



Habitual Offenders: A True Tale of Nuns, Prostitutes, and Murderers in Seventeenth-Century Italy

Craig A. Monson

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In April 1644, two nuns fled Bologna's convent for reformed prostitutes. A perfunctory archiepiscopal investigation went nowhere, and the nuns were quickly forgotten. By June of the next year, however, an overwhelming stench drew a woman to the wine cellar of her Bolognese townhouse, reopened after a two-year absence—where to her horror she discovered the eerily intact, garroted corpses of the two missing women.

Drawing on over four thousand pages of primary sources, the intrepid Craig A. Monson reconstructs this fascinating history of crime and punishment in seventeenth-century Italy. Along the way, he explores Italy's back streets and back stairs, giving us access to voices we rarely encounter in conventional histories: prostitutes and maidservants, mercenaries and bandits, along with other "dubious" figures negotiating the boundaries of polite society. Painstakingly researched and breathlessly told, *Habitual Offenders* will delight historians and true-crime fans alike.

Habitual Offenders: A True Tale of Nuns, Prostitutes, and Murderers in Seventeenth-Century Italy Details

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From Reader Review *Habitual Offenders: A True Tale of Nuns, Prostitutes, and Murderers in Seventeenth-Century Italy* for online ebook

Vicki Kondelik says

In *Habitual Offenders*, historian Craig A. Monson tells the story of two former prostitutes turned nuns who fled from their convent in Bologna in 1644. The initial investigation into the nuns' disappearance went nowhere and was soon dropped. It was widely believed that the two nuns, Suor Silveria Catterina and Suor Laura Vittoria, had left with their lovers: a priest, Carlo Possenti, and a mercenary soldier, Donato Guarnieri. Then, over a year later, a woman returned to her house in Bologna after being away for a long time, and smelled a horrible stench in her wine cellar. There she discovered the murdered bodies of the two nuns. A cruel prosecutor, Giandomenico Rossi, took over the investigation and had the prime suspects, the two supposed lovers and their accomplices, tortured. (Opera fans will note the resemblance between Rossi and Baron Scarpia in Puccini's *Tosca*, which Monson himself points out.) As the investigation continued, Giovanni Braccesi, the right-hand man of Cardinal Antonio Barberini, the nephew of the previous pope, Urban VIII, was accused along with his friend Possenti. Pope Innocent X hated the family of his predecessor and was determined to implicate Cardinal Barberini in the crime. Eventually the web stretched as far as Cardinal Mazarin and the court of Louis XIV.

Habitual Offenders reads like a whodunit, although it is non-fiction. Monson writes compellingly of the lives of ordinary people, often ignored by historians: prostitutes, servants, and soldiers. His account of the death under torture of one of the prime suspects is harrowing. The book includes dialogue, which leads some people to say it is "semi-fictionalized", but all the dialogue is taken from primary sources, including the enormous volume of trial proceedings. Monson's introduction, where he writes about how he came across this case while researching a book on convent music in the 17th century, makes for fascinating reading in itself. I also recommend his book *Nuns Behaving Badly*, which recounts similar cases. In fact, Monson thought of making this case a chapter in the earlier book, but he realized it would make a book on its own.

Alessandra Visconti says

This is a fascinating book for anyone interested in crime novels, history or gender studies. While doing archival research the author noticed a reference to the abduction and murder of two nuns in 17th century Bologna. After years of research he wrote this compelling and historical thriller replete with maps, documents, chronologies and lists that help the reader follow the twists and turns of the crime, the investigation and the complex historical backdrop with some of the most powerful men of the time. Priests, cardinals, archbishops, a prince, a pope, a king - men who thrived in the corrupt Papal system of 17th century Europe. This intriguing mystery of the murdered nuns, Silveria and Laura, stays with you long after you finish this book.
