

Domino

Ross King

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Welcome to Swinging London, circa 1720.

A dyspeptic poet (Alexander Pope, in charming cameo) proves how appearances must indeed govern reality, for women now fit their amoral conduct to follow their dressmakers' sumptuary, immodest models and society men are no better than their tailors' dummies. Haymarket's muddy streets teem with hired sedan chairs bearing aloft "Persons of Quality" to exclusive St. Bartholomew revels, where elaborate costumes and domino face masks both hide and flaunt the wearers' secret natures. An Italian castrato singer, smuggled into London at great price, makes his debut in Handel's (fictional) opera *Philomela*, and so arouses his audience with a story of rape and mutilation as to precipitate both staged violence and a murderous duel with his patron. Meanwhile the ravages of Europe's Plague visits England, and what those deaths cannot do, taxes can, for the great South Sea Bubble is about to collapse, its wily investors swindled by their own greed in the stock market, and their bonds worth no more "than paper that had a poem written on it." Meanwhile, cast as innocent *Candide* is the novel's narrator, George Cautley, a Shropshire lad newly apprenticed to a society portrait painter, who pursues with dogged devotions his livelihood and his love, painting the mysterious *Lady Beauclair*, and uncovering (through spilled turpentine) her secret in the canvas's earlier portrait.

It is George's story, above all-hapless, hopeless, doomed George-and he owns up to it with clever pace and a good eye for detail, with a style as pellucid as a developing Polaroid. He describes what he sees from his coach window: a notorious confidence man swings from the gibbet, and while the birds have desecrated his face, his embroidered frock coat waves like a flag.

The author extends his command of historical background, which began with his book, *Brunelleschi's Dome: How a Renaissance Genius Reinvented Architecture*, and his debut novel *Ex-Libris*, set in London of 1660. In *Domino*, too, he paints a world in time, without lagging in his main job: to provide a page-turning plot that truly surprises in its reach. If his cross-dressing dandies and their sexual role-playing decadent entertainments have a common thread, it is in his most felicitous marriage of metaphor and material: his world begins to look something like our own-minus the domino masks.

LEETA TAYLOR (March / April 2003)

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