

After •

midnight

His first book lifted the lid on the steamy secrets of Savannah, Georgia, and made him a very rich man. Now John Berendt has turned his gaze on another city of dark corners and murky depths ... Venice. He reveals his detective-like methods to **Caroline Baum**.

"STREETS FULL OF WATER. PLEASE ADVISE" – so read the famous joke telegram from Venice by humorist Robert Benchley. But for writer John Berendt it was just the opposite: when he arrived, the canals were empty, drained for cleaning. It was a fitting sign of the task he'd set himself: to get beneath the slimy green surface of the water and unlock the hidden mysteries of the city. Just as, nearly a decade ago, he had done in another swamp town, Savannah.

Berendt may not be a household name like Dan Brown or J.K. Rowling, but his first book, 1994's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, has, like their novels, been a runaway success. A record-breaking non-fiction

bestseller, *Midnight* reads like a novel but all the events and characters in it are real. In the book, Berendt, the ingenious narrator, comes across a cavalcade of increasingly ludicrous and grotesque personalities while trying to get to the bottom of a sensational murder case.

Despite the mandatory encounter with southern-fried voodoo, nothing about this tale is remotely predictable. *Midnight* stayed on the bestseller

list of *The New York Times* for four years and two months. Given that authors receive a bonus percentage for every week their book is on the list, you don't need to be a maths genius to work out that it made Berendt rich enough never to have to write again. Not only that, but the film of the book, directed by Clint Eastwood and starring Kevin Spacey, was released while it was still selling in the US in hardcover, boosting sales before the cheaper paperback edition came out.

So it's not surprising that Berendt, now 69, lives very well indeed. Clearly a man of refined tastes, he has spared no expense in renovating a wide-fronted brownstone on Manhattan's Upper West Side, minutes' walk from Central Park. It is a sanctuary stylish enough to belong in the pages of *Architectural Digest*, with its clean-lined minimalist interiors and discreet collection of contemporary American art – a palatial space, and not just by New York standards, for a man who lives alone.

The look is one of opulent restraint, the palette neutral. Squirrels scamper around the stone fountain in the backyard. There is another more secluded garden on the roof above the guest quarters. In the sitting room, an Andrew Wyeth landscape holds pride of place, and a witty work called *Nest Eggs*, made of shredded dollar bills, hangs in the upstairs drawing room. While giving me an extensive guided tour, which includes the large gym where he watches

one of his two flat-screen TVs while working out, Berendt admits to regretting the sale of a small Edward Hopper, in the time before *Midnight* secured his future. The walls of the third floor, where he writes in a neat, airy study lined with colour-coded files, are a shrine to Savannah – a collection of antique prints, maps and photographs – in tribute to the place that made all this possible. A place where, thanks to his book, tourism has increased by 46 per cent, and which was so grateful it gave him the keys to the city not once, but twice.

He's not sure the subject of his latest book, *The City of Falling Angels* (released in Australia this week), will react in the same way. For one thing, Venice does not need an increase in tourists – quite the contrary. For another, the book will offend some people. They may want to leave town after they've read it.

Like *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, there is a real crime at the heart of Berendt's latest book. In this case, it is not murder but arson – the dramatic burning down of one of Venice's architectural and cultural





jewels, La Fenice opera house. Considered one of the most beautiful opera houses in the world, La Fenice was a gilded baroque confection which had played host to the premieres of Verdi's *La Traviata* and *Rigoletto*.

When Berendt came to Venice in 1996, three days after the fire that had destroyed one of its most cherished landmarks, he was sniffing for a story and smelled burning. Ash was still floating in the air. He had come on a mission: to write a follow-up to *Midnight* that would prove he was not a one-trick pony. Yet despite the bitter, acrid cloud that hung over the city, he did not realise this event would be the fulcrum on which his book would pivot.

In a place where the term blind alley is not an expression but a fact of life, Berendt was led up several dead ends. The first led him to the famous Ca' Dario, a 14th-century palazzo on the Grand Canal in which several of the successive owners had met a terrible death.

There was talk of the place being cursed. Berendt decided that ghost stories were not his style. "I'm not susceptible to that kind of thing,

I'm very rational and not terribly spiritual," he says in the clipped, precise, New England accent that would sound perfect coming out of the mouth of one of the well-bred Americans who appear in the pages of Henry James's Venetian novel, *The Wings of the Dove*.

In fact, Berendt would fit right into a Merchant Ivory adaptation of a James novel: he'd be the impeccably dressed, urbane, discreetly homosexual observer who watches from a distance while the beautiful heroine spirals downwards, creating a scandal with an inappropriate love affair. He'd make the odd dryly witty remark, pouring drinks for the

protagonists with perfect timing. And all the time, he'd be taking notes. Which is more or less how Berendt wrote *The City of Falling Angels*. Using *Midnight* as his calling card (it sold well in Italy), Berendt gained entrée to a world hidden behind the facades of crumbling palazzi, of feuding and disinherited aristocrats (like many Americans, he has a weakness for titles), dubious gold-digging expatriates and other louche types, together with a sprinkling

"The trick is to see people when they are not ready to see you. Always arrive half an hour early ... so you can catch them unawares". John Berendt (above, at his New York home) is too canny to fall for his favourite ruse himself.

of mafia lawyers, celebrity restaurant owners, dynastic glassblowers and downright nutters. He rented an apartment in the Cannaregio district from a posh, knowledgeable British couple and set about accepting invitations. He was also nosy, peeking over fences into private walled gardens, chatting to neighbours about comings and goings like a seasoned stickybeak.

Flattered by his interest and fame, impressed by his near fluent Italian, wooed by his charm, only a few were wary enough to take Berendt's previous book as a warning of his forensic skill for getting people to reveal far more of themselves than they intended. And so, in a tone which is as juicy gossip, as larded with he-saids and she-saids as *Midnight*, Berendt exposes the bitchy, social-climbing poseurs who use the restoration of Venice as their way up a very steep and slippery ladder; the intellectual slysters who take advantage of a vulnerable widow to get their hands on the estate of American poet Ezra Pound; and the crazies who make a living dealing with the city's less glamorous residents: its rats and pigeons.

In many ways, he found Venice not so very different from Savannah: both are small cities built on mud and isolated by their geography. Both trade on the past to sell their brand of magic. But where the citizens of Savannah are friendly, open and welcoming, those of Venice are suspicious, proud and private.

Berendt is a patient man who works slowly and meticulously, like a detective sifting through clues. *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* took eight years to write, during which time his agent gave up on the project, eventually dismissing it as "too local." *The City of Falling Angels* has taken five. Although Berendt's Italian is good, thanks to the three hours of lessons he took each morning (he'd acquired the basics during a student exchange program to Turin at the age of 16), he relied on an assistant, Pamela Santini, to make sure his own translation of his taped interviews was accurate down to every last idiom of the Venetian dialect.

For Santini, a resident of Venice for 13 years, undertaking research at the local university, it was a dream job. Berendt's tenacious fossicking opened her eyes to previously hidden aspects of the city that no foreigner had previously uncovered. Among those who had mined the city exhaustively to capture its essence were writers of the calibre of Mary McCarthy, Jan Morris and Joseph Brodsky, to name a few.

"John has an uncanny ability to find stories and characters," Santini says. "It feels completely natural, because he spends a lot of time just chatting to people in the street, as we all do in Venice, because everyone walks everywhere."

Count Francesco da Mosto, a Venetian architect involved in the restoration of La Fenice and presenter of a successful BBC TV series on the city, became friends with Berendt, providing him with invaluable contacts and advice.

"I recommended the Sicilian approach of asking naïve questions to which you already know the answers and then just letting the person run on till they tell you something new," says da Mosto. "It worked very well for John, who thrives on being an investigator and whose curiosity is genuine."

Berendt's determination served him well in decoding the byzantine aspects of a society ornamented with centuries of artful, elegant lies, contradictions and myths. Several residents warned him that no one in Venice tells the truth. Berendt remained undeterred. Even in childhood, he demonstrated a clear-eyed, methodical persistence.

In *Small World*, an autobiographical novel by Berendt's mother published under her maiden name, Carol Deschere, in 1951, she recalls that her son was very put out when his older sister received a watch. Aged only eight, he wanted one too, but his mother refused him. To her surprise, Berendt did not argue, and she wondered what revenge he might be planning until she finally found a small notebook in which her son had written a description of himself as "brown hair, scars on eyebrow of right eye, scar on right arm ... right handed ... big white house with green shutters, gray Buick. No watch."

Berendt's mother was not the only writer in the family. His father Ralph had a day job as a travelling salesman of industrial paint finishes, but also wrote in his spare time. That writing



Savannah's citizens are friendly and open; Venice's are private, proud and suspicious. Berendt was warned that no one there tells the truth.

produced, finally, a book. "He said it was a letter to me, about philosophy and quantum physics, and he worked on it for over 30 years," says Berendt, a fond smile softening his chiselled features. "He was 92 when he finished it and couldn't find a publisher, so I published it for him. It's called *The Einstein Legacy*. I can't really understand it."

BERENDT GREW UP IN SYRACUSE, IN UPSTATE New York, and describes his family as intellectual rather than social. His earliest ambition was to be a movie star, but he soon switched to wanting to become a writer. Somewhere along the line he acquired more than a veneer of sophistication. An elegant dresser, he projects an understated patrician nobility that somehow manages to avoid affectation or snobbery, perhaps because he is genuinely interested in other people and blessed with intuition.

Some of his traits may have been honed as a student at Harvard, where Berendt revealed a talent for satire that he quickly sharpened as editor of the *Harvard Lampoon*, a mocking campus magazine. His astute psychological insight no doubt improved in his job conducting pre-interviews with guests for two of the biggest names in TV chat shows: Dick Cavett, the smooth-tongued, quick-witted American who dominated the genre in the '60s; and his British counterpart, David Frost,

who came to the US to host his own, more pugnacious, talk show. "My job was to meet people like Spiro Agnew, Ronald Reagan, Nelson Rockefeller, senators, governors, authors and find out what their strong and weak points were. I would write up a report on them and then a list of questions for the host. It was well paid but ultimately unsatisfying." It wasn't that Berendt, who is reserved and can appear cool and aloof, craved the limelight. It was simply that he wanted to ask the questions on his own behalf.

In his 20s, he embarked on his ambition to become a great magazine editor. His wit had scored him a coveted job straight out of college, writing for *Esquire* magazine. According to Byron Dobell, *Esquire's* managing editor at the time, Berendt was assigned to write fashion copy for the magazine "because he was so well dressed in that Harvard, preppy, Brooks Brothers blazer style". Typically, Berendt took up the challenge, but cut it to his own cloth. Instead of writing about the look of the season, he penned literate, slightly tongue-in-cheek pieces that dealt with the historical origins of a certain style or accessory (one investigated Sherlock Holmes's habit of wearing slippers) and the manners that matched it. The result was a brilliant mixture of style and social anthropology, the perfect preparation for what lay ahead.

"He was terribly handsome, adored by women and a very versatile writer," says Dobell, who remembers that Berendt was regarded as showing great promise as an editor. "But at some point the editor [Harold Hayes] felt he was a little distracted and losing his focus, so

"John has an uncanny ability to find stories and characters": Berendt (above) spent a lot of time just chatting to people on the streets of Venice to get the city to reveal its secrets.

he set him an almost impossible assignment. He was asked to go and interview every literary agent in New York and report back on what every author in the city was working on – it was like asking him to fetch a bucket of steam," recalls Dobell with glee. "He returned with 60 neatly typed pages; he'd done it, and in the process he gave us some major tip-offs that the magazine published subsequently to great acclaim. It was he, for example, who drew our attention to a book an unknown called Mario Puzo was writing about the Mafia."

By the early '80s, Berendt had opted to become a freelance contributor to *Esquire* as a columnist, having in the interim edited the weekly *New York Magazine*, where he was able to monitor the pulse of the city. At the same time, he discovered that for the price of one course at a Manhattan restaurant, he could buy himself a cheap fare to somewhere else. He picked Savannah, initially spending languid weekends there, being gradually seduced by its slow-paced southern charm until, three years on, he moved there altogether in 1985. His truffle nose for a story told him there was something here worth investing time in.

From the start he was up-front with everyone he met about the fact that he had decided to write a book about the place. Despite their distrust of a damn Yankee, the locals were only too happy to talk – and boy, could they talk. Fiction could not dream up a character like

the unforgettable taloned drag queen chanteuse The Lady Chablis, previously known as Frank. Then there was self-made millionaire antique dealer Jim Williams, who stood trial four times for the murder of his small-time hustler boyfriend Danny Hansford. The timing of that shooting and the suspense of the ensuing court circus was a gift to Berendt, as he realised only too well in Venice. "I used to say to people there, 'Why don't you shoot someone and make it easy for me,'" he jokes.

In Savannah, Berendt's characters took up his project with enthusiasm and humour. "They understand irony in a very sophisticated, self-mocking, knowing way," says Berendt appreciatively. When the book came out, its characters shamelessly cashed in on their notoriety when they became the focus of the swarms of tourists making *Midnight* pilgrimages.

While most fans found the cinematic version disappointing, Berendt claims to love the film, although he expressed irritation at one suggestion. "The producers called one day and said: 'Guess who is going to play you? Jodie Foster!' Apparently they wanted to create a romance for my character." Eventually, Berendt was played by John Cusack.

BERENDT'S SECRET IN GETTING THE FOLK OF Savannah to reveal so much of themselves (not that they were exactly shy or retiring types) was one he also applied in Venice: "The trick is to try and see people when they are not ready to see you. Always arrive half an hour earlier than you said you would so you can catch them unawares."

I had done just this, more by accident than design, for our interview but, of course, he was ready and waiting, house immaculate, fixings of a light lunch prepared. Little is left to chance in this elegantly choreographed life. It makes Berendt seem not just a



charming perfectionist, but intimidatingly controlling. A few years ago, as I was walking down Fifth Avenue with him, he surprised me by ducking into a branch of Barnes & Noble to check that his book was being properly displayed. By then it had already been at the top of the bestseller lists for a considerable time, and he should have been past caring. But he was not.

While happy to expose others, Berendt is a private man – "discreet" is the word friends and colleagues use frequently to describe him. When I ask if he is happy, inching towards the real question of whether he shares his life with anybody special, he smiles enigmatically and replies that he is. It is as if he is daring me to go further, so I do, eliciting only the most schematic of details: yes, for the past five years he has had a partner who lives in Pennsylvania, an entrepreneur who starts magazines and owns a hotel, which he describes as an Italianate mansion where three presidents have stayed. When, back in Australia, I Google the hotel in question, it turns out that the proprietor is a high-profile gay activist called Sean Strub. Interestingly, 25 years ago Strub was the main witness to the shooting of John Lennon. It seems that privately, as

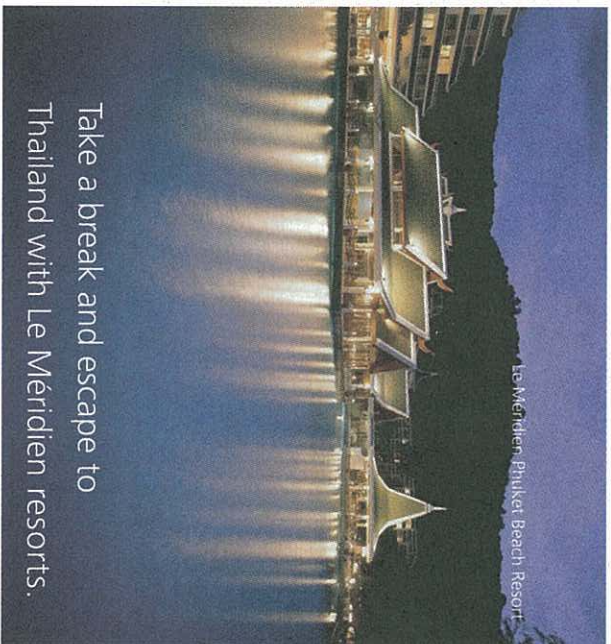
"The producers called one day and said, 'Guess who is going to play you? Jodie Foster!'", in the end, John Cusack (at right) played Berendt in the film from his bestseller. well as professionally, Berendt is a magnet for drama.

In between books, Berendt becomes social and gregarious: he belongs to the Century, a literary and arts club – "[painter] John Singer Sargent was a member," he mentions, dropping himself right back into the world of Henry James.

When he visited Venice in 1885, James called the city a "battered peepshow". Berendt compares it to a treacherous seductress, but he clearly relishes her duplicity and intrigue. He originally intended to call his book *The Venice Effect*, in reference to her unreliable quality of reflecting everything in the distorting mirror of her murky waters. Then he read about a sign posted outside the church of Santa Maria Salute in the '70s while it was being restored. "It said, 'Beware of falling angels' – a warning that marble ornaments were falling off their pediments. But to me, it was not just about the decaying architecture but, metaphorically, about people who might think of themselves as good but who are not."

Although he has collected a gallery of remarkable human gargoyles from his canal wanderings, Berendt concedes there is no single character in his new book whom readers will take to their hearts the way they did The Lady Chablis. But that does not appear to worry him. With the unsentimental detachment of a Jamesian character, he has already moved on. Liberated at last from the assumptions that he could not pull it off a second time, he is on the prowl for a new setting, somewhere where beauty hides a darker reality – but perhaps, this time, not in a swamp.

Caroline Baum's interview with John Berendt will be broadcast on Ovation at 9.30pm this Monday.



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