

The Conduct of Saints

Christopher Davis

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Christopher Davis continues to dazzle readers with the depth of his imagination and has created true literature that deserves to be remembered.

Brandon Doherty, a Philadelphia-born prelate, alcoholic, and friend of the debauched Italian aristocracy, is assigned by Pope Pius XII to question convicted murderer Alessandro Serenelli on events surrounding his 1902 rape and murder of Maria Goretti. Doherty intends to prove Serenelli a fake; however, his line of inquiry is not sanctioned by the pope. In fact, Serenelli is commissioned only to confirm Serenelli's belief in his own story: the purpose, to create an unshakable canon surrounding the planned sainthood of the girl.

Doherty is also deeply involved in the Pietro Koch trials. The Banda Koch had *carte blanche* and Nazi protection throughout the kidnappings and murders they carried out. Despising Koch but praying for the state's mercy, Doherty goes out on personal and political limbs for this infamously bloodthirsty soldier of Mussolini's regime. Taking into account that Doherty spends at least half his waking hours drunk, the reader must determine whether Doherty is aware he is arrogantly overstepping his role on both counts.

The story hardly sympathizes with those whose lives made a headlong dive into obscurity with the creation of the new Italy: Their lives merely go on, and their descent is moral as well as financial. The war and its trials are far from over for any among the cast of characters. Through accounts of the deals they make with one another and even through descriptions of their nightmares, Davis shows what they are all capable of.

Italy's unrest and desperation is emphasized through ancillary events in the lives of the main players: Protesters scream obscenities at the priest; street children regularly visit Serenelli; a once-wealthy man cannot settle a bar tab; an American lieutenant scurries about collecting art. The effect of the ensemble is a haunting portrait of Mussolini's Italy and the realities faced by post-war Italians, including those in the Vatican. The formerly high-ranking Nazis and sympathizers involved may seem to be beyond redemption, though glimmers of goodness manifest occasionally.

Serious historical fiction readers will be pleased. In the dialogue, they will find intriguing, nuanced suggestions of what may have been almost true. There was no actual Monsignor Brandon Doherty, but there were men like him. In fact, Davis notes that he based the character on a Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty. Koch, Serenelli, and Goretti are historical realities.

With *The Conduct of Saints*, Davis, who will no doubt continue to dazzle readers with the depth of his imagination, has created true literature that deserves to be remembered.

CARRIE WALLACE (Summer 2013)

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