



Friends in High Places

Donna Leon

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Donna Leon's sweetly cynical Venetian cop Brunetti has his principles, but is always prepared to bend them a little, to appeal to his own Friends in High Places. When bureaucrat Rossi starts to investigate whether his apartment in a historic building has any right to exist, he and his wife start to look for leverage;

At no time did it occur to him, as it did not occur to Paola, to approach the matter legally, to find out the names of the proper offices and officials and the proper steps to follow ...

Venetians ignored them, knowing that the only way to deal with problems like this was by means of acquaintances, friendships, contacts and debts built up over a lifetime.

When Rossi rings him at his office, seeking help, and is found dead under some scaffolding, Brunetti feels a particular obligation to find out whether he fell, or was thrown. His investigations take him to the heart of corruption, to money lenders and officials and drug dealers and petty thugs, and to solutions and resolutions that are only ever going to be partial. Brunetti is an attractive detective because he has a human preparedness to make compromises and a judicious sense of when it is morally appropriate, and when it is not. And as always in this excellent and popular series, the true protagonist is the city of Venice, its buildings and its weather and its smells. --Roz Kaveney

Friends in High Places Details

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From Reader Review Friends in High Places for online ebook

Karen says

I read this for a book club; it's the 9th in a series of crime novels based on detective Brunetti, and set in Venice. As a fan of crime thrillers I looked forward to reading a Venetian one, but alas I was disappointed. I found the characters undeveloped and the plot rather weak and meandering, with dead ends and unresolved crimes. It didn't really evoke much of a sense of Venice for me either, apart from the underlying corruption of the local government and links with various criminals. Brunetti was an untypical detective without the usual personal problems and crises that normally accompany such characters. The character of the secretary, Signorina Elettra, was also rather strange and unbelievable. She effectively functioned as another detective, seemingly able to find any kind of private information required by Brunetti, even to the point of putting herself in danger. The book didn't entice me to read any more in the series.

Monica says

This is the 9th book in the series, and proves to be just as entertaining as the previous eight.

"When Commissario Guido Brunetti is visited by a young bureaucrat concerned to investigate the lack of official approval for the building of his apartment years before, his first reaction, like any other Venetian, even a cop, is to think of whom he knows who might bring pressure to bear on the relevant local government department. But when the bureaucrat rings him at work, clearly scared by some information he plans to give Brunetti, and is then found dead after a fall from scaffolding, something is clearly going on that has implications rather greater than the fate of Guido's own apartment."

Every Commissario Brunetti book leaves me wanting to visit Venice, just once. I love the backdrop of this city that Donna Leon uses for her mysteries, every nuance gives you that much more of a glimpse into life in this Italian city. A mystery is much more than just who-dunnit...it's about the emotions and the why's and who's of the mystery, the questions that start roaming around in your head about human nature. All of this, for me, is found in Leon's books.

Gerald Sinstadt says

Much crime fiction is transportable. Change the names of the streets, adjust the thermometer, translate the ciao's and the auf wiedersehen's and the seeya's and the actual mechanics of the plot will often work as well in Rome as they do in Boston or Berlin. But not with Donna Leon's novels. Venice is more than a backdrop; the culture of the city is integral to the fabric of the story. For sure there are other corrupt communities in the world but perhaps none quite like the claustrophobic backscratching that lies not far beneath the surface of La Serenissima.

Donna Leon's understanding of that culture is profound; the strength of her books is that they never read like an undercover journalist's exposé; background and foreground are all one. Commissario Guido Brunetti seems only to half understand it himself. This is a very human policeman whose family environment is easy to recognise, underpinned as it is by warmth and love but still with its moments of unthinking hurt.

Given that Donna Leon's touch is light and her prose unfussy, her success is no mystery.

There would have been a fifth star for *Friends in High Places* but for the fact that it too is, almost literally, no mystery. Brunetti patiently unravels a crime that impinges on drug trafficking but ultimately stems from corruption in the civic financial offices. The Commissario is assisted by a handful of contacts better informed than he, not to mention a secretary whose ability to extract private financial and legal records almost instantly must be unique in Italy, never mind Venice. Yet the murderer who eventually emerges in the last thirty pages is no one who has figured in the previous three hundred. And if the shooting of a lawyer in Ferrara is ever explained, I fear I missed it.

Donna Leon is no heiress to the whodunnit traditions of Conan Doyle, Dorothy Sayers, John Dickson Carr, Agatha Christie et al. That is not necessarily a fault but this tale takes life's natural untidiness a little too far. If not for the plot, enjoy it for the people and the place. They are certainly worth four stars.

Joyce Lagow says

Friends in High Places[return]Donna Leon[return][return]9th in the Commissario Brunetti series, set in Venice, Italy.[return][return]Brunetti receives a visitor from the Officio Castato, the Registration Office, that controls permits and titles to all property in Venice. The visitor, Franco Rossi, tells a totally panicked Brunetti that because there is no record of the renovations that constitute his apartment to the building, the best he can hope for is a huge fine but the possibility exists that the apartment will be torn down.[return][return]Later, Brunetti receives a phone call from Rossi, clearly uneasy, who wants to talk with him in person. But before Brunetti can make the meeting, Rossi dies in a fall from a third floor window. It seems like an accident, but Brunetti, having witnessed the terror on Rossi's face when confronted with heights, believes that Rossi has been murdered.[return][return]The main protagonist in this book is Italian corruption, specifically the way it plays out in Venice. In all her books, Leon is unsparing in her criticism of corruption in all dealings that Venetians have with officialdom; this is nowhere more true than in real estate, and she at least mentions it from time to time in other books. But this is a close look at a major way that illegal money flows into the hands of corrupt officials.[return][return]There is a subplot involving Patta that is very well done, showing yet another way that the justice system is corrupted and efforts by law enforcement officials frustrated.[return][return]The end of the book, which is the climax, not usual for Leon, is hair-raising.[return][return]As usual, the comprimario characters, such as Paola, Signorina Elettra, and Sgt. Vianello make large contributions to the strength of the plot.[return][return]Another excellent installment. Highly recommended.

Bruce says

I read *Friends in High Places* by Donna Leon as an “airplane book” when I’d finished something more interesting and was curious to read a novel that might capture the ambiance of Venice. To call this a “light read” would be an understatement, it being less than even mildly entertaining. The writing itself is simple to the point of being boring, and the plot lacks intrinsic interest even as Leon introduces subplots that go nowhere and end up having little if anything to do with the primary mystery. I expected little of this book and came away with even less. Why Leon is a popular writer is the only mystery that I was able to discern.

ElaineY says

I enjoy spending time with Brunetti and his wife but this installment was made full by a rather pedestrian plot. Corruption in Italy? With regards to building permits? Double yawn.

Lorraine says

In this Inspector Brunetti, first published in 2000, police Commissario Brunetti takes on an investigation after getting a visit from a young employee of the government agency that oversees building permits. He is following up on a letter that Brunetti had received that was so full of government gibberish that he gave up on it. Now the young man is telling him that there's a problem with the apartment he and his wife bought 12 years before. Apparently it was built atop a 15th century building shortly after WWII without the permits. During their "closing," Brunetti and his wife signed documents without looking at them closely. Now they could be forced to actually tear the apartment down. A few days later the young man calls him about a problem. Brunetti tells him to come to his office. However, he never shows up and is later found dead at the bottom of some scaffolding at a building he was inspecting. Of course nothing is as it appears. Soon Brunetti is following a trail of drugs, money lending, money laundering and more. Unlike many of the books, this one has a very satisfactory ending from the point of view of justice anyway. Leon loves Italy despite the corruption. Then again, who are we in the US to cast the first stone?

John McDonald says

This might be the best of the Commissario Brunetti stories I've read so far (I think this is the 7th), where the mystery is engaging and somewhat complex, and the characters of the characters we meet in each story are amplified in a way that the reader understands who each one really is.

I continue to think that each of the regulars--Brunetti, Viannello, Electra, Paola, especially these--represent who Donna Leon really is.

Joe says

This is the ninth adventure of Venice Police Commissioner Guido Brunetti. Guido is one small man with a badge who is continually pitted against the big wheel of Italian corruption - which he inadvertently stumbles into book after book while doing his job - which is usually solving murder cases. These books are pseudo-police procedurals/mysteries. I use the term "pseudo" because the culprits are either known from the very beginning or tossed in at the very end. The series is also very formulaic – including Brunetti's supporting cast.

For instance Guido has a very politically conscious boss who's more concerned with not ruffling feathers as opposed to solving crimes - so our hero is usually involved in some type of tap-dance trying to get around him. Said boss has a beautiful, yet very competent secretary, whom Brunetti uses when he needs information – any information. She, with her computer skills and connections, can find any elusive fact Brunetti needs.

On the home front Brunetti has two fairly stereotypical adolescent children – a boy and a girl of course. And Mrs. Brunetti is a professional in her own right, although we usually meet her while she's in the midst of house-wife chores, (cooking, shopping, etc). She is the member of one of Venice's oldest families which causes some friction – she married a cop after all - except when Guido needs to pump his father-in law for insider information – which happens in every book.

The series' setting is Venice and its environs - so toss in some local color - coffee bars, markets, restaurants and Italian words for food and drink - and of course a condescending attitude towards tourists – usually Americans. The books also contain a little morality lesson, i.e. not all men and women of the cloth are good, don't judge a book by its cover – specifically people of "alternative" life-styles. Conveniently and usually in Brunetti's world, justice does prevail in the end, although not always as the law proscribes – but it's the best our Guido can do.

Friends in High Places follows this format when Guido is tasked to solve the murder of a building inspector; the investigation quickly taking him into the environs of Venice's illegal "money-lending" and drug trade. His suspects have "Friends in High Places" making Brunetti's investigation more difficult – and predictable. In this book we learn that people of means and who are connected aren't treated the same way as commoners are in Venice's justice system, i.e. money does talk and whom you know does matter.

To the author's credit this series has an extraordinarily loyal international following, although ironically, I read recently that, at the author's request, her books are not translated into Italian, (I believe Leon is an American living in Italy). This series was repeatedly recommended to me – by several of those very loyal Guido Brunetti fans - because I enjoy Michael Dibdin's Aurelio Zen series. Besides the obvious fact that both of the authors' books are set in Italy, I don't see much else that is similar. Dibdin's books are much more subtle, nuanced and complex – and at times, humorous. Besides very rarely tickling my funny-bone, I find the Guido Brunetti books light and quick reads – enjoyable but nothing extraordinary - or even very original.

Personal preference I know, which puts me in the vast minority. I don't dislike the Brunetti series, I just don't find it a particularly memorable one.

Toni Osborne says

Also under the title "The Dark Side of Venice"

(The ninth book in the Guido Brunetti series)

One day, Commissario Brunetti is visited by Franco Rossi, a young bureaucrat concerned about the lack of official approval to build his apartment years before. There are no existing plans for this addition in the registry's office; in fact, on record, the flat was never built. The Brunetti family fears a blackmail scenario, resulting in demolition or an enormous fine even though the original construction was done years ago and the legal aspect was duly notarised.

After months of anxiety and a lack of follow-up from the registry's office it comes to Brunetti attention that Rossi has been found dead. With an interest on more than one level, the detective looks into the young man's work life and discovers an underworld link to drugs and loan-sharking. At the same time, Brunetti's boss Patta reveals his personal problems in relation to the world of drug dealers, thugs and crooks ..it never ends..

Ms Leon successfully plays with the idea that corrupt practices breed more corruption.

This is a very good read, written in a simple language with the odd Italian word to accentuate the atmosphere. The returning characters are well drawn; Brunetti and his wife are the same likable couple maintaining balance between their working life and their family life. What is an Italian story without food, the author never lets us down and her description is so vivid you can almost smell the aroma.

This is another well done book in her series.

Sue says

I picked up this book in a charity shop as part of an offer - 5 paperbacks for £1 so I suppose I only paid 20p for it but, seemingly like many of the Venetians in the story, I was robbed.

I kept waiting for the plot to thicken but it never did and the only way it could be described as a page turner is because the print is so big.

I found the constant references to corruption, apathy and incompetence amongst the officialdom of Italy rather depressing and if this is truly the state of affairs I am surprised the author has lived in such a hopeless country for so long.

There was no depth to the characters although I did get a fleeting glimpse into the relationship between the central character and his wife but not enough to form an opinion about them.

Definitely did not leave me either on the edge of my seat or wanting more.

Jeanette says

In this one Guido is up against a situation involving the Office Castato, which is the registrar for Venice property. Of course his own apartment is involved and might have to be "pulled down".

As formulaic as all these Brunetti are, I so enjoy the conversations and the minutia of his life, family, and work in Venice. His daughter is 15 in this one and Paola is not on a reading binge and so is preparing some excellent meals. Sausage and peppers, Spring peas with risotto just a few in this one. And at one point she is even washing windows. In a break from marking some papers from her class. And he is disappointed, somewhat, that she hasn't made the home-made pasta for "under" the peppers and sausage that day. But all four are home for lunch, and have seconds too, of course.

So this complicated case with various bureaucracies involvements, and some possible Mafia connected loan sharks- is less action prone (if possible) than the "usual" Brunetti. Although he does involve a meal with an old girlfriend from his 17th year to ask her some "banking" questions. But he ends up bringing Paola a dozen iris, appreciating what he has.

Not my favorite but it was a delectable audible. Signorina Electra does her banking undercover computer hack exceedingly well too. As usual. Drug addicts' horror and their eventual business problems and exact finality answers most of the questions about the earliest crime- in its own time. Poor Rossi- so fallen.

This one didn't follow real life Italia very well, IMHO. Rossi wouldn't have been murdered. He would have

hinted at the bribe. And the missing Brunetti building papers from decades ago with proper style and code permissions would have been instantly "found".

This one is even slower than the normal slow Brunetti. But I did not mind, it could be enjoyed in piecemeal fashion too. Like an all day sucker.

Eric_W says

I'm surprised to see some of the negative ratings here. Perhaps it's because you need to get to know the characters and appreciate the interplay between Guido, his wife, Paula, and his children. Or, it could be that some folks just prefer action-packed shoot-em-ups rather (I can appreciate those too) than character and place studies. I suspect if you like DeKok and Maigret these will really appeal to you.

That being said, I really enjoyed Anna Fields reading this 9th in the series. Again, Italian corruption is prominent. The society seems riddled with bribery and everyone turns a blind eye. One character even says, "This European stuff will be the death of us. Soon no one will even take bribes anymore." [paraphrase]

Guido himself is caught up in the corruption as he is told by an inspector that the plans and permissions for the addition to the building where his apartment is located cannot be found, and if the appropriate documents cannot be located then it will be impossible to verify that the construction (over 20 years old) met the historical guidelines and may have to be torn down.

I have really enjoyed every one of Leon's books. I recommend them highly.

Suzy says

I love Leon's Commissario Guido Brunetti series! All the things that contribute to a good mystery - a rich recurring cast of characters with lots of ongoing dynamics, murders where the whodunit isn't easily guessable and plot twists and turns to keep things moving along. The bonus in these stories is Venice, as much of a character as the humans who populate Leon's novels. I love the leisurely pace of these stories, reflecting the relaxed culture of Venice.

I enjoyed this story of corruption in the Officio Castato, the registrar of buildings in Venice, of money-laundering and of murder (of course!). This may not be my favorite in the series but it kept my interest till the end, which was somewhat of a ho-hum, hence the 3-star rating.

As with some of my other favorite series, I'm predisposed to like each installment, some more some less, but all enjoyable. Each book transports me to Venice, seeing, feeling and tasting that magical city.

Alex is The Romance Fox says

Friends in High Places, the 9th novel in the Commissario Brunetti Series starts with Brunetti enjoying a

relaxing day at his home, which is interrupted by the news of an official from Officio Castato, the registrar of buildings in Venice, that his apartment on the top floor of one of the oldest buildings in San Polo, Venice may have not received planning permission and it may result in it having to be pulled down if the papers are not found.

Before Brunetti can solve this problem, the person who had given him the information about his home is found dead. As he investigates a case relating to drug dealing and money laundering, a chain of events occur that seem connected to the official's death.

One of the things I most admire about Brunetti is that he's a moral man but also human....

At no time did it occur to him, as it did not occur to Paola, to approach the matter legally, to find out the names of the proper offices and officials and the proper steps to follow. Nor did it occur to either one of them that there might be a clearly defined bureaucratic procedure by which they could resolve the problem.

I love the leisure pacing of these books, and enjoy watching Brunetti go through the clues and steps in the investigation.

Brunetti's love for his city is evident despite its flaws.

The beautiful and sinister parts of what make Venice such an interesting setting.

A great series.
