

# Secrets and desire in the city of canals

BY LESLIE BUDEWITZ

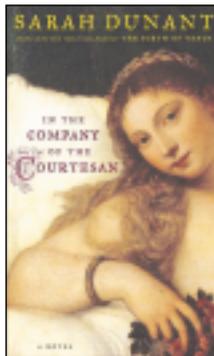
Sarah Dunant, whose *The Birth of Venus* was my favorite book of 2004, returns to Italy with *In the Company of the Courtesan*. This time, the action begins in Rome in 1527. We're in the company of Bucino, a most resourceful man—dwarf, actor-juggler and business manager for Fiammetta Bianchini, a beautiful young courtesan. But the Second Sack of Rome sends the courtesan and her dwarf to her native Venice. It's a city as strange and exotic to Bucino—who abhors water—as a shrewd, intelligent dwarf is to most Venetians.

The pair arrive to find Fiammetta's mother dead and her house in the care of a slovenly woman who soon disappears, along with the ruby they had counted on to finance Fiammetta's entry into Venetian society. Fiammetta soon becomes dependent on the assistance of a blind healer called La Draga, a woman Bucino instinctively distrusts. But not long after the loss of their fortune, Bucino finds a way for himself and his lady to re-establish themselves, with a touch of bribery, a secret hidden in a book and a great deal of panache.

*In the Company of the Courtesan* portrays a vibrant city at a dangerous time, when religion and politics clashed, often with violence. The city squares, bridges and canals teem with trade and colorful characters. Fiammetta's circle includes real-life historic figures, such as Aretino, who wrote both religious works and scandalous sonnets, and the painter Tiziano Vecellio, better known as Titian. In a delicious scene set in Tiziano's studio, Dunant imagines Fiammetta as the subject of one of his most famous nudes.

But while Fiammetta's beauty and talents support their lifestyle, this is Bucino's journey, the story of a man who can only maintain hard-won success by confronting everything he fears. Ultimately, this is a novel not about religious or social politics, but the secrets of the heart: how love can drive the smart and cunning to the brink of foolishness, and what happens when desire battles with contentment. ☺

Leslie Budewitz treasures a small collection of Venetian Murano glass earrings.



In the Company of the Courtesan

By Sarah Dunant

Random House  
\$23.95, 384 pages  
ISBN 1400063817  
Also available on audio

# MEET Stephen White

Title of your new book:

*Kill Me*

Describe your book in 50 words or less:

*What if you could choose how much illness or disability you would tolerate before you would choose to die?*

What's your favorite thing about this book?

*I was as interested by the subject when I was writing the last page as I was the first.*

Which author (classic or contemporary) would you most like to have dinner with?

*If she were cooking, Julia Child. If not — Thomas Jefferson, Shakespeare, Hemingway, Chandler. I'm not picky.*

What three things would you want with you on a desert island?

*Shade, GPS, and a satellite phone — though not necessarily in that order.*

How do you spend your time when you're not writing?

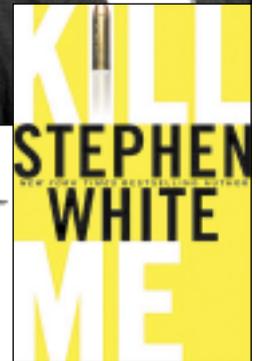
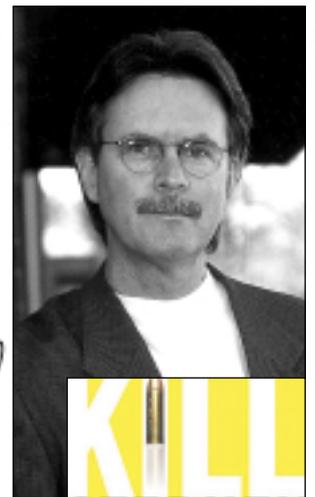
*At least nine months a year, no matter what else I'm doing — traveling, hanging with friends or family, sleeping — I am writing.*

If you could change places with one person for a day, who would it be?

*As I get older, I'm burdened little by envy or regret. I live a fortunate life & am lucky to have it.*

Words to live by?

*Success in life is largely about the ability to hit curveballs.*



## The dark side of paradise...

A slice of paradise in the turquoise waters of southern Florida, the island is a lush, breathtaking sanctuary.

*Few can resist its allure or its primitive beauty—*

*but fewer still know its secrets.*



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Also available this month, **KILLING KELLY**



*Kill Me* (Dutton, \$25.95, 352 pages, ISBN 0525949305) is Stephen White's 14th novel featuring clinical psychologist Alan Gregory. A former clinical psychologist himself, White now writes full time and lives with his wife and son in Colorado.