

B book on the beach

■ Matthew Hunt

Doctored Evidence

by Donna Leon

"Seven deadly sins, Seven motives for murder." That is the publisher's tag-line for Donna Leon's novel *Doctored Evidence*. If it sounds familiar, that's because it effectively sums up the entire plot of the excellent detective film *Seven*. *Doctored Evidence* is not as psychologically disturbing as that film, though it is an equally enthralling detective story.

The book's central character, Guido Brunetti, is a Commissario with the Italian police force in Venice, and *Doctored Evidence* is Leon's thirteenth novel in her Brunetti series. Crime thrillers and detective fiction are so popular that once a winning formula is found, each author can simply create new cases for their resident detective. For instance, in last month's Book on the Beach column I reviewed Ian Rankin's *Fleshmarket Close*, his sixteenth novel about Edinburgh detective John Rebus.

While Rankin's series shows us the grim reality behind the tourist spots in Edinburgh,

Leon's books have almost the opposite effect. Both authors write about similarly grisly crimes (murders and cover-ups) in their home cities, though Leon deliberately exoticises Venice with references to its opera and architecture. *Doctored Evidence* is prefaced by a quote from *Così fan tutte*, which seems pretentious until you know that Leon is actually a reknowned opera expert who has even composed one libretto herself.

Doctored Evidence begins with a series of false leads. An old woman is murdered, and there are no shortage of suspects as she was hated by almost everyone who knew her. Her family, her neighbours, her maid, and even her priest couldn't abide her. Maybe one of her neighbours finally grew tired of the old lady playing her television at full volume every night? Maybe her maid, tired of being treated like a slave, finally took revenge?

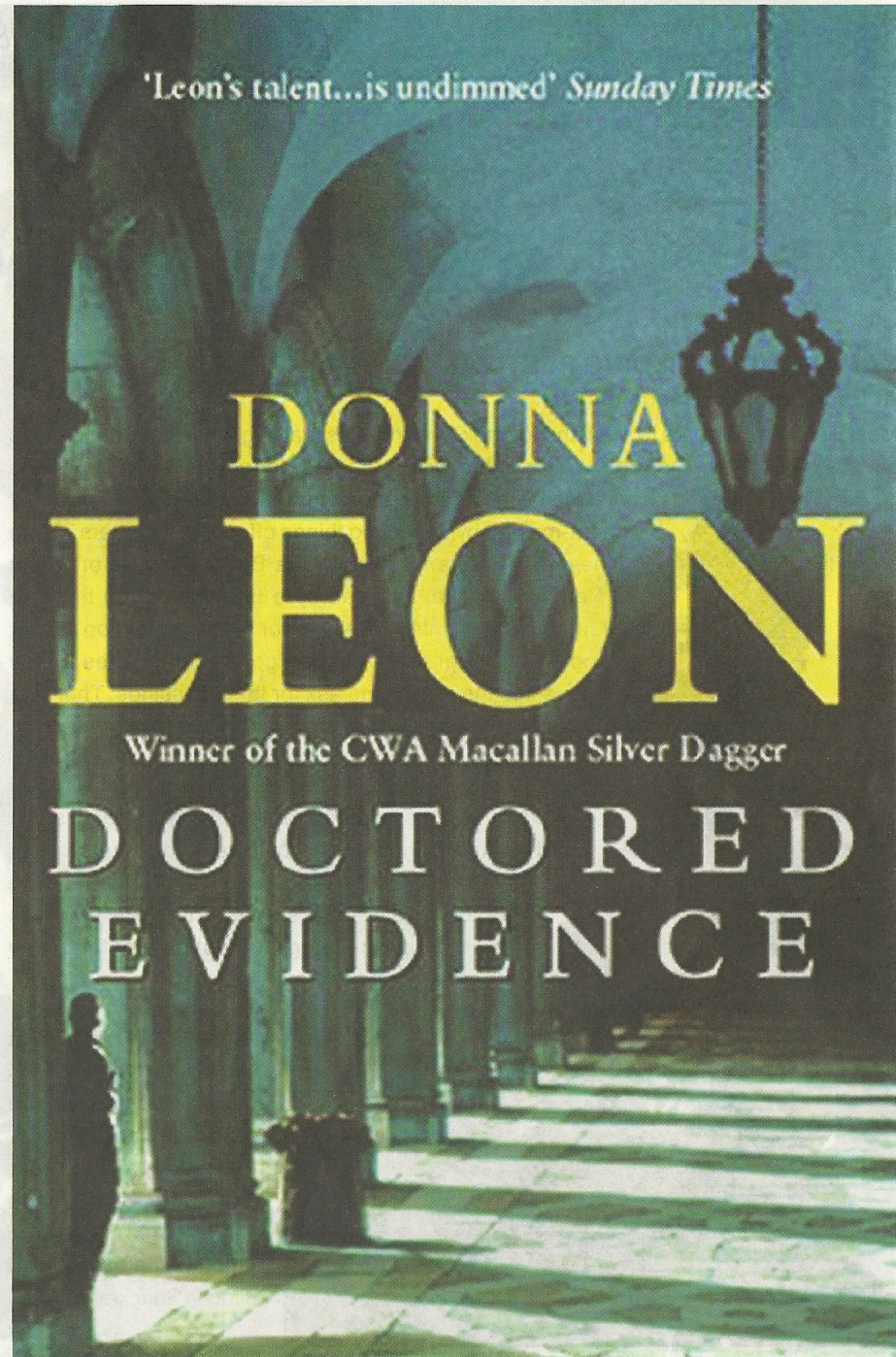
Everyone had a motive to dislike this old woman. (Though how many old women do


'Leon's talent...is undimmed' *Sunday Times*

DONNA
LEON

Winner of the CWA Macallan Silver Dagger

DOCTORED
EVIDENCE





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you know in real life who are hated by everyone? I don't know any.) For the sake of convenience, the police blame the maid. When she tries to escape, she is killed by a train, and the case is closed. Commissario Brunetti, is not satisfied, though, and sets out to identify the real killer, using increasingly unorthodox methods against the orders of his superiors (in other words, behaving like every other fictional detective).

After tracking down telephone records and bank details, Brunetti identifies some further suspects, and we are kept guessing once again. It is here that the seven deadly sins play their part. In *Seven*, seven sinners were murdered – seven people who were each guilty of a different sin (greed, lust, pride, sloth, envy, gluttony, and anger). In *Doctored Evidence*, the seven sins are used to solve a single murder, with Brunetti investigating which sin was the killer's motive for the crime.

The sins he seems to encounter most frequently are greed and pride. Brunetti uncovers (but usually ignores) various frauds and underhand financial deals, and the author makes it clear that Italian beaurocracy is corrupt at all levels. While greedy beaurocrats are seemingly everywhere, the sin of pride is personified

by a single character: Lieutenant Scarpa. Brunetti and Scarpa, it transpires, are bitter rivals, and Scarpa would be happy to take Brunetti off the case. While Brunetti is a well-rounded character, Scarpa is always portrayed (perhaps unrealistically) as a vindictive, scheming man with no redeeming features whatsoever.

Donna Leon drops in atmospheric Italian words and phrases every now and then, such as "**Brunetti was at the *ufficio postale* at seven-thirty the next morning**", always carefully choosing not-too-challenging words that non-Italian speakers could understand from their contexts. Readers may congratulate themselves that they can understand these sprinklings of Italian, though the author is being a bit too cautious and could have included more if she'd wished.

In its portrait of Venice, *Doctored Evidence* shows us the beauty and culture of the city and also its petty beaurocracy. It's an entertaining book, and would make good holiday reading for anyone interested in the more macabre aspects of city life. Donna Leon freely admits that her Brunetti books are written purely for fun, and if that is her goal then she has succeeded yet again with this novel. ■

BOOK ON THE BEACH: DOCTORED EVIDENCE

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