

The Goodbye Kiss

Europa Editions Reading Group Guide, number 3

The Goodbye Kiss by [Massimo Carlotto](#)

This reading group guide has been prepared by Michael Reynolds for Europa Editions

1. A shortage of villains

English actor, dramaturge and author, Steven Berkoff has been often acclaimed for his one man shows; productions that feature a cavalcade of heinous villains, from Shakespeare's Iago to the first person narrator of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Tell-tale Heart*, and Berkoff's own, disquieting inventions. The British actor complains that there are very few good, convincing "bad guy" roles being written these days; that he must go fishing in the past, or inventing his own scoundrels, in order to find roles that he can sink his teeth into. Despite relatively recent contributions to the pantheon of despicable literary characters—Patrick Bateman (*American Psycho*) Alex (*A Clockwork Orange*) and Hannibal Lector (*The Silence of the Lambs*) come to mind—Berkoff may have a point: there may well be shortage of rogues in contemporary literature. *What makes contemporary authors loath to breath life into despicable literary characters? Might it be that authors are afraid of being confused with their characters? Are they less able to create distance between themselves and their characters than authors of the past? Or, on the contrary, are they closer than ever to the characters they create, and as such, less willing to admit their own villainous sides?*

2. Vile, villainous, evil and oh, so delectable

There is, of course, another school of thought that goes something like this: literary villains get all the best lines. They are intelligent, devious, scheming, often eloquent and refined, sometimes even charismatic. They are often fully aware of the degree of their depravity (therein lies their strength) and are often proud of it. *Do we tend to remember great literary villains for longer than we do literary heroes? Are black knights better, more accurately and entertainingly portrayed than white knights? Or are they most often caricatures rather than characters? Why do bad guys charm us so? Do you agree with scholar, E.M. Tillyard's remark, "to be greatly bad, a man must have correspondingly great potentialities for good"?*

3. Irredeemable

"Morality does not figure high in *The Goodbye Kiss*, and the only moral of the story appears to be: once a low-life, always a low-life." (from The Complete Review's review of *The Goodbye Kiss*). *Can a hardened criminal ever be "rehabilitated"? If not, is prison nothing more than a place to keep criminals far from law-abiding*

From Massimo Carlotto's interview with Brian Oliver, appearing in "Black & Blue: an Introduction to Mediterranean Noir," compiled by Europa Editions' (2005).

—I have never once made up a killing. Every single death in everything I have written relates to a real killing, one for which I have read the autopsy report. I have seen the documents, I have carried out one-to-one interviews with murderers. This is my way of recording what is happening in present day Italy.

The Noir writers talk about the social and political situation right now; they react very quickly to changes in the criminal world. In Italy, Mediterranean Noir is called the literature of reality. I even have journalists calling me when they are writing about crime, to ask me what is going on. The world of journalism has changed. There is no investigation now. Italy has lost any real sense of truth, because nobody believes the official 'truths.' . . .

—The very top levels of the underworld have realised that they have to infiltrate the productive manufacturing process. They have to work with others, and the balance between different mafia organisations has changed, producing different strata, different cultural layers.

While the Sicilian mafia has retracted to the south, the Nigerians have become heavily involved in drugs, the Romanians run prostitution, the Chinese and Croatians have their sweatshops and at a lower level you have the Albanians. There is a completely new situation regarding organised crime.

There are new rules, too. The old-style mafia "code of honour"—never grass, never steal a friend's girl and so on—no longer applies . . .

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citizens, rather than an institution designed to reform criminal elements? What does the recent execution of Stanley Tookie Williams in California tell us about prison, criminals, penitence, and justice?

4. Allegory or Anachronism?

Carlotto's novels are not only first-rate crime fictions, but they also represent a means through which he denounces "the system" or the state and its ways of dealing with marginalization, justice, and crime. *Is Giorgio Pellegrini a loner, a modern exile from the world, a lost soul representative of little or nothing in contemporary society? Or is there something about his story that turns his story into a modern allegory?*

5. The Big Picture

One of the abiding features of Carlotto's work is his ongoing investigation into the relationship (symbiotic at times, antagonistic at others) between crime and the ostensibly legitimate world of business and politics. His work has proved controversial and at times, "dangerous" for precisely these reasons. Some would comment that this netherworld where crime, politics and business are indistinguishable is particular to Italy with its history of mafia and mafia-like politicians. Others, including Carlotto himself, would argue that while this illicit and destructive relationship may be better disguised in other countries it is no less present. *Are there American, or English crime writers whose books investigate this same relationship and to a similar degree?*

6. The End

"I burst into tears. Of happiness. I'd done it. The nightmare was over. I could finally be like everybody else. Just a face in the crowd." (from *The Goodbye Kiss*). This is a provocative ending considering the context, and the crime Pellegrini has just committed. His "I could finally like everyone else" rings like an indictment on the part of the author rather than the character's sigh of relief. *How does this book end? Hopefully? Darkly? Ambiguously?*

7. Massimo Carlotto is one of the major proponents of a literary movement known as Mediterranean Noir. Representatives and critics of this movement describe the Mediterranean noir novel as being directly related to the American "hardboiled" novel and the northern French "noir" novel, but having several delineable and distinct characteristics that make it typically "Mediterranean." *What, if any, characteristics make The Goodbye Kiss different to American hardboiled novels? Is there something that distinguishes it from its overseas cousins?*

from Towards a History of Mediterranean Noir by Sandro Ferri, in "Black & Blue: An Introduction to Mediterranean Noir."

...But real violence breaks in, hand in hand with the ancient but seemingly forgotten tradition of Mediterranean tragedy, in the novels of the Frenchman, Jean-Claude Izzo, the Algerian, Yasmina Khadra, the Catalan, Andreu Martin, the Greek, Petros Markaris, and the Italians, Massimo Carlotto, Carlo Lucarelli, Giancarlo de Cataldo, Osvaldo Capraro. and Maurizio Braucci, the German-born author based in Trieste, Veit Heinichen. These novels are born in port towns like Algiers, Marseilles, Barcelona and Naples, or in frontier towns on the northern borders of Italy. They share a common understanding: the Mediterranean has once more become a region rife with clashes, and political/ethnic conflicts; a place teeming with sackings of various sorts, of the fight for survival, of immense waves of migration, of war, of colossal concentrations of vested interests. Criminal appetites from all over the world—from the Slavic countries, from China and south-east Asia, from Nigeria and central Africa—converge on the Mediterranean and enter into conflict with local criminal realities—the Sicilian mafia, the camorra, the criminal milieu of Marseilles and the organized crime rampant in North Africa. Furthermore, this criminality is increasingly linked to "legal" or "respectable" activities, creating an opaque fabric that is virtually impenetrable.

This reality is continuously and contiguously undergoing transformation. It is influenced by new migration patterns and new criminal interests. It is, as Massimo Carlotto has noted, a reality that is determined by the lack of a genuine culture of investigation, and the lack of certain mechanisms that would otherwise ensure the integrity of crime scenes. This means that the solutions to criminal cases rest entirely in the hands of the investigator and his or her ability to manipulate shreds of information supplied by informers, collaborators, and contacts who inhabit a variety of marginal, and largely illegal, contexts.