



## **The Medici Boy**

*John L'Heureux*

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While creating his famous bronze of David and Goliath, Donatello's passion for his enormously beautiful model and part time rent boy, Agnolo, ignites a dangerous jealousy that ultimately leads to murder. Luca, the complex and conflicted assistant, will sacrifice all to save Donatello, even his master's friend--the great patron of art, Cosimo de' Medici.

John L'Heureux's long-awaited novel delivers both a monumental and intimate narrative of the creative genius, Donatello, at the height of his powers. With incisive detail, L'Heureux beautifully renders the master sculptor's forbidden homosexual passions, and the artistry that enthralled the powerful and highly competitive Medici and Albizzi families. The finished work is a sumptuous historical novel that entertains while it delves deeply into both the sacred and the profane within one of the Italian Renaissance's most consequential cities, fifteenth century Florence.

## **The Medici Boy Details**

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# From Reader Review *The Medici Boy* for online ebook

## Edmund Marlowe says

### Well-written and researched, but a missed opportunity

The eponym of this story, Agnolo Mattei, is not literally a Medici, but the fictitious boy model for Donatello's bronze David commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici. This statue, "the first free-standing bronze nude in more than a thousand years", is felt by L'Heureux to be "a testament to the sculptor's sexual obsession for the teenaged boy he had created." Hence this richly imagined tale of that obsession, narrated through the life story from birth in 1400 to death in 1467 of Donatello's assistant Luca, the disapproving foster-brother of Agnolo. Luca disapproves because Agnolo, as a shallow rent boy, is unworthy of the great man's obsession, a convincingly conceived scenario except for the stretch of the imagination required to see a youth of 17 to 18, however slender and effeminate, as the model for the barely pubescent David to be seen in the Bargello today.

The author spent a year doing research for his book in his Florentine setting, and it certainly shows. So much popular fiction set in the fifteenth century betrays quite fundamental ignorance of how people thought and behaved that it is a rare and wonderful delight to find an author so obviously at home in this setting that one can drop one's guard and enjoy his story without worrying that one is being lulled into a false sense of the sights and sounds of Florence in its golden age. It is rich in fascinating detail of life then and most especially enlightening on the technical means of production of artistic masterpieces.

Despite the premise on which the story is built, some may be taken aback by the amount of homosexuality depicted as going on in Florence then. Oddly enough, however, it is really only through underplaying it in certain ways that L'Heureux's recreation has fallen short of the historical reality. He has read and richly informed his story with many of the findings of Michael Rocke's *Forbidden Friendships*, the monumentally important study which ascertained from Florentine court records that most men and boys there were at some time implicated in what was then called sodomy and would now be called pederasty. Nevertheless, without contradicting Rocke's evidence, L'Heureux has given his story a modern sensibility which stops him doing it full justice.

Considering both the evidence Donatello loved boys actually more fervently and frequently than depicted here, and his failure to marry, it is fair enough to depict him as one of those fairly rare individuals the court records called "inveterate sodomites" to distinguish them from the majority for whom pederasty was mostly a youthful phase preceding marriage. But by choosing for his two other main characters males with an equally exclusive taste for one gender, Luca for women and Agnolo for men as a boy then boys as a man, rather than choosing typical members of what Rocke found to be "a single male sexual culture with a prominent homoerotic character", L'Heureux has given his tale an untypical, modern feeling. Worse still, recognizing that his 12-year-old son Franco Alessandro was eager for sex with men (a recognition as historically realistic as it is courageous for a 21st-century author to depict), Luca wonders "Why is he made so?" This is anachronistic: a 15th-century father might have thought such a son wicked, but not fundamentally different from others.

In a review of *Forbidden Friendships*, I wrote that "Rocke's findings provoke one extremely important question neither he nor anyone else I have heard of has ever attempted to answer: what effect does ubiquitously-practised pederasty have on a society? The ancient Greeks believed erotic bonds between men and boys were vitally important in transmitting skills and virtues from one to the other. ... Fifteenth-century

Italy in general was considered "the mother of sodomy" and Florence in particular was in Savonarola's words "defamed throughout all of Italy" for it. One might well say exactly the same about their respective reputations at the forefront of the extraordinary cultural flowering known as the Renaissance, a flowering that included the revival of the naked male youth as a worthy subject of art by artists themselves often well known for their love affairs with boys. Is this just an amazing coincidence?" Leonardo da Vinci, one of the most firmly-documented of the many Florentine artists who loved boys, certainly thought not, defending the practice as explaining why "there have issued forth so many rare spirits in the arts." I believe he must have been right and that his point is of momentous importance.

I explain this because what seriously disappointed me about *The Medici Boy* as a well-written novel on the topic is the missed opportunity to explore how this could have worked. Mary Renault showed brilliantly how it did in ancient Athens in her *Last of the Wine*. Showing this in Florence would admittedly be more challenging. Instead of philosophical writings, virtually all our information comes from court records. Necessarily concerned as these were with only the potential for prosecution offered by the love affairs between artists and boys, they are nearly useless for showing how such bonding could transform merely promising adolescents into geniuses. With enough imagination and emotional honesty though, it must be possible to show, and it would be an extraordinary and original accomplishment. L'Heureux forfeited the chance to try through focusing narrowly on an artist's sexual obsession with a worthless "boy whore" incapable of deep emotional or intellectual response. It would have been more rewarding, for example, to have told the story of how the boy Donatello evolved as an artist through the love affair Luca is made to say he had had with the older Brunelleschi. Moreover, I think it would have made a much more moving story. The one told here instead is certainly interesting, but not emotionally compelling enough to be great.

Edmund Marlowe, author of *Alexander's Choice*, <http://www.amazon.com/dp/1481222112>, a modern British tale of Florentine-style amore mascolino.

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### **mari says**

This has been quite the entertaining read. It follows Luca from the dying house, to a monastery and into the bottega of Donatello. We get to see into the complicated, artistic lives of the mastersculptor, models, his assistants and patrons. Jealousy, money and dangerous relationships make for lots of intrigue and entertainment.

I enjoyed the setting immensely. Fifteenth century Florence is brought to life by L'HEUREUX. You can almost smell the Arno and the blood of the executed, and feel the heat of the summer. I loved reading about the making of these pieces of art that I saw in Florence on my visit to the city in 2008.

A great read for anyone interested in Renaissance art and artists.

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### **Tocotin says**

It started out so promising! Realistic, atmospheric – the sights and smells of the medieval Italian city, the cruelty, the freshness, the youth, all was great, just right. Then Donatello came into the picture and spoiled everything. Okay, maybe not everything. But his presence brought this particularly false tone that plagues

books about art – the pompous, exalted, humorless tone I dislike. It's implausible and distant, this tone. It implies that everyone must adore and value art, and bow before it – but guys, most people don't care, and life goes on and sometimes through the long-suffering Artist!... Who, incidentally, is always a real Artist acknowledged and vindicated by the History and Mankind – because no one wants to write about the suffering of a mediocre artist, be it even so long.

So the narrator measures everyone by their attitude towards the great Donatello, and thus he has to hate and despise the poor Agnolo, because Agnolo doesn't give a f\*ck about Donatello's greatness, quite literally at that. So I liked Agnolo.

The book deteriorates fast after he appears in Donatello's life. It becomes a litany of arrests, paying fines, and hiding from denunciators, occasionally punctuated by very detailed descriptions of making some pieces of art.

I liked that the narrator married Alexandra and had a long, relatively happy life with her, and respected her, and I thought the end of their marriage to be particularly well thought out.

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## **Caroline says**

I checked out "The Medici Boy" after reading a short story by John L'Heureux in The New Yorker ("Three Short Moments in a Long Life," May 2, 2016). In the short story, I was most interested in how he wove together meaning without resolution, and in the way his protagonist bordered on being unlikable while retaining my sympathy. To put it in other terms, the depth of his honesty about his characters and their experience of life resonated with me.

I found similar features in "The Medici Boy," and it's what kept me reading when the plot became repetitive (and repetitive it was, but I'll get to that in a moment). The protagonist, Luca, assistant and accountant to the great Donatello, has nothing great to recommend him or thrill the reader. He is not particularly attractive, intelligent, talented, charming, has little gumption or ambition, and is exceptionally salacious. His only claim in life is to be coincidentally well-connected. But his deep and painful awareness of this, his complex acceptance of it, are presented so delicately that I felt a very empathetic connection to him. Not only Luca, but all of the book's characters are tragically flawed. And I loved L'Heureux's ability to sell each of them to me as a reader.

But for me, the book lost points by virtue of its narrowness. Virtually every scene and every turn in the plot centered around anal sex. Almost every page has some mention of it, and the plot was driven by it in entirely too many ways. While I'm not an easily offended reader, I was exhausted by the sheer repetitiveness of it. [Spoiler alert] Each time I picked up the book, I knew exactly what to expect: more anal sex takes place; Luca is obsessively jealous of Donatello's absurd obsession with Agnolo; Luca is eaten by bitterness. This central triangle plays out in a hundred different ways, and finally the passive Luca is driven mad and takes action against his enemy. End of book.

There was one slip in point-of-view, but it was brief and didn't distract.

Would I recommend it? Yes, but only for very patient readers. If you liked the film "Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels," you will probably like the book. If you have a long reading list to get through, this is one you could skip. I'm going to read another by L'Heureux before I make any

determinations, however. His writing is good enough to forgive the plot, so he deserves another chance.

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### **Julia Rist says**

Wonderful read, about an assistant to Renaissance artist Donatello. One thing stayed with me: the increasing sense of dread every time the character of Agnolo appears. You just know things are going to go wrong, and you can't look away...like an impending train wreck.

Kudos to the author for how well he describes the relationship of Agnolo and Donatello, even if it makes readers want to shake some sense into both.

This is the kind of novel that requires a lot of research to write, and then a lot of restraint not to flood the book with the said research, but to include just enough so that the readers understand the political and social background. L'Heureux manages just that. The same goes for how he conveys the techniques used by Donatello to build his sculptures, by showing them through the eyes of Luca, the narrator.

A most interesting book; it will make you want to look further into Donatello's works.

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### **Donna says**

To begin, I was given a copy of this book for review. I was neither asked, nor encouraged to write a positive review.

Now, with housekeeping out of the way, I truly enjoyed this novel.

The Renaissance period is amazing..and this book is no exception.

We see the inner workings of the workshop of the great Donatello, through the eyes of Luca Matteo.

Luca is a young man who, himself, is fascinated by the great Donatello.

We learn about the fine artisanship that occurs in the master's workshop, we learn about several high placed renaissance individuals (Cosimo de Medici) and we come to know the master himself.

Mostly, this is a book about forbidden love. We watch as Donatello creates his DAVID statue, while he himself, the mighty Goliath of this time is being brought to his knees by his love for the model for David.

I found myself feeling pity for the great master, as well as for Luca, the teller of the story.

I give this book 4/5 stars and encourage anyone interested in art, or Renaissance Florence to read this well written book. You will not be disappointed. But...if you can't tolerate gore, skip over the part about the cat...

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### **Caitlin says**

Every now and then I pick up a book and it captures me within just a few pages - *The Medici Boy was one of*

those books. I started during a short afternoon break at work - a mistake since I really just wanted to sit in the sun and read once I started. *The Medici Boy* is historical fiction set in Renaissance Florence in the studio of the sculptor, Donatello. The book captures the essence of the Renaissance as I imagine it in my head - the writing of place is very vivid filled with all the beauty and brutality of the age.

Our hero, Luca, is devoted to Donatello and spends his time helping to keep the artist's business affairs in order. His journey to Florence is a long and strange one and that's fitting for Luca is a complex and stranger character conflicted in almost all ways about his life. Luca's past comes to haunt the book in the presence of Agnolo, a beautiful model and prostitute who disrupts the studio at every turn. Well-written and interesting, *The Medici Boy* is a good read, although I wish Donatello had a stronger presence in the book. The portrait of him in Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists* is still the one that resonates with me, but that didn't stop me from tearing through this book.

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## **Marita says**

Three and a half stars for this novel about the great Italian Renaissance sculptor, Donatello (1386-1466). If you can make it past the first few chapters with its descriptions of the plague (The Black Pest), an onanistic monk-to-be (who wasn't) and the torture of a cat, you might well enjoy this story of love, friendship and magnificent art. After all, this was life in the Middle Ages, and Animal Welfare and Human Rights were not the order of the day.

In this novel we learn of both the intricacies of creating and casting a statue in bronze, as well as the minutiae of life in an artist's bottega (workshop). When Donatello and his assistants do the casting for the statue of David "The bottega bristled with the excitement of the first casting". The author builds on the excitement until the reader too is swept along, and I found myself holding my breath while I waited for the masterpiece to be revealed.

Cosimo de'Medici's initial response to the sculpture is "Goliath, conquered by the boy David", and Donatello, a Goliath, a giant in standing amongst his peers is conquered by the boy Agnolo who poses as David. There is greatness, but there is also human failing and a need to love and be loved. Throughout the novel there are hints of calamities to come, and this adds to the suspense of the novel and the inevitable outcome.

The story is filled with great names, famous artworks as well as important events of the day. There are outstanding artists, famous and infamous noble families, political intrigue and mention of a war or two. Although I had to skip the bit about the cat, I thought it an interesting book.

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## **Greg says**

In the grand tradition of such bodice-rippers as Rosemary Roger's "Sweet Savage Love", John L'Heueux gives us this 'toga-ripper' (and let us not forget that men and women wore togas). While the sexuality doesn't span as much territory as, for example, T.C. Van Adler's\* "St. Agatha's Breast" (in which you WILL learn new tricks of the trade) it does a good job at offering us various types of relationships.

Now, to the plot: this is a fascinating story of Donatello's creation of a bronze statue (the first free-standing

nude bronze in over a thousand years, the author tells us). It seems to me the genre of "art mysteries" is on the upswing while the "religious conspiracy" genre is heading the other way. Beginning with three stars, I added a star for L'Heureux's extensively researched description of the creation of a bronze statue. But I took away a star for an extreme torture porn sequence which was perhaps allowable at one page, not so much at a dozen or so pages. Thus my three star rating. This is solid entertainment and I enjoyed researching Donatello's work after this read.

(\*T.C.Van Adler must be a pseudonym, so my guess is "St. Agatha's Breast" is a David Hewson product. And Hewson's Nic Costa series is one of the best in the "crime fiction" genre, imo.)

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### **April says**

Love this book! It's not perfect, there are some slow bits; however, I found it irresistible! I could not stay away from it, I HAD to see what happened. The love stories in it are fascinating! He touches on love in it many of it's forms. He also includes the unknowable and unpredictable creative AND destructive power of love. And, he sets it in a very interesting time and in the world of one of the great sculptors of all time: Donatello.

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### **Bill says**

Simply put this is an historical fiction about Donatello, the great 15th century Florentine sculptor told from point of view of a fictional assistant. It delves into the political and social milieu of the time: political concerning his patron Cosimo de' Medici and social-cultural from his controversial homosexuality and its place in that society.

The book was interesting, as I'm new to this period. It has a tendency to become didactic in explaining some things rather than just showing how things were via plot and character. But, that was useful to a tyro to the era, if not the best literary technique. This begs the question of how fictional the events, the milieu and personages really are. It also encourages one to explore the era to solve this dilemma.

I especially enjoyed looking at Donatello's works on Google images while reading Donatello's detailed descriptions and meanings of them. These are of course the authors ideas about the works, but it is a starting point. I found his David and John the Baptist most engaging,

A question to answer is, "Who is the Medici boy?"

6.5 of 10 stars

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### **Monty Milne says**

I first encountered Donatello's sculptures as a 16 year old, and was immediately and deeply affected by all of them (though I have only ever seen them in photographs). I was so startled on being confronted with the bronze David that I hyperventilated and then burst into tears - it was just too overwhelming. (I was an odd youth however).

Many will love this book for the atmospheric immersion in the life of Renaissance Italy - you can practically smell it; others for the moral complexity of the characters - all flawed, all damaged, but all in some way appealing; yet others for the sense of eternal verities about life and art embedded in the novel's sixty year timespan which throws into relief the transitory nature of our own lives. Truly, "Ars longa, vita brevis."

But what I loved it for most of all is the sculpture. True, there is no photograph or drawing reproduced here, but for the last forty years I have carried with me a strong mental impression of all of Donatello's works. When the author tells us a character is modelled on the St George or the St Louis, the mental picture conjured in my mind is instantaneous and almost overwhelming. So the genius of Donatello is complemented beautifully by the genius of L'Heureux.

(Slight spoiler): Near the end of the book Donatello uses the same model whom he has used for David to model for his John the Baptist. If you know both sculptures you will know what a daring connection this is - youthful beauty collapsing into gaunt decay, yet John has beauty too - just not of the physical kind. A brilliant touch.

There is only one omission. A lot of loving attention is paid to the statue of David itself yet the author never mentions what for me is one of the most startling details: the way the feather on Goliath's helmet curls up David's inner thigh in a shockingly sensual way. The paradox of the mighty warrior brought down by a stripling, and the paradox of the Beautiful Destroyer, who even as he contemplates the destruction he has caused, receives the lingering tribute of the feather's caress from the one he has vanquished.

There is so much more that could be said (why is David's smile so disturbingly enigmatic? The Mona Lisa looks like a smug peasant in comparison. How has Donatello done the impossible, and read in bronze an expression that is unreadable? And how has L'Heureux done the double impossible, and created a character who accords so perfectly with that expression?) - but I have written enough, and now I need to lie down in a darkened room, and weep while listening to Mahler. It will be some time before I can get over this book.

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## **Beth says**

The title character in this book, the Medici boy, is not the narrator, as I thought when I began reading it. Although the narrator begins with how he came to be an apprentice of the artist Donatello, that is, with what preceded his apprenticeship, the Medici boy doesn't enter the story until after. And then the Medici boy causes trouble and pain for many years. Yet Donatello loves him.

John L'Heureux, the author, came up with this story after he saw Donatello's statue of David. Is any of this, other than the competition between two families in Florence at that time, the fifteenth century, true? I need to look it up. But L'Heureux's concentration is on Donatello's homosexuality and his love and desire for a boy who is nothing but trouble.

This book gets a low rating from me because, first, it begins with so much repetition of the same subject it is just plain boring. After we get to Donatello, I was just as bored with reading about his desire for a 16-year-old boy when he is in his 40s. As the years go by, the story becomes more boring partly because of the subject matter, partly because so many years are just glossed over.

L'Heureux is a great writer. I loved his paragraphs. But when they're all put together, they do not make a great story.

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## Dawn Teresa says

Originally posted on my blog, *ReadLove*

The Medici Boy is a sweeping narrative spanning over 60 years. Meticulously researched — John L’Heureux was awarded a Guggenheim Grant in 2006 — the novel presents a detailed view of 15th-century Florentine culture and climate, from political, social, religious, and artistic arenas. The result is a picture of life that, though fictional, feels authentic and true.

Given that The Medici Boy is told in the form of a confessional by our narrator, Luca Mattei, I was reminded of Dumas’ brilliant tale of revenge, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Indeed, each work examines human weakness and frailty. The Medici Boy focuses on love, loyalty, passion, sexuality, desire, and human need, while not shying from darker aspects like jealousy, lust, greed, betrayal, hatred, and murder. Characters are so consumed by their feelings that they become obsessive to the tune of Ahab. Luca even describes himself as “possessed”.

Its exploration of human nature gives the novel teeth. Set at a time when Italy was still under the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, moral law and civil law collided. The Church, however, was weakening. In its desperation to control the sexual impulses of men and stamp out sodomy, the church legitimized and regulated prostitution. Still, both practices flourished. However, it was a dangerous time to be even a suspected sodomite. The penalty was cruel. The reenactment of the humiliation, whipping, hanging, and burning at the stake of convicted sodomite and rapist Piero di Jacopo (1429) is harrowing. The scene’s prolonged torture mirrors the crucifixion, complete with a throng of humanity reduced to a roiling mob with an unslakeable thirst for pain.

In another similarly unforgettable moment, Luca witnesses the barbaric behavior of men in the act of torturing a cat for sport. His observation is astute: “I had always hated this sport. I prefer cockfighting or bear baiting, sport where men can at least pretend it is the animals and not they themselves that are by nature vicious.” At these intense moments, so strong is the author’s grip that, no matter how you may try, you are unable to turn away.

Love is not portrayed in a good light: “There is no love without pain.” It has the ability to weaken: “Love robs us of our strength — of mind as well as of character — and we cease to know who we are.” It can ruin: “Love is the great destroyer”. Man’s agency is in question, as love’s grip seems not just undeniable, but unavoidable: “We love where we must, not where we choose.”

None of the novel’s relationships, outside of friendship, are entirely happy and healthy, and all the characters are in some way flawed. No one escapes sin, for it is human to sin: “A man must get through life somehow, poor forked creature that he is.” And Luca, a bastard child, grows to adulthood without ever knowing a pure love. So eventually he concludes “that love is not always what it seems and that some hungers can never be satisfied.” Herein lies one of the main conflicts of the novel. Luca and his brother (though not his brother) Agnolo are a kind of Cain and Abel competing for the attention and affection of Donatello.

I normally avoid fictional works that take liberties with real-life historical figures. However, little is known about the gifted Donatello, and *The Medici Boy* maintains a dedicated focus on the master’s art. And though itself a work of art, the novel respects Donatello rather than reducing him to a fictionalized novelty and

rewriting his life.

L'Heureux's descriptions of Donatello's artwork are another strength of *The Medici Boy*. His understanding of the process and techniques used in Donatello's sculpture is thorough. Where a less gifted writer might have become bogged down by minutiae, so lively and vivid is L'Heureux in his descriptions that the reader can easily imagine these masterpieces. Indeed, while he related the pouring of the bronze that would complete the construction of the David, as the apprentices sweated and labored, L'Heureux had me holding my breath. Admittedly, prior to reading *The Medici Boy*, I was familiar only with Michelangelo's David, which now seems to pale in relation to the more emotional rendering by Donatello.

Ultimately, Donatello remains enigmatic. His passionate genius and sometimes volatile nature seem at odds with something more gentle and delicate, such as his David. Yet, though he remains elusive, L'Heureux is able to present a plausible version of Donatello's private life, hinting at unplumbed depths but just scraping the surface, suggesting one can never truly know or understand genius. We are, however, made keenly aware that no one is immune to love, which has the power to bring even a giant to his knees.

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### **Harvee says**

I recommend the book not only for its historical information on the life of a great artist and his wealthy Medici supporter, but also for its social implications which extend to our own time. The author's fluid narration and his command of language made this informative and thought provoking novel both a challenge and a delight to read.

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