

*Trace Elements*, by Donna Leon (2020, Atlanta Monthly Press)

I had never heard of the American detective writer Donna Leon until I saw this book mentioned in a respected journal as a favorite read of 2020; perhaps you've known about her for years, and don't need me to tell you more. She has published 33 books, most of which feature a fictional Venetian policeman named Guido Brunetti and his associate from Naples, Claudia Griffoni.

This latest book crosses genres between detective fiction and cultural analysis. It's really a study of ethics amidst corruption, a vivid picture of life in everyday Venice, overrun by tourists, full of local traditions and prejudices, gripped by crooked businessmen and venal politicians, wilting in summer heat, yet peopled with many ordinary citizens doing their best. The plot concerns a water-monitoring technician killed in a motorcycle accident which his dying wife claims was murder. There's a subplot of sorts about two juvenile Roma pickpockets caught in the act by the mayor's wife. Any violence is off-stage, there are no breathtaking chases, and Brunetti is an exemplary husband and father, though his professional hands aren't totally clean. All the drama is in the difficult decision he faces when he has to choose between two criminals, only one of whom he can arrest. The clever plot, deceptively straightforward, is presented as one thread in the tapestry of Venetian life—as such an inquiry would be if it really took place.

Although my account might make you think this is a depressing work in the “noir” category, I didn't find it to be so, mostly because of the decency of Brunetti and his creator. If you're up for a crime story that is not a thriller, vividly written but never sensational, you might find *Trace Elements* as enjoyable as I did.