

Uniform Justice

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For more than a decade Donna Leon has been a bestseller in Europe with a series of mysteries featuring Commissario Guido Brunetti. Always ready to bend the rules to solve a crime, Brunetti manages to maintain his integrity while maneuvering through a city rife with politics, corruption, and intrigue.

In *Uniform Justice*, a young cadet has been found hanged, a presumed suicide, in Venice's elite military academy. Brunetti's sorrow for the boy, so close in age to his own son, is rivaled only by his contempt for a community that is more concerned with protecting the reputation of the school, and its privileged students, than with finding the truth. The young man's father is a doctor and former politician. He is a man of an impeccable integrity who inexplicably avoids talking to the police. As Brunetti pursues his inquiry, he is faced with a wall of silence. Is the military protecting its own? Or has Brunetti uncovered a conspiracy far more sinister than that of a single death?

A New Yorker of Irish/Spanish descent, Donna Leon first went to Italy in 1965, returning regularly over the next decade or so while pursuing a career as an academic in the States and then later in Iran, China and finally Saudi Arabia. It was after a period in Saudi Arabia, which she found "damaging physically and spiritually" that Donna decided to move to Venice, where she has now lived for over twenty years.

Her debut as a crime fiction writer began as a joke: talking in a dressing room in Venice's opera-house La Fenice after a performance. Donna and a singer friend were vilifying a particular German conductor. From the thought "why don't we kill him?" and discussion of when, where and how, the idea for *Death at La Fenice* took shape, and was completed over the next four months.

Donna Leon is the crime reviewer for the London Sunday Times and is an opera expert. She has written the libretto for a comic opera, entitled *Dona Gallina*. Set in a chicken coop, and making use of existing baroque music, *Dona Gallina* was premiered in Innsbruck. Brigitte Fassbaender, one of the great mezzo-sopranos of our time, and now head of the Landestheater in Innsbruck, agreed to come out of retirement both to direct the opera and to play the part of the witch Azuneris (whose name combines the names of the two great Verdi villainesses Azucena and Amneris).

Brunetti arrived before the children did, so he opted to keep Paola company while she finished preparing the meal. As she set the table, he lifted pot lids and opened the oven, comforted to find nothing but familiar dishes: lentil soup, chicken smothered in red cabbage, and what looked like radicchio di Treviso.

"Are you bringing all of your detective skills to bear in examining that chicken?" Paola asked as she set glasses on the table.

"No, not really," he said, closing the oven and standing upright. "My investigation has to do with the radicchio, Signora, and whether there are perhaps traces in it of the same

pancetta I detected in the lentil soup."

"A nose as good as that," she said, coming over and placing the tip of her finger on it, "could effectively put an end to crime in this city." "I went to see Signora Moro," he began, pausing to see if Paola would react. She did not, so he went on, "I wanted to talk to her about the hunting accident."

"And?" Paola prodded.

"Someone shot at her from the woods near her friends' house, but then some other hunters came along and took her to the hospital."

"Are you sure they were other hunters?" Paola asked, giving evidence that her native skepticism had been enhanced by more than two decades of marriage to a policeman.

"It would seem so," he said, leaving it at that.

Knowing how reluctant he would be to mention him, Paola asked, "And the boy?"

"She said that he didn't kill himself, and that's all she said."

"She's his mother," Paola said. "Believe her."

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