

With a story of inventive and heartbreaking transformation, **Tracy Chevalier** has turned her poetic eye and love of meticulous research to a Muranese family saga spanning 500 years. *The Glassmaker* is a beautifully crafted novel that unveils the legacy of Murano glassmaking through the life of Orsola Rosso, a courageous 15th century bead maker, initially forced to create in secret. Though only 30 minutes by "hard rowing" apart, the worlds of Venice and Murano are differentiated and explored through centuries of rivalry, culture, relationships, and artisan glass creation.

From the first time you visited Venice to now, after writing *The Glassmaker*, how has your relationship with Venice and Murano changed?

I first visited Venice in 1993, and spent my honeymoon there in 1994. Since then, I've visited many times, in particular to go to the Art Biennale every two years. So, I have a long relationship with the city. However, that has changed a lot since I began writing *The Glassmaker*. It always does when I research a book - I learn so much about a subject I hadn't known in depth. Before, I visited Venice as a tourist. Now I have a much better understanding of its history and its current challenges. For instance, I hadn't realized that Venice has been besieged by tourism for hundreds of years; I thought that was a more recent phenomenon. I also didn't realize Napoleon handed Venice to the Austrians, who ruled it for 50 years during the 19th century without understanding its nature, and so bringing it almost to ruin.

It has been wonderful getting to know Murano better. Before writing this book, I had been a couple of times to watch the glass demonstrations that are put on for tourists. During research trips I stayed there and got to know the Murano of daily life - what it's like after the tourists go home (quiet!), what the people are like. I've made friends and seen more behind-the-scenes glassmaking that is the real thing and not just for show. It's been a fascination and a joy.



Tracy Chevalier watching maestro Davide Fuin at work

After you dusted off the bead pamphlets that you had been given and started learning the history of the *impiraressa* of Venice, what ignited the spark that confirmed this life of Muranese women and glassmakers would be the focus of your next book?

When you visit Murano, you usually see men working with glass. What the bead pamphlets taught me was that Murano women sat at their kitchen tables making beads over flames - called lampwork - to supplement the family income. I gravitate to lesser-known stories, often of women working quietly in the background. Once I found out about this lampwork, and later of the *impiraressa* - women who strung tiny seed beads to prepare them for shipping - I knew I wanted to write about them.

I've read that you write your books initially in longhand and choose a special journal for each project. What was the journal you chose for *The Glassmaker*?

Actually, I've stopped choosing special notebooks and now just use whatever is available, as long as the paper is unlined. (I'm fussy like that!) I do still write longhand, though, and at the end of the day type into the computer whatever I've written. I prefer the tactile feel of pen to paper. Computers - though useful for editing - feel too modern and harsh for writing about something like 15th-century Venice.



Impiraresse

This book feels experimental because of "time alla Veneziana" that brings us through 500 years of history with compelling characters that only age a natural lifetime. Why is it this story that lent itself to such magical expression of time?

When I first began the novel, I knew I wanted to tell both the story of a family and the story of a city. Both seemed to require a long span of time rather than just a few years, or even 50 years. But I knew readers would want to stick with the same characters - they would come to care about Orsola Rosso and her family, and want to know what happens to them, not their descendants. It's hard for readers to make that leap to caring about great- great- great-grandchildren! And yet Venice changed so much over 500 years, while still retaining its unique beauty, and I wanted to address that.

I puzzled over what to do, and one night in bed I just thought, 'Why should they die? Why not just let them live through the centuries?' I was in Venice when I thought this, so maybe some of the timeless magic of the city rubbed off on me! This makes the book sound like fantasy, but actually it's very realistic. The family just happens to skip through time.

I loved encountering familiar people, the master glass families of Barovier and Seguso, a rakish

Casanova, the eccentric Marchesa Luisa Casati, and glass entrepreneur Antonio Salviati. With 5 centuries to explore, in a historical novel how did you determine which real Venetian personalities would appear?

I loved weaving in real people into the story, to give it verisimilitude. I knew I wanted to set a section in each century, starting from the 1400s, when Venice was at its height. I thought about each century and what was most important to touch upon: the plague, Venice as a Grand Tour destination, Napoleon and the Austrian occupation, World War I, aqua alta flooding and Covid. Then I worked out which famous and interesting real people had a connection with Venice at those times, and how I might work them into the story. Hence Maria Barovier, who invented the famous rosetta bead, Josephine Bonaparte, who visited Venice in 1797, Casanova, Luisa Casati. I especially loved writing about those last two - I had such fun with their decadence!



Tracy Chevalier making beads with Alessia Fuga

When Orsola first learns to make beads, we feel her impatience and frustration and then as she masters the craft, her satisfaction. How did learning lampwork from Alessia Fuga support your

ability to tell Orsola's journey as a maker?

I always like to do what my characters do, if at all possible, because then it's so much easier to describe it. In the past I have tried painting, weaving, fossil hunting, quilting, embroidery. On Murano I went twice to [Alessia Fuga](#), the excellent beadmaker and patient teacher, to learn how to make beads. She showed me just how difficult it is to control glass! I was able to weave in some specific details from the experience too. For instance, Alessia told me one way to practice handling molten glass is to move honey between two sticks. I tried that myself, and then had Orsola do it.

You are a maestra at the minutiae that lends such superb authenticity to your story. Nothing escapes your attention. From the glass domes of the plague doctor's mask to the heady scent of attar of rose, and a mysterious black silk zendale, it is these marvelous details which bring the past vividly alive. What is your process for researching the historical elements of earlier centuries?

Some subjects have little written about them. Venice is the opposite: there are thousands of books about the city. The difficulty became finding the right ones to read! I asked experts, I read and took notes, I went online and down plenty of Venetian rabbit holes. Nothing beats going to the places, though. I made several trips (and would have made more but for the pandemic!). I walked around, asked questions, took pictures. At the end of each day I took notes, though mainly I couldn't capture it in words - it was about absorbing the feeling of the place and the people. Sprinkled throughout research were those little details that I noted and sometimes used. (Not always - I do a lot more research than the reader ever sees.) It is hard to explain the magic that happens during research, but it brings the story to life, and sometimes provides the story. It is my favourite part of the process.



Venice and Murano are inseparable from the water. In the book, boats are utilized as transportation: gondola, traghetto, sandalo, peata, and caorlina. How did your perception of rowing change when you learned to navigate with [Nan McElroy of Row Venice](#) and experienced viewing the city from propelling yourself on the water?

I have always been fascinated by the strange way gondoliers row. I describe it in the novel as like unevenly stirring soup. It looks shallow and yet propels the gondola so well. It's difficult to master, and I needed to feel that for myself. Nan took me out in a batellina - a flat-bottomed boat a little easier to control than a gondola, but still hard! She was a great teacher, and we laughed a lot. On the boat I was so busy trying to use the oar properly and keep my balance that I couldn't really look at the buildings! But I have been on a friend's boat on the canals, and also went kayaking, and then I got to see how Venice really was built around water. The main entrances to buildings used to be on the water, and people got around on boats more than by foot, and that becomes

clear when you are out on the small canals.

The Glass Maker elevates the work of not only the bead makers but the bead stringers. In shining your brilliant literary light on these traditions and the importance of Venetian beads throughout history do you think it will change our perception of this beautiful artisan craft and the legacy of women in Venice and Murano?

You know, I think that perception is already changing. In 2020 UNESCO included glass beads on its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, an official recognition of beads’ historic and cultural importance. I will be delighted if *The Glassmaker* helps to consolidate that growing reputation.

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