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# In the Company of the Courtesan: A Novel

by Sarah Dunant

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## About the Book

My lady, Fiammetta Bianchini, was plucking her eyebrows and biting color into her lips when the unthinkable happened and the Holy Roman Emperor's army blew a hole in the wall of God's eternal city, letting in a flood of half-starved, half-crazed troops bent on pillage and punishment.

Thus begins **In the Company of the Courtesan**, Sarah Dunant's epic novel of life in Renaissance Italy. Escaping the sack of Rome in 1527, with their stomachs churning on the jewels they have swallowed, the courtesan Fiammetta and her dwarf companion, Bucino, head for Venice, the shimmering city born out of water to become a miracle of east-west trade: rich and rancid, pious and profitable, beautiful and squalid.

With a mix of courage and cunning they infiltrate Venetian society. Together they make the perfect partnership: the sharp-tongued, sharp-witted dwarf, and his vibrant mistress, trained from birth to charm, entertain, and satisfy men who have the money to support her.

Yet as their fortunes rise, this perfect partnership comes under threat, from the searing passion of a lover who wants more than his allotted nights to the attentions of an admiring Turk in search of human novelties for his sultan's court. But Fiammetta and Bucino's greatest challenge comes from a young crippled woman, a blind healer who insinuates herself into their lives and hearts with devastating consequences for them all.

A story of desire and deception, sin and religion, loyalty and friendship, **In the Company of the Courtesan** paints a portrait of one of the world's greatest cities at its most potent moment in history: It is a picture that remains vivid long after the final page.

## Discussion Guide

1. In what ways do you think **In the Company of the Courtesan** seems historically accurate? What details about Renaissance Italy do you think came from the author's imagination, and what aspects of it seemed to be based on her historical research of the period?
2. Do you think a character like Fiammetta could exist today? What, if anything, is modern about her?
3. What did you think of Fiammetta's relationship with her mother, and her mother's influence on her daughter's life?
4. **In the Company of the Courtesan** is told from Bucinos' perspective. Why do you think the author wrote it this way, rather than in the first person, from Fiammetta's point of view? What are the benefits of hearing the story and seeing Venice through Bucino's eyes? What are the limitations?
5. We tend to think of a Fiammetta's profession as one that is very hard on women, and doesn't make for a happy life. On the whole, do you consider Fiammetta to be a contented character, or an unhappy one?
6. Did you find La Draga to be a likeable character? How did your view of her change throughout the novel?
7. Is it accurate to describe **Courtesan** as a novel of "rebirth"? What are some other themes of this novel?
8. Do you think Fiammetta was truly in love with The Pup? If not, how would you define their relationship? Was Bucino's anger at this relationship justified?
9. What does 16<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian society have in common with our society today?
10. Why do Bucino and Fiammetta make such a good team --- what makes them successful?
11. The picture on the cover of **Courtesan** is a detail from a painting by Tiziano Vecellio (Titian). When you were reading the novel, did you form an image of Fiammetta that was based on this cover image, or did you make up your own image of her? If your own, can you describe it?
12. What predictions would you make about little Fiammetta's future life? Do you think she'll have the same profession as her namesake?

## Author Bio

Sarah Dunant is the author of the international bestsellers **THE BIRTH OF VENUS**, **IN THE COMPANY OF THE COURTESAN**, **SACRED HEARTS** and **BLOOD AND BEAUTY**, which have received major acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. Her earlier novels include three Hannah Wolfe crime thrillers, as well as **SNOWSTORMS IN A HOT CLIMATE**, **TRANSGRESSIONS** and **MAPPING THE EDGE**. She has two daughters and lives in London and Florence.

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