

# **Death at La Fenice Study Guide**

## **Death at La Fenice by Donna Leon**

(c)2016 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Death at La Fenice Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-2.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 3-4.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 5-7.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 8-9.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 10-11.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 12-13.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 14-15.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 16-17.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 18-19.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 20-21.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 22-23.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 24-25.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">33</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">40</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">42</a>



# Plot Summary

Death at La Fenice chronicles Commissario Guido Brunetti's investigation of the death by cyanide poisoning of renowned German conductor Maestro Helmut Wellauer in the middle of a performance of La Traviata at the Venice opera house, La Fenice. Brunetti learns that Wellauer is a scoundrel. Worst, Brunetti learns that Wellauer was a pedophile, raping young girls of 12 or 13. Brunetti realizes Wellauer's wife poisoned him because he raped her daughter by a previous marriage, not killing him but causing him to go deaf. Wellauer takes the cyanide himself, after realizing his hearing loss is permanent and severe, and Brunetti helps the widow cover up her misdeeds for the sake of her daughter.

After the second act of La Traviata, famed conductor Helmut Wellauer does not return to the stage. He is backstage, poisoned. Commissario Guido Brunetti is called in and, examining the scene, he finds that cyanide has likely been put in Brunetti's coffee. Brunetti's beautiful widow, Elizabeth Wellauer, thirty years younger than her husband, is distraught and Brunetti sends her home. He speaks with the singers. The lead soprano, Flavia Petrelli, lies to him, telling him that she did not speak with the conductor during the performance. She was seen, however, going into the conductor's dressing room.

Brunetti finds out that Wellauer was moralistic and prejudiced against gays. He reneged on a deal with the gay director to place a friend of his in a performance, citing that he need not honor a deal with someone who is gay. He also threatened to tell Flavia's ex-husband about her lesbian affair with American millionaire archaeologist Brett Lynch, so that Flavia's abusive ex-husband could gain custody of their children. Brett admits that Flavia saw the conductor during intermission and that they fought about the threats.

Meanwhile, Brunetti learns that Wellauer may have been a Nazi and was definitely a womanizer. He hears about trouble with a now-elderly has-been opera singer, Clemenza Santina. He goes to see the singer, who is living in squalor, but she refuses to talk with him about the core of her hatred toward Wellauer. Brunetti finds out from a journalist the story that Wellauer impregnated Clemenza's sister, who died from an illegal abortion. Brunetti also uncovers that Wellauer was distracted before his death, seemed estranged from his wife, and learned from doctors that he was going deaf.

Wellauer made good on his threats to Flavia, as a letter comes from her husband's attorney, threatening action. Brunetti comforts Brett, telling her that they have no case without Wellauer's testimony. Then he visits Clemenza again and uncovers the true story. Clemenza's sister was only twelve, and she was raped and impregnated by Wellauer while he was having an affair with Clemenza. Putting the pieces together, Brunetti realizes that Elizabeth Wellauer, after finding that her husband sexually abused her daughter from a previous marriage, poisoned Wellauer with antibiotics to make him go deaf. Realizing that his music was gone, Wellauer killed himself. Brunetti reports the death simply as a suicide, not wanting to drag Elizabeth Wellauer's daughter through a hurtful court case.



# Chapters 1-2

## Chapters 1-2 Summary

Death at La Fenice chronicles Commissario Guido Brunetti's investigation of the death by cyanide poisoning of renowned German conductor Maestro Helmut Wellauer, in the middle of a performance of La Traviata at the Venice opera house, La Fenice. Brunetti learns that Wellauer is a scoundrel. Worst, Brunetti learns that Wellauer was a pedophile, raping young girls of 12 or 13. Brunetti realizes Wellauer's wife poisoned him because he raped her daughter by a previous marriage, not killing him but causing him to go deaf. Wellauer took the cyanide himself, after realizing his hearing loss was permanent and severe, and Brunetti helps the widow cover up her misdeeds for the sake of her daughter.

As the novel begins in Chapter 1, the intermission is over at the Venice opera house Teatro La Fenice, and the audience members take their seats. However, the conductor does not appear. The wait becomes longer, and the musicians and audience members begin to chatter. Finally, the theater's director, Amadeo Fasini, comes onstage and announces that a new conductor will take over. He also asks if there is a doctor in the audience. A woman, Doctor Barbara Zorzi, comes forward and is led backstage to Maestro Wellauer's dressing room. The man is on the floor, dead. The doctor smells a bitter almond scent in the spilled coffee on the floor. She tells the assistant stage manager to call the police.

In Chapter 2, the police arrive by boat through the Venice canals. Guido Brunetti, a commissario of police, is the officer in charge. The dead man, Maestro Wellauer, is a famous German conductor in his sixties. Brunetti examines the room, making note of the spilled coffee cup, and then tells one of his men to call the medical examiner and photographer. He asks another to interview the porter and find out who has been backstage and tells the third to find out who has spoken to the conductor that evening. Brunetti examines the dead man's pockets and then speaks to the doctor, as he hears the performance of the opera continuing from the stage. The doctor says the victim was dead for less than half an hour when she examined him and that the coffee cup was cold. She says the poison smells like cyanide, which would cause nearly instant death.

The medical examiner, Dr. Ettore Rizzardi, arrives, confirming unofficially that the death is due to cyanide. The autopsy will be the next day. Wellauer's young blonde wife arrives, and Brunetti breaks the news of her husband's death and gives her some brandy for the shock. He asks if someone is at the theater who can take her home, and she says her friends are there. She tells him that she came to speak with her husband after the second act but was too late to talk to him. Brunetti instructs the attendants to wait until the crowds have gone to remove the maestro's body, then he asks one of the officers to take Wellauer's wife and her friends home, and not to talk to reporters.



Another officer reports that over a hundred people have been backstage. Brunetti tells him to investigate other ways into the theater, Wellauer's arrival, any messages, and the coffee's origin. He also says to contact the German authorities for Wellauer's background. Brunetti interviews the opera singers. Francesco Dardi, a baritone, says he only spoke to the conductor briefly, as Dardi came into the theater, and that he saw the maestro speak briefly with the director, Franco Santore. The tenor, Signor Echeveste, says he arrived at 7:30, late because of a haircut, and entered through the orchestra, seeing no one. He was afraid the maestro would be angry that he was late again. Echeveste says he only saw the maestro on stage, conducting.

## Chapters 1-2 Analysis

Death at La Fenice is set in Venice, and the author showcases the historic Italian city throughout the novel. The murder is in Venice's prominent opera house, which emphasizes Venice's musical history. The identity of the murderer, an internationally renowned conductor, also sets the novel in a dramatic social sphere. The reader will visit the highest elite of Venice, as well as some of its lowest slums.

The scent of bitter almonds in the spilled coffee evokes the most traditional cues of the murder mystery genre. The poison is recognizable to the doctor, she admits later, from reading Agatha Christie, more than from her training as a physician. The writer uses this trope to clearly indicate to the reader that this is a murder mystery; the conductor's death is foul play. This is a trick of the author, already leading the reader to an unwarranted conclusion, so that the solution to the mystery will be a surprise.

Commissario Brunetti is the sleuth and the main character in this murder mystery. He is shown as competent and observant in his examination of the murder scene and his handling of his police officers. He also shows himself to be humane and sympathetic. He feels for the widow, who is obviously distraught, and he avoids making a public spectacle of removing the body from the scene of the crime.

The murder is a difficult one to solve based on hard evidence. The opposite of a "locked room" murder, where no one has access to the crime scene, this is an "open room" murder, where hundreds of people could have come in and put cyanide in the coffee. Brunetti will need to approach the crime from the aspect of motive and personal interactions, not from the aspect of fingerprints and physical evidence.



# Chapters 3-4

## Chapters 3-4 Summary

In Chapter 3, Brunetti learns that the director, Franco Santore, has gone to the Hotel Fenice, next door to the theater. Brunetti goes to interview the impatient but famous soprano, Flavia Petrelli, who is in her dressing room with her expensively dressed secretary and friend, Brett Lynch. Brett, an American, embarrasses Brunetti by speaking the local dialect as well as he does. Flavia tells Brunetti that she only saw the conductor to say hello to, aside from seeing him conduct. However, the two women exchange looks, suspiciously. Brett Lynch says she remained in the dressing room, reading a book in Chinese. Flavia tells the commissario that she is staying at Brett's apartment in Venice.

After the interview, Brunetti learns from one of his men that Flavia and the director were both observed by a stagehand talking to the conductor. The director went to Wellauer's dressing room before the performance, and Flavia went in after the first act, though the stagehand could not identify her absolutely. The theater has emptied, and Brunetti lets the ambulance attendants know they can take the body away. Brunetti heads to the next-door hotel to talk to the director, while one of his officers goes to have a drink with the porter and question him in a relaxed atmosphere.

In Chapter 4, Brunetti finds Santore, the director, in the lobby of the Hotel Fenice. Brunetti knows Santore is a successful and talented director who is gay. Santore is reading Aeschylus in Greek, preparing for a production of Agamemnon in Rome later in the month. Santore tells Brunetti that he argued with Wellauer before the opera. Santore agreed to direct the opera, on the condition that Wellauer would help a friend of Santore's get a job at a festival in the summer. Wellauer backed out of the agreement, feeling no moral qualms, as if dishonoring an agreement were acceptable if the other party were gay. Santore tells Brunetti the rumors that Wellauer was a Nazi in Germany during the war. Wellauer himself claimed that he only performed for the Nazis because he had to, and to save some of the members of his orchestra who were Jewish.

Santore says that he had worked with Wellauer before, and both put aside their disagreements: Wellauer's moral disapproval of homosexuality and Santore's belief that Wellauer had been a Nazi. Santore says that he is sorry the musician is gone, but he is not sorry the man is dead. Still, he says, he thinks something seemed missing from Wellauer's conducting during this last opera. Santore is leaving for Florence in three or four days, and Brunetti tells him to leave an address where he can be reached.

## Chapters 3-4 Analysis

The first clue of the murder comes when Brunetti speaks to the conductor's widow, who seems flustered and contradictory about whether she spoke to her husband. However,



this conversation passes almost without notice. Greater weight is given to Brunetti's conversation with Flavia and her mysterious assistant, Brett Lynch. Brunetti is thrown by Brett's high intelligence and ability to speak the local dialect of Italian, and Flavia indicates clear signs of lying, enhanced by the evidence of the porter who thinks he saw her enter the conductor's dressing room. The two women seem to be in some sort of conspiracy, and so Brunetti is confronted with at least one mystery he will need to solve.

Brunetti's interview with the director also begins to reveal unsavory information about the victim. Wellauer was overly self righteous, a possible Nazi, and prejudiced against gays. Another popular trope in murder mysteries is that the character of the victim is a key to the murder; the victim is killed because he or she behaves in a certain way. Any of these clues to Wellauer's character could be clues to a motive. Though Santore does not seem particularly suspicious, he is also thrown into the ring as a suspect, considering he argued with Wellauer shortly before his death. The more potential suspects and motives the writer can introduce, the more the reader has to speculate about. Red herrings lead the reader astray, allowing the author to surprise the reader with the true solution.



# Chapters 5-7

## Chapters 5-7 Summary

In Chapter 5, Brunetti walks home to his apartment, which was illegally built by the previous owner. His wife Paola greets him and makes him tea. He tells her about the murder, and she realizes it will be an unwelcome sensation in the press, with pressure from above to solve the case quickly. Paola makes a guess that the killer is the maestro's wife, who is thirty years younger than her dead husband. She makes a habit of always guessing the most obvious suspect, claiming that her dissertation on the un-obvious Henry James gives her the right to look for the obvious in real life.

In Chapter 6, Brunetti arrives at his office the next morning to find his haughty superior, Vice-Questore Guiseppe Patta in the office, asking for him. Brunetti has no respect for Patta, who seems a poor policeman with a lot of attitude who spends more time at lunches than on the job and who seems more concerned with public perception than actual police work. Brunetti reports what he has learned to Patta. Patta seems to suspect the maestro's wife, questioning Brunetti about her movements and giving Brunetti orders to find out more about her, as well as about anyone who was in or near the dressing room the previous night. Patta urges Brunetti to find the killer for the honor of the city, and he assigns two of his pet officers to Brunetti to assist in the case.

In Chapter 7, Brunetti reads the press reports of the murder, learning little new information except some background on Wellauer, a renowned musician married to his third wife. His second wife killed herself twenty years before. Brunetti receives the report from Germany. Wellauer has no record. His apartment was robbed twice, and Brunetti reads about Wellauer's second wife's suicide. She hanged herself, leaving no suicide note but three children, twin seven-year-old boys and a twelve-year-old girl. Wellauer's present wife's name was formerly Elizabeth Balintffy. She is a Hungarian doctor, German by her first marriage, with a thirteen-year-old daughter from her first marriage. The reports tell Brunetti nothing about Wellauer during the war years.

Brunetti finds that the lab has not yet processed the crime scene and his officer learned nothing from the porter. Brunetti grabs a sandwich and takes a boat out to the graveyard, visiting his father's grave before going to find the results of the autopsy. Brunetti, who fainted at his first autopsy, does not actually attend, but Rizzardi gives him the results. Wellauer was in excellent health and not a drinker. The cause of death is definitely cyanide in the coffee. Rizzardi confirms that death would be nearly instantaneous. The only other thing the doctor found were possible injection marks, probably antibiotics. The marks were in a place where he could not have injected himself.





## Chapters 5-7 Analysis

Chapter 5 introduces the reader to Brunetti's home life and helps build Brunetti's character. The fact that Brunetti's apartment was built illegally by the previous owner and is not officially in Venice's records introduces a thematic element that will continue throughout the novel. Brunetti does not conduct himself strictly in line with the law, although his position is that of law enforcement. He accepts a certain amount of illegality in the world, if it lies within his boundaries of what is right. He sees nothing really wrong with having an illegal apartment, except the potential consequence of having to pay outrageous fines.

Brunetti is clearly in love with his wife Paola and loves his home life. Her annoying habits, such as choosing a murderer at random from his brief descriptions, are in fact more endearing than irritating. Brunetti finds her presence calming and comforting. His home life is a contrast to his work life, where he is constantly confronted with pressures, such as the insistence of the press and of his superiors that he solve the case quickly.

Patta embodies these pressures well. The incompetent police officer is another trope of mystery fiction, although it is not as common in novels where the main detective is a police officer. However, Leon implements it here, by making Brunetti subordinate to a pompous and incompetent superior, Patta. Like Paola, Patta seems to narrow in at the most obvious suspect, for a quick and easy solution to the problem. While in Paola, who has no actual relation to the case, this is endearing, in Patta, who is supposed to be on the side of the law trying to find the real murderer, it is obnoxious.

Brunetti uncovers more potential leads. Wellauer's second wife killed herself, a mysterious death by violence because she did not leave a note. A death in the past is always suspicious in murder mysteries, opening up the potentialities of past undiscovered murder, or in this case, undiscovered secrets. Another clue is the subcutaneous bleeding discovered at the autopsy, which the medical examiner believes is an indication of injections. This will need to be explained in order for the murder to be solved, as will the second wife's suicide. If any of these circumstances is left unexplained, the solution will be unsatisfying. In the murder mystery genre, the author must not leave loose ends.



# Chapters 8-9

## Chapters 8-9 Summary

In Chapter 8, Brunetti goes to see Flavia at Brett Lynch's apartment. The upper part of the old building has been restored, and Flavia's expensively renovated apartment has skylights that could never have been approved through any normal route with the city planners. Brunetti tells Flavia and Brett that the cause of death was definitely cyanide in the coffee. Brett makes it clear that she and the maestro disliked each other, while Flavia says that she shared professional respect with the victim and so got along well with him.

When Brunetti asks about Flavia's personal feelings toward Wellauer, she seems to dislike it. She finally admits that she did not like Wellauer personally, but she cannot, or will not, give a reason for her dislike. However, she seems to suddenly get frustrated with the conversation, and Flavia admits that Wellauer accused her of being Brett's lover. They argued about it and Wellauer threatened to tell her ex-husband, who could use the information to try to get custody of their children, who are currently at school in Milan. Brett believes that Wellauer's threat was real and Brunetti knows that this gives Flavia a motive. Brunetti gets Flavia's address in Milan, where she will want to travel on the weekends and after the performance is over. As Brunetti is leaving, he asks Brett about the skylights, and she says that she bribed the city planner to get them, about half of a month's salary for Brunetti.

As Chapter 9 begins, Alvisè and Riverre, the two officers that Patta assigned to the case, have gone through the maestro's study and brought back some documents that are being translated into Italian. Meanwhile, there are no fingerprint results from the lab's work. Brunetti calls the widow for an interview. Signora Wellauer looks exhausted, and Brunetti sympathizes with her loss. He also tells her the results of the autopsy. Signora Wellauer says that her husband seemed as usual the night of his death and that he went backstage before the performance to read over the score, which he usually examined before the performance and between acts. It was unusual for her to go backstage between acts, but that night he had asked her to visit him after the second act. His request was also unusual. She was late, and they only spoke briefly before the second bell.

Signora Wellauer says that a maid, Hilda Breddes, lives full time at the house in Venice. Elizabeth Wellauer also explains that she is a German citizen from her first marriage and met Wellauer two and a half years ago in Berlin. They have been married two years. Signora Wellauer explains that her thirteen-year-old daughter is living with her grandparents in Munich, saying that she did not want her daughter to have to go to school in a foreign country.

Brunetti asks about Wellauer's will, and Signora Wellauer says that his children by his previous marriages, and Elizabeth Wellauer herself, are the five inheritors. She does not



know how much the estate is worth. Finally, Brunetti asks about the Wellauers' marriage. Signora Wellauer says she loved her husband, despite the differences between them due to their ages. Brunetti says that he will come to the funeral the next day and then asks who might have wanted to harm her husband. Signora Wellauer says she does not know of anyone.

## Chapters 8-9 Analysis

Wellauer's anti-gay bias acts as a platform for the author to explore the cultural taboo of homosexuality. Brunetti has a stereotypically male lascivious reaction to thoughts of Flavia and Brett's sexual relationship, and he seems awkwardly threatened by the intelligent, talented, and beautiful women. Brunetti must overcome his own latent prejudices toward the two women through the story. Wellauer's prejudices were far from latent, meanwhile, and the illicit nature of Flavia and Brett's relationship makes them suspects in the murder.

Signora Elizabeth Wellauer emerges as the other main suspect. However, she does not appear to Brunetti to be a guilty murderer. She seems more tired than afraid. Still, she seems to be hiding something. When Brunetti asks if she has been faithful, she says that she thinks she has, and then covers her answer by saying she is tired of trite questions. She was backstage during the performance, which was unusual. Whatever her motive could be, though, it does not appear to Brunetti to be money. Elizabeth Wellauer honestly does not seem to know the amount of her husband's estate.



# Chapters 10-11

## Chapters 10-11 Summary

Chapter 10 begins as Brunetti leaves the Wellauers' apartment. The city has grown dark. He ponders Wellauer's character. Brunetti thinks of Paola's titled and wealthy parents, Count and Countess Falier. Paola's parents make Brunetti uncomfortable, and he typically only visits their mansion on holidays. However, when he gets home, Brunetti asks his wife if they can go to a party her parents are giving. He wants to speak with people in the dead conductor's circle, to find out information. After first questioning her husband then cajoling him into wearing a suit to the party, Paola agrees to ask for an invitation.

In Chapter 11, Brunetti arrives at the office the next day. The lab reports are finally back. Only Wellauer's fingerprints are on the coffee cup. There are too many prints in the room overall to be of any use. Brunetti reads the officers' report of Wellauer's personal effects. Wellauer had a large, expensive wardrobe, while his wife's clothing was more limited. There was no evidence in the house of Elizabeth Wellauer's daughter. The documents retrieved from the study seemed unimportant.

Brunetti goes to talk to the two officers who made the report and finds them at a bar. He asks if they saw any signs of Signora Wellauer's daughter, and they confirm that they did not. Riverre tells Brunetti that they got the impression the maid does not like Signora Wellauer. He also says that Elizabeth Wellauer did not seem to like the idea of them looking at Wellauer's belongings, especially his papers. Brunetti asks where the papers are now, and tells Riverre to find out and have the papers sent to his office, if they are still at the precinct. Riverre discovers that the papers have been sent back to Signora Wellauer already.

Back at the police station, Patta is demanding to see Brunetti. Brunetti gives a brief report, and then Patta threatens to take him off the case, concerned about the lack of progress. Brunetti suggests he could take the case on himself, which seems to cool Patta's concern. Patta complains that the higher-ups want progress and tells Brunetti to get him a daily written report first thing each morning. Brunetti finally gets out of the meeting and is able to attend the funeral. The mass is simple and without music. Afterward, he helps the widow, who is clearly overcome with grief, avoid photographers, as the casket is moved to a boat and taken to the graveyard. Before leaving the boat, Brunetti makes an appointment to meet with the widow again the next day.

## Chapters 10-11 Analysis

Count and Countess Falier are part of a dying breed, as Brunetti sees it, a titled upper class that lives completely apart from everyday people. Brunetti's everyday wife comes from her parents but does not live in their world. Brunetti sees himself as socially



stratified, separated from his wife's parents, which is why they make him uncomfortable and why he does not want to visit them in their archaic, expensive mansion. Brunetti's children seem to love their grandparents and enjoy going there, but Brunetti does not understand it. Paola seems to resent her husband's attitude toward her parents and his idea that the Faliers' world is so totally separate from his world.

The reports from the lab emphasize that the crime is not one that will be solved by technology or analysis. The investigation that Brunetti carries out is not an objective investigation, focused on facts, times, trace evidence, DNA, or fingerprints. It is a subjective kind of investigation, focused on feelings, motivations, and psychology. The problem with the officers' report of Wellauer's effects is that it focuses on the concrete. Wellauer had specific clothes in his closet, specific possessions. It looks at details without looking for meaning. Brunetti gets nothing from the report itself. He needs to talk to the people, to find out impressions, to look at psychology and human action in order to find any clues.



# Chapters 12-13

## Chapters 12-13 Summary

In Chapter 12, Brunetti and his wife Paola arrive at her parents' mansion, Palazzo Falier. They are greeted by Paola's parents, the count and countess. Paola's father has made some phone calls in the business world and tells Brunetti that the total estate is around 10 million German marks, divided equally between his children and wife in his will. Wellauer tried to call his lawyers a couple of weeks prior to his death, but he left no message and never called back. When Brunetti asks what the count found out about Wellauer's personal life, the count is shocked at the question and ends the conversation. Brunetti returns to his wife, who leads him to a college friend of hers whom she believes will have all the gossip, Demetrio Padovani, an art critic for the major communist paper.

Paola knows Padovani familiarly as Dami. He tells Brunetti how head-over-heels Paola was for Brunetti when she first met him, in college, and how all her male college friends, including Dami, were broken hearted and jealous. Dami realizes that he has been invited to the party to provide information about Wellauer, and he suggests that Brunetti get them a bottle of Scotch so they can retire to a quiet room and talk. Dami also makes an exaggerated come-on to both Brunettis, revealing his bisexuality.

Dami tells Brunetti about the rumors Wellauer was a Nazi and about Wellauer's second wife's suicide. The conductor's first marriage ended in divorce, with a large settlement for the wife and wicked rumors about possible sexually perverted reasons for the divorce. Wellauer also blackmailed female singers for sexual favors in exchange for a chance at a career and ruined the careers of gay and lesbian singers. Finally, Dami tells Wellauer about a singer, Clemenza Santina. She was a talented opera singer discovered singing at dance halls with her two sisters. She had some sort of relationship with Wellauer, and someone died or some tragedy happened. Santina threatened to kill Wellauer at the time.

Before leaving the party, Brunetti sees Dr. Zorzi, and he is surprised to find that she is the count's physician. He confirms the doctor's suspicion that the death was from cyanide, and wonders about the communist doctor treating the wealthy, old-world count. The doctor chides him for seeing the world in black and white. She questions him about what occurs when the law is at a dissonance with his personal moral code. After Paola joins them and talks with the doctor, the Brunettis leave.

In Chapter 13, Brunetti wakes up late the next morning and gets the news from Paola. She makes a comment about a conductor of the Rome opera that gives him an idea. After a brief stop at the office, Brunetti meets with Salvatore Rezzonico, a music critic who was at Wellauer's last performance. Rezzonico says that the famous conductor lacked control that night, though the critic does not know why. Rezzonico had the impression that Wellauer realized his conducting was off, based on Wellauer's actions



and looks at one point. When Brunetti returns to the office, he finds that Dami has left Clemenza Santina's address for him.

## Chapters 12-13 Analysis

The Palazzo Falier is a piece of Venice history, a look into the past, as it hangs on into present time. The mansion is also a window into the elite society that Brunetti is investigating. Paola's father is powerful as well as rich, with access to financial information at his fingertips. He lives in a world that follows social structures and rules that are completely foreign to Brunetti. Falier's class has its own culture which depends on rules of social niceties. Brunetti comments that Falier, who borrows Brunetti's handkerchief, will have it washed, folded, and returned by servants.

This cultural distance is the root of the problems between Brunetti and his father-in-law. Neither understands the other's world. Dr. Zorzi's insight shows Brunetti that his point of view about his father-in-law certainly is not the only one, but Brunetti is caught by his own particular perspective. The conflict is illustrated when, though he has no qualms about delving into the maestro's detailed financial information, the count is horrified to be asked about Wellauer's personal life. It goes against his culture to discuss such things; it is taboo. Falier focuses on the niceties and the surface politenesses of the world, while Brunetti must delve into the depths of human psychology and interrelationships. Luckily Dami has no qualms about delving into sexual perversions or wicked gossip.

Brunetti's encounter with Zorzi brings up the thematic element of justice versus the law again. Brunetti wonders why a communist doctor is treating a rich capitalist, and Zorzi accuses him of drawing black and white lines in the world. She quizzes him about when his job, enforcing the law, conflicts with his personal view of justice. Brunetti's allegiance to the law in the face of what he believes will be tested by the end of the story.

Clemenza Santina seems unrelated to the murder that Brunetti is investigating, and certainly Patta would deem her so. However, Brunetti wants to learn about the unpublished, secret past of the victim, and so looks for the instances where the ripple of scandal reached the world. He wants to get to the heart of the scandals of the past, thinking they will parallel the present. His other main line of investigation surfaces prominently in Chapter 13. Something is wrong with the conductor's work, and Brunetti needs to confirm this and find out what the problem is.



# Chapters 14-15

## Chapters 14-15 Summary

In Chapter 14, Brunetti visits Clemenza Santina in a rundown, impoverished area of Venice, the island of Guidecca. Brunetti tries to appeal to Clemenza, telling her that he is an admirer of her singing, but she guesses that he is a policeman. Still, she agrees to talk to him and brings him into her cold, damp, moldy apartment where she sits huddled under layers of clothes and blankets by a kerosene heater. Clemenza says that she sang with Wellauer in Germany, for the Nazis. Her career ended when she refused to sing for Mussolini and ended up under house arrest. She says she is glad Wellauer is dead and wishes it were suicide, so he would go to hell. Brunetti finds a picture of Clemenza and her two sisters when they sang together as young women: the Three C's, Clara, Clemenza, and young Camilla. Brunetti suggests that the trouble with Wellauer involved Clemenza's sisters, but Clemenza refuses to talk about it and suggests that he leave.

In Chapter 15, Brunetti gets in touch with his friend Michele Narasconi, a travel and music writer, and asks him to find out information about the scandal involving Clemenza and Wellauer from his father, who was a writer during the time. Then, Brunetti goes to talk with the widow again. Brunetti asks Signora Wellauer about her husband's objections to homosexuality and she says that gays offended his ideas about order in the universe but that he managed to work with them.

Brunetti asks if there were any sexual peculiarities in Wellauer's marriage, and Elizabeth Wellauer denies it. Brunetti questions her about the singers, but she has no new information. She was not prejudiced against gays, as her husband was. Finally, Brunetti asks to examine the papers that were returned to the widow, and she directs him to the study. Examining Wellauer's datebook, Brunetti finds that his schedule had gotten lighter and lighter in recent months. He finds references to someone named Erich, as well. Brunetti asks the widow about the datebook, and she says her husband had been tired, feeling his age. Erich, she reluctantly reveals, is Erich Steinbrunner, one of Wellauer's oldest friends.

Brunetti meets with the Wellauers' maid. Reluctantly, she reveals that the maestro had seemed distracted during this last visit to Venice. She describes one time she walked into his study and he ignored her, pretending she was not standing behind him, until she turned to leave. He had begun to wear glasses, but not for reading. The maid also noticed a coldness between the husband and wife.

## Chapters 14-15 Analysis

The novel takes the reader immediately from the height of Venice society at the count's party to the depths of its poverty in Guidecca. Clemenza Santina herself has fallen





through these ranks. She was once a famed singer, renowned for her beautiful voice and performing before heads of state. Now, she lives in an unhealthy apartment in conditions of extreme poverty, without enough heat or decent food. Clemenza's living conditions are the underlying truth that the count's polite courtesies ignore. Brunetti dislikes going to this impoverished area of the city, but he goes doggedly in search of truth, into areas others choose to ignore. Just as Wellauer's sins are hidden beneath his surface fame and fortune, the city's dirty truths are hidden underneath a polished surface of romanticism, music, and history.

However, Brunetti cannot uncover this particular sin and truth just by visiting Clemenza. He knows that something happened in the past, but he leaves without knowing what. He uses another trope of mystery fiction, a network of contacts that the detective has, to gather information. After setting this side investigation underway, Brunetti interviews the widow. Her attitude seems suspicious, because she is reluctant to give Brunetti information about Erich Steinbrunner. She reacts guiltily to things Brunetti does not expect and innocently to questions that he would expect would bother the murderer. The maid confirms that Wellauer has not been normal lately and adds a piece of information that will become more important later, that Wellauer started wearing glasses, though he did not need them to read with.



# Chapters 16-17

## Chapters 16-17 Summary

In Chapter 16, Brunetti goes to see Signore Traverso, a violinist in the orchestra. They go up to one of the dressing rooms to talk. Traverso confirms that Wellauer's conducting had not been up to his past performances. Traverso had performed with Wellauer before and noticed a definite decline in Wellauer. It seemed to Traverso that Wellauer was not paying attention. Traverso also relates Wellauer smiling to himself when the second act was over, before he left.

Brunetti decides to wait in the dressing room until the performance is underway and then go to the conductor's dressing room, to see how many people come back there during the performance. While he is trying to find the woman in charge of the dressing rooms, he discovers Brett Lynch reading in one of the dressing rooms. He begins talking to her, and learns that she enjoys Handel and Mozart and not Verdi. Brett also confirms that she is Flavia's lover and admits that Flavia went to see Wellauer after the first act and had an argument with him about Wellauer threatening to tell her ex-husband about her lesbian relationship. Brett is a wealthy archaeologist working in China, and though she cares for Flavia, she knows she will need to return to her work, giving up the relationship. Flavia bursts in at the intermission and Brunetti leaves. He finds that backstage is chaos, with easy access for anyone to the conductor's dressing room, unnoticed.

Chapter 17 begins with Brunetti arriving home, late. Paola has the performance of La Traviatta on the television. Brunetti's daughter Chiara quizzes him about the characters' motivations in the opera, criticizing the man's jealousy, and then brings her father a glass of wine. She asks her father for a computer that he cannot afford. Paola comes in as the opera is ending and asks about Flavia. Brunetti refuses to voice an opinion as to whether Flavia killed the conductor, saying that she might have though she is presenting herself as hotheaded instead of calculating.

Brunetti's son Raffaele joins the family for dinner. He is fifteen and rebellious, doing poorly in school. After dinner, Paola miraculously cajoles Raffaele into assisting his sister with the dishes. Then, the family plays Monopoly, with Chiara as banker. Brunetti lets himself lose so that Raffaele, who is a poor sport, can win at the game, despite Paola's cheating.

## Chapters 16-17 Analysis

Brunetti's investigation into Wellauer's seeming distraction and poor performance continues to develop in his interview with Traverso. However, the more interesting event in this chapter is Brunetti's encounter with Brett Lynch. The encounter is accidental, outside of the scope of his investigation in many ways. Their relationship has been



distant and untrusting, but when Brett admits to being Flavia's lover, she seems to relax and become friendlier. The necessity for keeping her love a secret seems to cause a distance between her and other people. Since part of her life is forced underground, she is forced to live constantly on guard. Once Brunetti breaks through the barrier, and perhaps through some of his own prejudice, he begins to warm to Brett.

Chapter 17 again shows Brunetti at home with his family. His daughter is bright and insightful. His son is rebellious and self-serving. Brunetti cares about his children. He worries about not being able to afford the computer that he knows his daughter's grandfather can easily afford and intends to buy her for Christmas. He throws the game of Monopoly for his son, even though his son is ill-mannered and a poor loser. Brunetti has a soft spot for both of his children.



# Chapters 18-19

## Chapters 18-19 Summary

As Chapter 18 begins, Michele calls Brunetti back at one in the morning, waking him from a sound sleep. Brunetti learns that Wellauer had an affair with Clemenza and after she went under house arrest, impregnated one of her sisters, who died during an abortion. The other sister went to Argentina after the war, and Michele believes she died there. Clemenza's voice was not the same after the war, and her career ended. Michele's father met Wellauer once and did not like him. Brunetti says that he will call his friend if any of the information turns into a story.

In Chapter 19, Brunetti wakes the next morning and starts the coffee, catching it just as it boils over when he gets back from the bathroom. He goes out on the terrace and views the mountains in the distance, hears the church bells, and sees a naked man in a window opposite his. Then, he joins Paola in the kitchen. Unlike Brunetti, his wife is cheerful in the morning. Brunetti tells her about last night's phone call and that he needs to see Clemenza again.

At the office, Brunetti reads through his files on the case again. Wellauer's second wife had invited a friend to coffee just before hanging herself. The woman was delayed, and so Wellauer found his wife's body first, giving him the chance to destroy any note she may have left. Brunetti calls Dami Padovani and invites him to an expense-account lunch at an expensive restaurant, Galleggiante.

With the help of a translator, Brunetti phones Erich Steinbrunner in Germany. Steinbrunner is an ear, nose, and throat doctor in addition to being Wellauer's friend, and Wellauer came to him with concerns about his hearing. Steinbrunner found very slight hearing loss in his friend, less than ten percent. The doctor says it would not interfere with Wellauer's conducting and was likely a normal result of age. At Wellauer's insistence, Steinbrunner also gave his friend the name of a specialist near Venice, Valerio Treponti. Steinbrunner thought his friend may have been concerned about something else as well, perhaps to do with his wife Elizabeth. After the call, Brunetti phones Dr. Treponti and discovers that Wellauer may have visited him under the assumed name of Hilmar Doerr. He makes an appointment to see the doctor that afternoon at five.

## Chapters 18-19 Analysis

In Chapter 18, Brunetti's circle of contacts pays off, as he uncovers another piece of Clemenza's story. Though the tale does not seem to have much relationship to the murder, Brunetti intends to continue his investigation of it, returning to the unpleasant, impoverished area where Clemenza lives. If he did not believe firmly that he needed to



uncover essential information about Wellauer's hidden, private life, he would not go to these lengths.

Brunetti is in poor shape in the mornings and this flaw makes him human and empathetic. The scene where Brunetti wakes also shows the contrasts of the city where he lives. The mountains showcase Italy's beautiful countryside, while the church bells highlight Venice's Catholic past and beautiful architecture. The naked man in the window and the woman who, unseen, comes up behind him exemplify the hidden private lives of the people of the city, the main focus of Brunetti's investigations.

Brunetti's investigations continue to proceed forward. He hopes to gain more information about Clemenza from Dami, and his phone call to Erich Steinbrunner is an attempt to understand the distraction and odd behavior of the victim prior to his death. What Brunetti discovers relates to information he already has. The maid at Wellauer's house relates walking into a room and having the maestro ignore her. Deafness on his part could explain him "ignoring" her, simply because he did not hear her come in, in addition to the problems the musicians noticed with his conductor. The reader is intended to remember these clues and begin to put them together.



# Chapters 20-21

## Chapters 20-21 Summary

In Chapter 20, Brunetti meets with Dami at the restaurant. The restaurant owner, Signorina Antonia, dictates the meals she thinks are appropriate to the two diners, and Dami tentatively adds a salad to his order. Brunetti asks about Dami's work, and Dami explains that he has to write two reviews of artists he despises. One of them will be a good review because a director of the newspaper is friends with the artist's husband.

As Brunetti and Dami start the next course, the detective asks if he has got more information about Clemenza. Dami has not found out more about her, but he has gossip about Flavia. She became a sensation from her first understudy performance. As he is telling the story, Signorina Antonia comes to take away their risotto, upset that Dami has not finished his. She serves the fish, threatening obliquely not to bring the salad if Dami leaves his fish uneaten. Dami continues: Flavia's ex-husband is rich and abusive. Flavia divorced him and became reclusive, then when through a phase of dating many men before beginning the lesbian relationship with Brett. He believes the relationship is serious.

Brunetti and Dami begin talking about Brett's skylights. He has heard that no one would build them, so Brett went up and installed them herself. Then she called the city planning office, told them, and asked what the fine was. She had to call the mayor to convince the city planners that she built the skylights herself. She paid the enormous fine with a check to cash. Brunetti asks about Brett's personal life, but Dami has little information. Brett is wealthy and talented, an accomplished archaeologist. Brunetti realizes he has gained little relevant information by the end of the meal.

In Chapter 21, Brunetti catches a train to see Dr. Treponi. Brunetti shows him a picture of Wellauer and confirms that the conductor went to see the doctor. Wellauer presented himself as Hilmar Doerr, an Austrian, and complained of hearing loss. Treponi found the patient had sixty to seventy percent of hearing remaining. The hearing loss was sudden and irreversible. After two weeks, at a second appointment, it had worsened. Treponi gave him a hearing aid hidden in a pair of glasses, but the doctor is unsure if it would have helped. The hearing loss might have been caused by an infection or certain medications, such as heavily dosed antibiotics. Treponi is surprised to find his patient has died and says that cyanide could not have caused this type of hearing loss. He has his nurse make a copy of the file for Brunetti.

## Chapters 20-21 Analysis

Signorina Antonia adds a bit of humor to the scene at the restaurant, but she can also be compared to Wellauer. She is an expert in her unique field. Her area of expertise is food, and the service of food to people. She has more knowledge than her customers,



and she puts herself above them for that reason. She can be compared to Wellauer, also a dictatorial artist who believed his knowledge and talent put him above others. Signorina Antonia works in a much smaller venue and seems harmless, but she brings up the thematic question of what others are willing to put up with from talented people for the sake of their talents.

During the conversation, the thematic question of ethics also comes up again. Dami writes good reviews of friends of the owners of his newspapers, for the sake of having a job where he can write about the things that are important to him. He gives up something of lesser ethical value to him for a larger good. This is similar to the choice that Brunetti will make at the end of the novel. The story of Brett's skylights is another instance where the rightness of the law is questioned. Brett knowingly goes against the law for the sake of something she wants and does not believe is wrong. The men laugh about the story, but it is just one more instance of the subservience of legality to justice.

Dr. Tre Ponti's evidence further explains Wellauer's behaviors and his glasses. The reason for Wellauer's deafness, however, remains a mystery. Wellauer seemed to respond to Tre Ponti's idea that it could be caused by antibiotics, so that is one possibility that the reader needs to pay special attention to. As the story nears its conclusion, the mysteries are being resolved. They are coming closer to being tied together into a unified solution.



# Chapters 22-23

## Chapters 22-23 Summary

In Chapter 22, Brunetti comes home to find that his wife has gone to the movies with the kids. He is making himself a salami and cheese sandwich when the phone rings. Brett Lynch wants to talk to him, urgently. Flavia's ex-husband's lawyer has sent her a letter, warning that they plan to take action against her. They meet at a bar, and Brett tells him about the letter which accuses Flavia of living an "immoral and unnatural" life and demands custody of the children, threatening a court case. Brett and Flavia had a fight about it, and Flavia told Brett it was all her fault. Since their affair is illicit, Brett has no one to talk to. Only Brunetti, practically a stranger, knows about it.

Brunetti tells Brett that the letter is an empty threat. Wellauer cannot testify, and the letter is hearsay. There is no real evidence. Brett has started to recover her emotions, but she is angry at the things Flavia said to her in their argument. She plans to go home and to see what happens. Brunetti walks her home and says goodbye to her.

In Chapter 23, Brunetti walks through the city, wondering if his growing fondness for Brett has blinded him to the possibility that she or Flavia is a murderer. He goes over other possible motives: Clemenza's sister from Argentina in revenge, or Santore for the broken agreement. They seem unlikely. The widow's grief seems real, and she seems more like she is protecting Wellauer than herself. In heavy fog, he makes his way to Clemenza's home.

Brunetti asks Clemenza about her sister. Clemenza, clearly bitter, says her sister bled to death in a hotel room, where Wellauer left her after her abortion. When Clemenza found out, she hit a policeman to leave her house arrest and bury her sister, who was refused a Catholic funeral because of the abortion. When Brunetti asks when Wellauer's affair with her sister started, Clemenza spits at him. Clemenza tells him that her sister was twelve years old and Wellauer raped her. He continued raping her sister, all the while she was his lover. Clemenza is overcome with anger and tells Brunetti to leave.

## Chapters 22-23 Analysis

Brunetti's meeting with Brett at the bar brings her even closer to her in friendship and breaks down many of his barriers against her. He compares her need for secretiveness about her relationship to Dami's descriptions of how Paola was constantly talking about Brunetti when she first fell in love with him. He recognizes how difficult it is to keep this important aspect of her life a secret. When Brunetti sees her pain, he begins to realize how harmful prejudice against gays can be. Even more to the point, Flavia risks losing her children, something that could not happen if she were in a heterosexual relationship.

The fog that Brunetti walks through is a metaphor for the clouds that still shroud his investigation. He has found out information, but he has not yet gotten to the real heart of



the matter. The fog has not been lifted yet. He seems restless after his encounter with Brett, needing to push forward and find the answers that he seeks. Finally, he makes the dreaded visit to Clemenza, in the impoverished and downtrodden, most hidden areas of the city. There he finds the nugget of information that clarifies the case for him, the deeply buried secret that he seemed instinctively to know was there to find.



# Chapters 24-25

## Chapters 24-25 Summary

In Chapter 24, Brunetti goes back to the police headquarters, the Questura. He looks at the autopsy report again, seeing the doctor's notation of subcutaneous bleeding, possibly from injections. He also notes that Elizabeth Wellauer's ex-husband, who stopped to see on her way to Venice, was chairman of the Department of Pharmacology at the University of Heidelberg. Brunetti goes to see Elizabeth Wellauer.

Brunetti tells Signora Wellauer that the autopsy showed signs of injections he could not have given himself and asks if she gave him injections. She claims they were B-12 vitamins and that she does not remember the pharmacy that filled her prescription, somewhere in Berlin. Brunetti does not believe her and says he is sure the Berlin police can track down her prescription. Elizabeth Wellauer suddenly becomes exhausted and tells Brunetti the truth. She gave her husband a strong antibiotic, though he did not need it, to induce his deafness. She told him it was vitamin B-12. After seeing the two other doctors, Wellauer realized what she had done, and she confessed it to him. They avoided each other after that, up until the premiere.

Realizing that the loss of hearing was permanent, Wellauer punished Elizabeth by poisoning himself and inviting her backstage during the intermission to make it seem she killed him. Signora Wellauer feels responsible and that he had a right to frame her. When Elizabeth came to his dressing room, he quoted lines from Puccini, "to finish like this, like this," and later she realized that he was revealing his intentions. Brunetti asks why she injected him with antibiotics, though he has suspicions. She reveals that she came home unexpectedly one day and found Wellauer abusing her young teenage daughter. She does not even remember what she said or did when she found out. She moved Alex out, and though she remained living with her husband, they stopped sleeping together. The idea of destroying his hearing came to her suddenly one day, and sometimes she cannot even believe she did it.

Elizabeth Wellauer does not know where her husband got the cyanide from, but he would know that she would have access to it through her visit to her ex-husband. She never believed he was a Nazi before, but now she does. She had decided to leave him, but they had not talked about it or about his abuse of her daughter.

Though Brunetti believes Wellauer killed himself, he sees that there is a case against Elizabeth Wellauer. Brunetti knows that, with the evidence of abuse, Elizabeth Wellauer would never stand trial for the poisoning, let alone be convicted, but he also knows Signora Wellauer would never allow her daughter to give testimony. He asks if Wellauer ever talked about his health declining with his age, and Elizabeth tells him about a conversation with Erich Steibrunner. Wellauer said that if ever he could not work, he would kill himself. She also has letters from him, when they first met, telling her he would never be a burden to her, a feeble old man.



Brunetti asks if Elizabeth believes Wellauer tried to frame her for murder by inviting her backstage, and she is not sure. Brunetti decides to protect her and tells her that, if anyone asks, they talked about her husband's fears of going deaf and that she was afraid he had killed himself because of it. Brunetti tells her that he is helping her because she did not murder Wellauer and because he wants to protect her daughter. His report will say that Wellauer committed suicide when he discovered he was going deaf.

In Chapter 25, Brunetti turns in a report chronicling the evidence for Wellauer's suicide due to his deafness, including medical evidence from the doctors, interviews with the music critic, violinist, maid, and widow, evidence of access to cyanide, and evidence of his preference for suicide over being deprived of his music. Patta states baldly that he suspected it from the beginning and is armed with vague psychological reasons why various suspects could not be guilty, including that a lover of music could never do such a crime and that a mother cannot be a cold-blooded killer. Patta will pass on the report to the mayor and the chief magistrate, certainly casting himself in the role of lead investigator. Eleven months later, Brunetti receives a letter from China containing a photo of a jeweled crown, with a note from Brett Lynch on the back. She has returned to her life of archaeology.

## Chapters 24-25 Analysis

Brunetti has put together the evidence in his mind. In the second to last chapter, he puts together the clues for the reader. The injections found by the coroner are explained. Wellauer's strange behavior is explained, as is the lack of evidence of Signora Wellauer's daughter and even Elizabeth Wellauer's strange behavior. Each bit of information falls neatly into place.

The ending of the novel, however, leaves Brunetti face to face with the moral quandary that has been hinted at throughout the novel. Which does he value more, justice or law? Brunetti is an agent of the law, but he is also a father of a young teenage daughter. He empathizes with Elizabeth Wellauer, but more than that, he empathizes with the daughter he has never met, a young girl who loves horses. Brunetti makes his choice and becomes a vigilante, like Elizabeth Wellauer. He chooses his own ethical and moral code above the code of the law that he has sworn to uphold. It seems easy to put together the case for what, indeed, has happened: a suicide.

The conclusion of the mystery is a slightly unusual one for this genre. The author used the trope of cyanide in the coffee cup to clearly establish that the conductor was murdered. However, the truth is not murder. The truth is suicide. Wellauer committed the crime of rape; his wife committed a crime of poisoning by giving her husband injections under false pretense. However, the central crime was not murder but suicide. Wellauer himself is the killer, as well as the victim.



# Characters

## Commissario Guido Brunetti

Guido Brunetti is a commissario of police in Venice, Italy, assigned to investigate the murder of famed conductor Helmut Wellauer. Brunetti is a seasoned investigator, and he feels that the main way to understand the crime is to understand the victim. Brunetti realizes immediately that a lot of the information that he gets about Wellauer is superficial, about the man as a musician instead of about the inner man. Wellauer seeks to reveal Wellauer's inner character in order to understand the crime that has occurred.

Brunetti is a family man, deeply in love with his wife Paola. His work life has a lot of stresses. He endures an incompetent and demanding boss, pressure from the press, and the distress of crime. At home, he finds Paola comforting and calming. Brunetti stays up late working at his job and wakes up cranky in the morning, but Paola never minds his crankiness. Brunetti is also the loving father of teenage children, a fifteen-year-old anarchist son, and a younger mathematically-inclined daughter, and his feelings about his children affect his perception of the case.

Brunetti shows himself to be open-minded and after some initial discomfort with Brett Lynch's lesbianism grows fond of her as a friend. He also, despite being a representative of the law, has a broader personal view of justice that usually coincides with official justice, but not always. The solution of this case is the exception to the rule. Brunetti does not want to hurt a young girl, about his daughter's age, in order to prosecute Wellauer's wife for her crime, and he does not want to have Wellauer's wife falsely accused of a crime she did not commit. Under the circumstances, Brunetti is willing to circumvent the law.

## Maestro Helmut Wellauer

Although Helmut Wellauer dies before the start of the book, he is a central character in the novel. Brunetti's goal is to find out about Wellauer's death, and in doing this, he must find out about Wellauer's life. The key to the mystery is Helmut Wellauer's personality. Though Wellauer is the victim, he is in many ways more of a villain. Wellauer is unsympathetic in nearly every way, and it is nearly impossible to see what Elizabeth Wellauer may have seen in him to love.

Wellauer is rumored to have been a Nazi during World War II, and even his wife appears to believe the rumors after her experience with him. Wellauer is prejudiced against gays and does not hesitate to ruin another person's career for what he believes to be a moral reason. At the same time, Wellauer is a misogynist. He mistreats all of the women in his life, using singers for sexual favors and sleeping around on his wives. Worst of all, Wellauer is a pedophile, and this is the secret that unveils the mystery of



his death. Wellauer has a predilection for girls of twelve or thirteen. His first wife left in secrecy with a hefty divorce settlement about the time their daughter was that age. His second wife hanged herself and Wellauer was in a position to remove the note, at about the same time. His third wife discovered Wellauer abusing her daughter and took revenge against him.

Wellauer's only redeeming quality is his musical ability, and this ability seems to transcend, in the minds of others, any wrongdoing he may be responsible for. The story of him impregnating and leaving to die a twelve-year-old girl after bringing her to an abortionist is not unknown, but it is buried. Wellauer's talent makes him feel like a god, above the law. When his wife takes away his musical ability as punishment for his wrongs, Wellauer would rather die than live life without his talent.

## **Signora Elizabeth Wellauer**

Signora Elizabeth Wellauer, formerly Elizabeth Balintffy, is the conductor's young, beautiful, Hungarian wife, who is trained as a doctor. She has a teenage daughter, and she finds out that her husband has been abusing her. Signora Wellauer sends her daughter away and she begins secretly poisoning her husband with an antibiotic. The effect will be to cause deafness, which will take away her famous husband's ability to conduct. When Maestro Wellauer realizes what his wife has done to him, he kills himself, hoping to frame his wife for murder. Brunetti helps to cover up what Signora Wellauer has done, merely presenting the conductor's death as a suicide due to his increasing deafness and inability to conduct.

## **Amadeo Fasini**

Fasini is the theater's artistic director, who makes the announcement to the audience that a new conductor will take over the opera and asks for a doctor.

## **Dr. Barbara Zorzi**

Dr. Zorzi is a member of the audience the night that Maestro Wellauer dies and she is the first doctor to examine the body. She realizes that he has been poisoned.

## **Dr. Ettore Rizzardi**

Rizzardi is the medical examiner who performs the autopsy on the murder victim.

## **Francesco Dardi**

Dardi is a baritone singing in the opera at which Maestro Wellauer is murdered.



## **Franco Santore**

Santore is the theater director, who had agreed to direct the opera, if Wellauer would get a friend of his a place in a performance at a minor venue. Wellauer broke his side of the deal, using Santore's homosexuality as an excuse for breaking the agreement.

## **Signor Echeveste**

Echeveste is the tenor performing in the opera during which the conductor, Maestro Wellauer, is killed.

## **Flavia Petrelli**

Flavia Petrelli is the soprano singing in the opera that Wellauer is directing when he is killed. Flavia is living with her lesbian lover. Wellauer threatens to make trouble for her by telling her ex-husband about Flavia's affair, so that Flavia's husband can bring an action for custody of their children.

## **Brett Lynch**

Brett Lynch is Flavia Petrelli's lover, and she comes from an extremely wealthy family, wealthy enough to put skylights illegally into her Venice apartment despite the prohibitively expensive fine. An archaeologist of renown, Lynch has taken time away from the dig she is excavating in China because of her affair with Flavia. Although Brett feels a deep romantic tie to Flavia, she knows that she will have to leave to go back to her work.

## **Paola Brunetti**

Commissario Brunetti's wife Paola, a professor of English, gives her husband support and love. She has a habit of always guessing the murderer at the beginning of Brunetti's cases, and invariably she guesses the most obvious suspect.

## **Vice-Questore Guiseppe Patta**

Patta is Brunetti's superior officer, a haughty and image-conscious man who is inept at the actual practice of police work and only concerned with the image of the police in the press and among his superiors.



## **Alvise and Riverre**

Alvise and Riverre are two officers assigned to the case by Brunetti's superior because they are loyal to Patta.

## **Miotti**

Miotti is one of the officers who arrives on the scene of the crime and he assists on the case throughout the novel.

## **Hilda Breddes**

Hilda is the Wellauers' maid in Venice.

## **Count and Countess Falier**

Paola Brunetti's parents are titled and wealthy, owners of a huge mansion. Brunetti dislikes visiting them, but he goes to one of their parties to gather information about the dead maestro.

## **Demetriano Padovani**

Known to Paola Brunetti as Dami, Demetriano Padovani is an old college friend of Brunetti's wife. He is an art critic, and he provides Brunetti with rumors about Wellauer's character. He also tells Brunetti that Wellauer's conducting has declined recently, and that his performances have not been what they used to be.

## **Clemenza Santina**

Clemenza Santina was a singer in dance halls with her two sisters years ago. A talented operatic singer, she was discovered and brought to the stage. Wellauer had an affair with her, and unknown to Clemenza, raped her pre-teenaged sister and impregnated her. He left the girl to die after an abortion childbirth. Clemenza is Brunetti's clue to Wellauer's real sexual proclivities.

## **Salvatore Rezzonico**

Rezzonico is the chief music critic for the Gazzettino and a professor, who tells Brunetti that Wellauer's last performance was off and that the conductor was not in control of the performance.



## **Michele Narasconi**

Michele is a travel and music writer who lives in Rome and is friends with Brunetti. His father was a reporter before him, and Brunetti finds out more about Clemenza Santina's story from Michele's father by way of Michele.

## **Dr. Erich Steinbrunner**

Erich Steinbrunner is one of Wellauer's oldest friends. He is also a doctor, who detected slight hearing loss in Wellauer when the composer came to him for an examination.

## **Signore Traverso**

Traverso is a violinist in the orchestra, who confirms that Wellauer's conducting was off during rehearsals for the opera.

## **Chiara Brunetti**

Chiara is Brunetti's young teenage daughter who is talented in math.

## **Raffaele Brunetti**

Raffaele is Brunetti's fifteen-year-old son, who is rebellious and wants to drop out of school, where he is struggling.

## **Dr. Valerio Treponti**

Treponti is an ear, nose, and throat doctor in Padova, whom Wellauer comes to see under an assumed name. Treponti reveals that he found greatly increased hearing loss in the conductor that may have been caused by antibiotic injections.

## **Signorina Antonia**

Signorina Antonia is the dictatorial owner of the expensive and renowned Galleggiante restaurant.





## Objects/Places

### La Fenice

La Fenice is the famous opera house in Venice where Maestro Wellauer is conducting and where he is killed.

### Verdi's La Traviatta

La Traviatta is the opera that Wellauer is conducting at La Fenice when he is poisoned.

### Wellauer's Coffee Cup

Maestro Wellauer is poisoned with cyanide in his coffee, and the cup is found spilled on the floor next to his dead body.

### Brunetti's Notebook

Brunetti carries a notebook with him, and he opens it when questioning suspects or reporting to his superior. However, he rarely writes anything down, and his notebook is mostly blank.

### Palazzo Falier

Palazzo Falier is Brunetti's wife's parents' home, an old, expensive-to-keep-up mansion on the Grand Canal in Venice.

### Guidecca

Guidecca is an island in Venice, which is rundown and impoverished. Clemenza Santina lives there.

### Wellauer's Datebook

Wellauer's datebook shows evidence that he has been attending fewer and fewer engagements in recent months and meeting with a man named Erich.



## **Wellauer's Glasses**

Wellauer has begun wearing glasses in the past few months of his life. Brunetti finds out that the glasses hide a hearing aid that is supposed to help with the hearing loss Wellauer is experiencing.

## **Galleggiante**

Galleggiante is an expensive restaurant in Venice, where Brunetti can only afford to eat on his expense account. Brunetti invites Dami Padovani there for lunch.

## **Giro's**

Giro's is a nondescript bar where Brunetti meets with Brett Lynch.

## **The Questura**

The Questura is the police headquarters where Brunetti's office is.



# Themes

## Justice and the Law

Brunetti must face a choice between doing what he believes is just and following the law that he has sworn to serve. Throughout the novel, Brunetti runs into situations involving questionable ethics and evading the law. The law is portrayed as a guideline of official policy in the novel, not without flaws, and not to be followed in the face of a conflict with one's personal ethics or morals. Brunetti decides independently, outside the law, to let Elizabeth Wellauer go unprosecuted. He manipulates the law, instead of enforcing it, so that he can follow his personal ethical and moral beliefs.

During the story, Brunetti talks to Dami about being an art critic, and Dami tells him that he has come to terms with writing good reviews of bad art when the higher-ups demand it. The compromise allows him to write about things that are truly important to him. He makes a small compromise of justice and ethics in order to achieve something that he sees as a greater good. Similarly, Dr. Zorzi is able to set aside her communist views to have a client who is a wealthy capitalist. Her personal system of ethics and morals does not need to follow strictly any official communist policy or stance. She can treat a person as a human being, not merely as a representative of a strata of society.

Brunetti also recognizes injustice in society's laws. When Flavia's children could be taken away from her through a legal action, he suggests to Brett that they could lie about their relationship. There is no proof. He sees the action of taking Flavia's children away because she is in a lesbian relationship as unjust. Though the law might allow it, he has no qualms about circumventing the law for justice. Brunetti merely extends this idea to covering Elizabeth Wellauer's crimes.

## Being Above the Law

Elizabeth Wellauer's motivation for deafening her husband is revenge. Wellauer, despite his self-righteous hatred of gays, is a pedophile and misogynist who raped Elizabeth Wellauer's daughter. This is a pattern of behavior for him that has gone back fifty years and more. Wellauer, however, has enjoyed a privileged position, in many ways because of his genius as a musician. He sees himself as above the law because of his artistic talent, and he has no qualms about asserting himself over other people. Wellauer's death is divided into two realities. The world has lost a great musician, and a horrible blight of a man has been eliminated.

In the book, society looks the other way for Wellauer, no matter what he does, because of his musical talent. He may have been a Nazi, but he is forgiven because of his talent. He is prejudiced against gays, but gays work with him because of his talent. He is a pedophile and left a twelve-year-old girl to bleed to death after an abortion. The story was known at the time, but nothing was done against Wellauer. Wellauer was, in



practice, above the law, in part due to the law's favoritism toward men, in part due to his genius, and in part due to the taboo nature of his crimes.

It took an action outside of the law to bring Wellauer to justice, of a sort. Taking away Wellauer's talent strikes appropriately at the heart of what makes him think he is above the law. He is robbed of his genius, and therefore robbed of his rationalization for abusing others. Though he was seemingly above the law, he was not beyond private revenge.

## Sexuality

Death at La Fenice deals with subjects that are taboo in the society. Brunetti investigates the aspects of human life that are impolite and unacceptable in his father-in-law's world. The primary avenue of these taboo topics is sexuality. Sex is the root of most of the conflicts in the novel. Wellauer is a sexual criminal. He is a sexual blackmailer, a rapist, a philanderer, and a pedophile. His second wife kills herself instead of facing the horror of his crimes, and his crimes are horrible to her because they are taboo. The fact that his crimes are taboo also forms a shroud of mystery around them, so that he cannot be caught and punished. No one wants to talk about these sexual crimes, to have witnesses testify to them, or to bring them into the public eye to prosecute the criminal.

The other aspect of taboo sexuality that enters prominently into the story is homosexuality. Though Brunetti is open-minded about homosexuality, it also does not seem to be a topic he has thought much about or is terribly comfortable with. He has an initial negative reaction to Brett Lynch, related to both her sexuality and confident strength as a woman. However, as he gets to know Brett, Brunetti realizes how much the taboo nature of her sexuality isolates her and causes her pain. Whereas Brunetti's wife Paola, as a college girl, fawned to all her friends about her new love, Brett must keep her love a secret, with only a stranger to come to when she has problems. Secrecy and taboo in her sexual life, enforced by society, is both self-perpetuating and harmful.

# Style

## Point of View

Death at La Fenice is written in the third person with a semi-omniscient narrator, from the point of view of Commissario Brunetti. The reader follows Brunetti throughout his investigation and follows along with Brunetti's thoughts, ruminations, and reactions to what goes on around him. The semi-omniscient narration allows the reader to accompany Brunetti on his investigation, and experience the clues as they are revealed to the detective. This allows the reader to play Watson to Brunetti's Holmes, trying to keep up with (or jump ahead of) him in the investigation as it proceeds.

Though Brunetti's thoughts and feelings are often revealed as he ruminates over the characters he meets and the conversations he has, few of his thoughts about the crime itself are revealed. He tells his wife near the beginning of the novel that he does not work by intuition and does not guess at who is guilty. He carries this through the entire investigation, and even at the end, Brunetti's ideas are not fully revealed until his final interview with Elizabeth Wellauer. This allows the reader to do his or her own speculating about the solution to the mystery.

The point of view of the first chapter is different, however, because Brunetti is not yet on the scene. The first chapter sets up the crime for the reader, and chronicles the discovery of the body. Throughout the rest of the novel, only Brunetti is followed, through both the investigation and his home life. The death of Wellauer is the instigating action, but Brunetti is the central figure of the novel.

## Setting

Death at La Fenice is set in Venice, Italy, and the novel showcases the exotic location, from an insider's point of view. The murder is set at a culturally important location in the city, the opera house, evoking Venice's musical history as the home of Mozart and other famous composers. This also sets the murder in the upper echelon of Venice society. The stratification of society in Venice is one of the aspects of the setting, and the reader is able to experience the breadth of that stratification, from the high-ranking, titled parents of Paola to the impoverished home of Clemenza Santina. The world of Brunetti is somewhere in between, providing the middle ground from which to view Venice.

Brunetti walks the streets of Venice, giving the reader a tour of the city. Readers experience the small, winding streets, impossible to navigate because of the non-existent system of numbering. Venice shows off its canals and islands, each a world unto its own, including the island cemetery, where the autopsy is performed and the dead are buried. Brunetti comments on how the tourist trade has invaded the city as well, as tourist shops overtake the shops that serve the everyday needs of the residents.



The Italian culture is a prominent element of the story. Attitudes toward government and law are important and are showcased by Brett's skylights and Brunetti's illegally built apartment. Food is a central element in the characters' lives and in the city, and it is always accompanied by wine and coffee. Through Brunetti's daily life, the reader experiences Venice, in its culture, architecture, history, and society.

## Language and Meaning

In *Death at La Fenice*, language is informed by the relationships between people. Though the novel is in English, the characters are usually speaking Italian, and in Italian, there are two forms of address: formal and informal. The narrator comments on when the characters use formal or informal modes of address with each other. When Brett breaks the ice with the detective, admitting to her relationship with Flavia, she moves from the formal to the informal mode of speech. She is becoming friendlier and closer to Brunetti.

Brunetti's boss, on the other hand, insists on his subservient detectives using the formal mode of address with him. He expects respect through language, although he does not command respect in reality. This same use of the linguistic attributes of respect where no real respect exists is exemplified in Patta's use of a title. The idea of titled gentry is an Old World one, and Patta's use of it is both archaic and inane.

However, the titled gentry do still have a strata of society. The Count and Countess are titled, and their titles carry much more weight than Patta's seems to. While Patta's use of a title is pretentious, the Count and Countess are the real thing. Brunetti does not belong in their world, and this is shown through his inability to find a correct way to address his father-in-law. Brunetti cannot be either formal or informal with the man, who is both a close relative and an elevated member of a class that is beyond him.

## Structure

The novel begins with the death of Erich Wellauer that Brunetti will investigate throughout the book. Flowing chronologically, the novel follows Brunetti's investigation until he turns in his report of his official opinion about the crime. Much of the novel is a series of Brunetti's encounters and interviews with people involved with the victim or who might know about Wellauer's background, as he tries to find out the information that will give him the key to the crime.

While the first chapter occurs at La Fenice, covering the discovery of Wellauer's death, the following chapters all follow Brunetti. The reader does not only see Brunetti's investigation, but also his home life and his interactions with his family, as the author develops Brunetti as a character. Brunetti's investigation focuses in on two main aspects of Wellauer's life: his odd behavior and waning talent before his death and the rumors about Clemenza Santina. As Brunetti interviews witnesses, he gains more and more information about both of these elements of Wellauer's life, until the picture becomes clear.



Interspersed with the investigation and Brunetti's home life are scenes of Brunetti discussing ethics or morality with other characters. He talks with Dr. Zorzi about the ethics of taking on a wealthy patient when she is a communist, and he talks with Dami about writing false art reviews because of the artist's connections at his newspaper. These discussions of ethics and justice lead up to Brunetti's ethical decision at the end of the novel, to protect Elizabeth Wellauer from prosecution.

## Quotes

"The scent that mingled with the coffee was equally distinctive, the cutting, sour almond smell she had only read about." Chapter 1, p. 4.

"Still only a short distance into the room, Brunetti remained still and let his eyes roam, taking note of what he saw, uncertain about what any of it might come to mean, curious." Chapter 2, p. 7.

"But these were the hours when, for Brunetti, the city became most beautiful, just as they were the same hours when he, Venetian to the bone, could sense some of her past glory." Chapter 4, p. 33.

"But Wellauer's death, Brunetti knew, was different. He was a famous man, no doubt the most famous conductor of the age, and he had been killed in Venice's little jewel of an opera house. Because it was Brunetti's case, the vice-questore would find him directly responsible for any bad publicity that might attach to the police." Chapter 6, p. 49.

"Before he began to read it, Brunetti reminded himself that Wellauer was a sort of living monument and the Germans were always on the lookout for heroes, so what he read was very likely to reflect both of those things. This meant that some truths would be there only by suggestion, others by omission. Hadn't many musicians and artists belonged to the Nazi Party? But who remembered that now, after all these years?" Chapter 7, p. 57.

"'Yes, he will be missed by the world of music,' she said. Before he could reflect on the strangeness of this, she added, 'And here as well.'" Chapter 9, p. 79.

"'Oh, I see,' she said, her anger not diminished, after all. 'And does that give us all the right to divide up the world into two groups, the one we're in and all the others? And I get to treat those people who share my politics and let the rest die? You make it sound like a cowboy film—the good guys and the lawbreakers, and never the least bit of difficulty in telling the difference between the two.'" Chapter 12, p. 129.

"He saw the signs of desperate poverty: the cement sink with only one faucet, the lack of refrigerator or stove, the moldy patches on the walls. He smelled, more than he saw, the poverty, smelled it in the fetid air, the stink of sewer common on the ground floors of Venice, of the salami and cheese left open and unrefrigerated on the counter, and smelled it from the raw, unwashed odor that seeped across to him from the blankets and shawls heaped on the old woman's chair." Chapter 14, p. 147.

"She surprised him by giggling, and he surprised himself by laughing with her. 'Well, that's done. I've confessed. Now perhaps we can talk like human beings and not like characters in a cheap novel.'" Chapter 16, p. 180.





"Padovani asked if he might possibly, if the signora advised it, have a green salad as well. She gave this request the attention it deserved, assented, and said they wanted a bottle of the house white wine, which she went to get." Chapter 20, p. 215.

"He saw Brunetti's look and smiled. 'Come now, Guido, don't tell me you've never ignored a piece of evidence or written a report in a way to suggest something other than what the evidence suggested.'" Chapter 20, p. 216.

"He remembered, in that instant, Padovani's telling the tale of Paola's first blush of love for him, of the way she carried on, telling all her friend, talking of nothing else. The world had permitted her not only joy but public joy. And this woman had been in love, there was no question of that, for three years and had told no one. Except him. The policeman." Chapter 22, pp. 237-238.

"She looked across at him when she said this. 'He knew how much I loved him. So he couldn't believe that I'd do this to him.' She smiled bitterly. 'There were times, after I started, when I couldn't believe it, either, when I remembered how much I loved him.'" Chapter 24, p. 253.



## Topics for Discussion

Is Brunetti's decision at the end of the novel to cover up Elizabeth Wellauer's crime justified? Why or why not?

Compare Brunetti's affectations with his notebook to the affectations he derides in Patta.

Was Wellauer's life worthwhile? Does the contribution to the world of his music in any way justify his crimes? Why or why not?

How does Brunetti's personal family life inform his professional investigation in the novel?

How does Brunetti's attitude to Brett Lynch change throughout the novel, and why does his attitude evolve in this way?

Why does Brunetti dislike spending time with his in-laws? Does Brunetti have an objective opinion of them?

How does the setting of Venice affect the novel?

Is the resolution of the mystery satisfying, since there is no killer to prosecute?