proud of.”

–But now the reader may wish to interrupt me, “Anorak?” Actually, I had to look it up. It is not, as I thought, a parka. It is a kind of tight hooded sweatshirt, apparently, usually worn with the hood up (my son might call it a “hoodie”) though a lot warmer than a sweatshirt.

None of which explained why the Fascists “approached me and told me I was a Red bastard, and I should take off that fucking anorak immediately.” When he won’t, they tell him, “Take it off, *Comrade*,” and beat him up. But in spite of everything, Guerrieri never does. And swears vengeance. What in the world?

It took considerable researching on Wikipedia’s Italian version to discover that during the riot era, the “anorak” became the trademark garb of Leftist youths, somewhat the way the pea coat was for the hippies in 1967 and 1968. If you didn’t know that Guerrieri had been part of that youthful scene, you’d never understand him quite right, or understand why he hated Rayban so much.

Was the publisher was unwilling either to provide a helpful footnote or to free the translator to add a sentence explaining the significance of the anorak to the Fascists. Certainly a practical man of the world like Carofiglio would have permitted it, though James Joyce might not have. If they ever translate my book on Italian American culture into Italian, I have decided, I am going to demand it.

Could Bitter Lemon not at least have run the book past an American translator, who might have red-flagged the rare phrases that were stiff in one culture though not in England?

But neither Britishisms nor incomprehensible pop cultural references were the biggest problem that *Reasonable Doubts* faced finding a popular audience in America.

As you may have guessed, Guerrieri (who is something like a public defender, but grander) has just recognized that the defendant he has been assigned under Italy’s legal system to defend is Fabio Rayban, now married and in middle age. Rayban doesn’t recognize his old victim. Guerrieri is ready to recuse himself until Rayban’s wife comes in — but let me set this up.

A few doors down the hall from me here at SF State was Frances Mayes, Professor of Creative Writing. Frances was a good academic poet who almost accidentally made millions of dollars a few years ago writing up her real-life retirement adventure in Tuscany. She bought a farmhouse, and remodeled it: *Under the Tuscan Sun*. It stayed on the New York Times best-seller list for over a year. The glamorous Diane Lane (35?) played Frances (70) in the movie version. Frances has spun off sequels since, including a popular cookbook. She has captured an American fantasy about Italy.

Carofiglio has not. He’s too Italian to write well about Italy for Americans.

When I saw that this book would take place in Bari, I smiled nostalgically. In the 1960s, I had taken a train out into that area to stay with the relatives of my teacher, Charles Calitri (lionized by another student, Frank McCourt in his memoir, ‘Tis’)

I knew I was getting close to Mr. Calitri’s village when I saw women washing clothes in a stream and beating them on rocks. There were no cars in the village, only burros. Staring out of the rattling train’s open windows, I half-expected to see Sophia Loren walking up the cobblestone streets of Mr. Calitri’s Panni, barefoot and wearing a scowl and a torn dress, like in *Two Women*. Bari, where the book takes place, is just another few hours ride on that train.

But that was before the Italian Economic Miracle. Bari has changed.

In Carofiglio's novel, Fabio Rayban's wife isn't Sophia Loren in a torn dress, but a beautiful Japanese woman named Natsu Kawabata. Natsu works as a sushi chef. In Bari! "Three evenings a week, she worked at a restaurant. She mentioned the name of a fashionable spot — but she also made sushi, sashimi, and tempura for private parties thrown by people who could afford it."

A "fashionable sushi spot" in Bari? Private tempura parties? An afternoon's drive from where Bonaventura Calitri taught me to go to his hen house, and eat a raw egg with a shot of grappa for breakfast? *Infamia!* And on the next page, when Guerrieri sits down to consider his options, does he pour himself an Orvieto Classico Bigi and listen to an aria? No! The son of a bitch listens to "the latest Leonard Cohen album, *Dear Heather*, on the CD player."

I was completely bummed out. This is not tourist Italy, and that after all is what the mass market would be looking for; and me too. Taking an armchair trip to Italy to watch them eating sushi and listening to Leonard Cohen wasn't what I had in mind when I sat down on the couch with the book. When Guerrieri, mad with love for Natsu, walks through the midnight streets, he says, "I was in a strange place, an unknown area of my consciousness, a black and white film with a dramatic, melancholic soundtrack, in which Boulevard of Broken Dreams by Green Day stood out. I often listen to that song, and it echoed almost obsessively in my head during my nocturnal walks."

The first rock concert I took my son to was a Green Day concert. I have to go all the way to Italy to listen to Green Day?

But by the middle of this fast-paced book, I was hooked, and couldn't put it down. I had to find out if Guerrieri would send the bastard Fabio Rayban up the river by blowing his defense, to get the enchanting Natsu. There's a powerful complication. Guerrieri, a childless man just dumped by his fiancé, doesn't want Natsu as much as he wants her adorable daughter, who is so young she would forget her birth father, Fabio Rayban, and accept Guerrieri. It's not often you get the chance to take not only your enemy's wife, but his child. And in this case, it would be a rescue.

No wonder these books have been bestsellers in Europe, where the readers aren't surprised or disappointed to read about an Italy more modern than 1961 Sophia Loren flicks.

And the SFSU reader will similarly come to enjoy, as I did, learning about an Italy so different from one's tourist memories.

And yet. Is it really so wrong to want to revisit, in fictional form, those memories, that Italy? Given a choice between this book and *Roman Holiday* — set in a tourist Italy, but also an Italy before the Italians got globalized into Green Day fans—which would you choose?

Yesterday morning, I went to the Apple store in Palo Alto to buy a Firewire cable. In the parking lot, a man in a late-model black SUV accosted me and asked me, in Italian, if I was an Italian. I realized he was wearing an Armani suit with tailor's marks on it and the label on the outside. Interesting. I said yes. He then explained to me that he was in a complicated legal situation, which meant he had to get rid of these Armani suits in the van at a greatly reduced price. I declined. He asked me where in Italy I was from, and this time I said here.

He said, irked at having wasted his time, "But you looked Italian!" I told him thank you, but I'm not. Believe me, I'm not. Just a tourist.

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