

Part 3

You are going to read a newspaper article about a novelist. For questions 13–19, choose the answer (A, B, C or D) which you think fits best according to the text. Mark your answers on the separate answer sheet.

The opera-lover turned crime novelist

Through her series of crime novels, Donna Leon has been solving murders in Venice with great panache – mostly to the soundtrack of grand opera.

Donna Leon first launched herself as a crime writer in 1991 with *Death at La Fenice*, which saw a conductor poisoned in mid-performance at the Venice opera house. 'It was an idea that kind of grew,' she says. 'I had a friend at the opera house. One day we were backstage, complaining about the tyrannical conductor – and we thought it would be a laugh to make him the victim in a crime novel, which I duly went off and wrote. But that's all it was meant to be. I was lucky to be born without ambition, and I had none for this book. Then I sent it off to a competition, and six months later they wrote back to say I'd won. I got a contract, and suddenly I had a purpose in life, a mission.'

To hear her talk, you'd think that until *Death at La Fenice* she'd been living in obscurity. Not so. She was a well-known academic teaching English literature at universities in the USA and Europe. But she found that she wasn't really cut out for university life, and finally decided to walk out on it. 'I'm a former academic,' she says now through slightly gritted teeth. And it's interesting that her literary reputation has been made through a medium so remote from the one she used to teach.

'You'd be surprised how many academics do read murder mystery though,' she adds. 'It makes no intellectual demands, and it's what you want after a day of literary debate.' That said, Ms Leon is big business. She sells in bulk, her books are translated into nineteen languages and she's a household name in German-speaking countries. 'All of which is gratifying for me personally, and I don't mean to rubbish my own work, but murder mystery is a craft, not an art. Some people go to crime conventions and deliver learned papers on the way Agatha Christie presents her characters, but they're out of their minds. I stay away from such events.'

Leon also stays away from most of the other expected haunts of crime writers, like courtrooms and police stations – 'I've only known two policemen, neither of them well,' – which accounts for the absence of technical legal detail in the books. What's more, the few points of police procedure that appear are usually invented – as, she admits, they're bound to be when you set a murder series in a place where murders never happen. 'Venice is small, compact, protected by its geography – there's really not much crime.' Clearly

the key thing about her murder stories isn't credibility. Predictability comes closer to the mark: setting a series in a fixed location that the reader finds attractive, with a constant cast of characters.

And that's what Donna Leon does. Her unique selling point is Venice which, as the reviewers always say, comes through with such vitality and forcefulness in Leon's writing that you can smell it. There's a set cast of characters, led by a middle-aged detective, Commissario Brunetti, and his wife (a disillusioned academic). Then there are her standard jokes – often to do with food. Indeed, Leon lingers so ecstatically over the details of lunch, the pursuit of justice frequently gets diverted. The eating is a literary device – part of the pattern of each novel, into which she slots the plot. 'That's how you hook your readers, who like a kind of certainty. And the most attractive certainty of crime fiction is that it gives them what real life doesn't. The bad guy gets it in the end.'

Indeed, when the conversation switches to Donna Leon's other life, *Il Complesso Barocco*, the opera company she helps run, she talks about baroque opera as though it were murder-mystery: fuelled by 'power, jealousy and rage, despair, menace' which are her own words for the sleeve notes of a new CD of Handel arias by the company, packaged under the title *The Abandoned Sorceress*. Designed to tour rare works in concert format, *Il Complesso* was set up in 2001 in collaboration with another US exile in Italy, the musicologist Alan Curtis. 'It started as a one-off. There was a rare Handel opera, *Armínio*, that Alan thought should be performed, and it became an obsession for him until eventually I said, 'Do you want to talk about this or do you want to do it?' So we did it. I rang a friend who runs a Swiss opera festival. We offered him a production. Then had eight months to get it together.'

Somehow it came together, and *Il Complesso* is now an ongoing venture. Curtis does the hands-on artistic and administrative work. Leon lends her name which 'opens doors in all those German-speaking places' and, crucially, underwrites the costs. In addition, her publishing commitments take her all over Europe – where she keeps a lookout for potential singers, and sometimes even features in the productions herself: not singing ('I don't') but reading the odd snatch from her books.

- 13 What is suggested about the novel *Death at La Fenice* in the first paragraph?
- A Donna based the plot on a real-life event she had witnessed.
 - B Donna didn't envisage the work ever being taken very seriously.
 - C Donna had to be persuaded that it was good enough to win a prize.
 - D Donna embarked upon it as a way of bringing about a change in her life.
- 14 The second paragraph paints a picture of Donna as someone who
- A has little respect for her fellow academics.
 - B regrets having given up her job in a university.
 - C was unsuited to being a university teacher.
 - D failed to make a success of her academic career.
- 15 From Donna's comments in the third paragraph, we understand that
- A she feels crime fiction should be considered alongside other types of literature.
 - B she is pleased with the level of recognition that her own novels have received.
 - C she regards her own novels as inferior to those of Agatha Christie.
 - D she finds the popularity of crime novels amongst academics very satisfying.
- 16 Donna is described as an untypical crime writer because
- A she is able to imagine crimes being committed by unlikely characters.
 - B she is unconcerned whether or not her stories appear realistic.
 - C she has little interest in the ways criminals think and operate.
 - D she manages to come up with imaginative new ideas for her plots.
- 17 Donna's greatest strength as a crime writer is seen as
- A her avoidance of a fixed approach.
 - B her injection of humour into her stories.
 - C the clear moral message she puts across.
 - D the strong evocation of place she achieves.
- 18 When Donna helped set up *Il Complesso Barocco*,
- A she didn't expect it to be a long-term project.
 - B she saw it as more interesting than her writing work.
 - C she had a fundamental disagreement with her main collaborator.
 - D she was attracted by the challenge of the first deadline.
- 19 In what way is Donna important to *Il Complesso Barocco*?
- A She provides essential financial support.
 - B She oversees its day-to-day organisation.
 - C She helps as a translator.
 - D She organises the recruitment of performers.