

A Conversation with
Laurel Corona
Author of
The Four Seasons:
A Novel of Vivaldi's Venice

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Q. What inspired you to write *The Four Seasons*?

A. I ran across a reference to Vivaldi's work with the female musicians of the Pieta in a textbook I used for a Humanities courses at the community college where I teach. When I did a little research, I realized how rich and complex a subject the Pieta was in and of itself, how magnificent it became when a great composer and his music were added in, and how explosive a result there would be to have the opulent, complicated and gorgeous city of Venice as the foundation for the story.

Q. While Venetians were—by their own admission—often described as too impassioned, your characters are often in situations where they must suppress any passion. Do you see your most successful characters as those who were able to conceal it the best?

A. My goal was to create central characters with a deep sense of personal dignity, characters who are trying to be all they can be, and not disappoint themselves with the way they've lived their lives. I think people recognize that suppression of at least some of our passion is the price of keeping or enhancing our social status, and I think most of us probably aren't proud of at least some situations where we let passion overwhelm us. I perceived my characters as having all this in mind as they made decisions in their lives, whether I wrote any of it into their thoughts or not.

Q. You appear to sidestep making any concrete suggestions about the possibility of a sexual relationship between Vivaldi and Maddalena. Why?

A. Antonio Vivaldi is a real person who should be respected. He was a Catholic priest who had taken a vow of lifelong chastity. He was the kind of person who would find that vow difficult to live up to, and I don't know (nor does anyone else) how well he succeeded. He can do nothing at this point to defend his reputation, and without hard evidence, I wouldn't feel right about suggesting he dishonored this vow, just to make my story a little sexier. And even though Maddalena is entirely fictional, she is a cloistered virgin—strictly hands off. Readers might think they would like a little more in the way of a physical relationship between them, but I honestly don't believe in the end they would like either of the characters as much if I had taken the story in that direction.

Q. Did you envision one of the sisters as more dominant, and do you think loyalty, privilege or fear ultimately stifled either?

A. I'd like to listen in to a discussion of this at a book club! I simply tried to imagine what Maddalena or Chiaretta would think and do in a given situation and then write it. I didn't stop to analyze them in the way the question suggests, and I'm glad I didn't because it would have reduced the depth of the book to only my perspective. Really I feel no more qualified to weigh in on such matters than readers are.

Q. You vividly capture the life of Venetian society and Venice is almost a character in and of itself. What amount of research did you do to describe the city in such detail?

A. I had already visited Venice several times, but I made a special trip in the winter to see what that season was like. It snowed one day, which was rare enough to get even the gondoliers excited! I visited the new Museum of the Pieta and saw halves of broken combs mothers could match to the proper child if they returned, the branding iron for scarring the babies' heels, and instruments and sheet music the musicians had used. I also found the last surviving church that has a balcony like the one the coro performed from, as well as a salon where important guests could have private concerts (complete with a hidden balcony about the size of a window ledge for the musicians). I tracked down properties owned by the Morosini family and settled on specific ones for Chiaretta to live in, so I could describe her environment more precisely. And, of course, I used stacks of books and articles by scholars throughout the process of research and writing.

When I write, I'm always running through a list of the five senses to see how many I can work in to a scene. I try to bring the underutilized senses of touch and smell into descriptions wherever possible, and struggle particularly to describe sound, which is actually the most difficult sensory element to put into words in fresh ways. That makes it rather tough to write a book about music, I discovered!

Q. Are you a musician yourself?

A. No, and I thought that would be more of a problem than it was. Musicians advised me about technical aspects of playing and singing, but having an understanding and appreciation of music that is closer to the typical reader's probably gave me an advantage, in that I couldn't slip into jargon or get wrapped up in minutiae. I tried to approach music from the perspective of a poet, because that's how I experience it.

Q. Family values are handled in a very interesting manner. With marriage being of such great importance, it does not seem that family necessarily was, other than for inheritance. Was that the culture of the time or does it stem from the two sisters having been abandoned?

A. Chiaretta gave up her career to be able to have a family life. Nothing was more important to her than her children. They were very important to her husband, Claudio, as well—more so, I think, than to the typical Venetian man of that era. Maddalena had her own family of another sort, especially when she became a maestra and could mother the next generation of girls. I would argue that if anything, the two of them valued family more because they hadn't grown up within one. A few other characters—Antonia in particular—begrudge or belittle its role in their lives, but not my main characters.

Q. Can you go into more detail about Venice's problem with abandoned children? What social structures allowed it?

A. Venice was a republic ruled by a number of patrician families who would only marry their own kind. In this limited marriage pool, money played an increasingly large role, since families would compete to secure the best in the pool of potential spouses for their children. As a result, by the time in which *The Four Seasons* was set, even the wealthiest families could not afford to marry off all their sons and daughters. Unmarried daughters went willingly or unwillingly into convents (three quarters of the noblewomen in Vivaldi's Venice were nuns!) and bachelor sons live in apartments in their families' homes. Since sexuality is an important part of life, these unmarried men did not lead chaste lives, but produced many illegitimate offspring (and occasionally so did the cloistered

daughters). Foundling hospitals were set up so the courtesans and other women who had unwanted babies were not tempted to drown them in the canals.

Q. This book would make a beautiful costume drama movie, complete with complicated romances, larger-than-life characters and wonderful scenery. Did you write the book with a movie in mind, and, if so, which actors would you envision for Chiaretta, Maddalena and Vivaldi?

A. Thank you! Though I didn't start out to write anything but a good novel, I realized early on that *The Four Seasons* had many scenes that would be enhanced by music in the background. Languid summers in the villas on the Brenta Canal, the colorful regattas on the Venetian Lagoon, and the mayhem of the War of the Fists and Carnevale would be so much richer accompanied by the right selections from Vivaldi's music. To me the music itself is a central character in the book, and I often wrote about it directly, but an experience of *The Four Seasons* that is as saturated with music as the film *Amadeus* is would be a great experience.

Of the actors I'm familiar with, Toby Maguire and Elijah Wood are plausibly close to Vivaldi's physical appearance. I imagine there are a number of actors who could bring Chiaretta's fair and delicate beauty to the screen. Maddalena needs an auburn-haired actor with subtle radiance and less physical perfection. I find myself looking for their faces in magazines when I'm in line at the supermarket or getting my hair cut, but I haven't found them yet, and I can't wait to see who they turn out to be!

Q. Beyond reading this beautiful, intricate story, what do you hope readers will take away with them upon completing *The Four Seasons*?

A. I love VOICE's concept of smart reads for multiple generations of women. One of the things I hope readers take away from the book is the desire to recommend it to their mothers, sisters, daughters, and friends.

This book, and any book I will ever write, is optimistic and positive in outlook. There's a particularly strong message of female empowerment in it, since one of the things that interests me most is how women come to grips with the social limitations of gender, and then manage to either rise above them or thrive within them. *The Four Seasons* says loudly and clearly that even in the most rigid and constraining societies, women--and men--retain the ability to decide what kind of people they are going to be. Making choices for ourselves, however limited our options, is what shapes us and enables us to reach full personhood, regardless of where and how we live.

Q. What's next for you? Are you currently working on another novel?

A. I recently finished my second novel, *Penelope's Daughter*, which asks the question "What if, when Odysseus went off to the Trojan War, his wife Penelope was pregnant with a daughter?" The book covers his twenty-year absence, and we see how Penelope and her daughter rise to the occasion and become heroes of the story in their own right. I am in the early stages of research for the next two historical novels I want to write, one of which is set in eighteenth century France, and the other in medieval Spain.

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