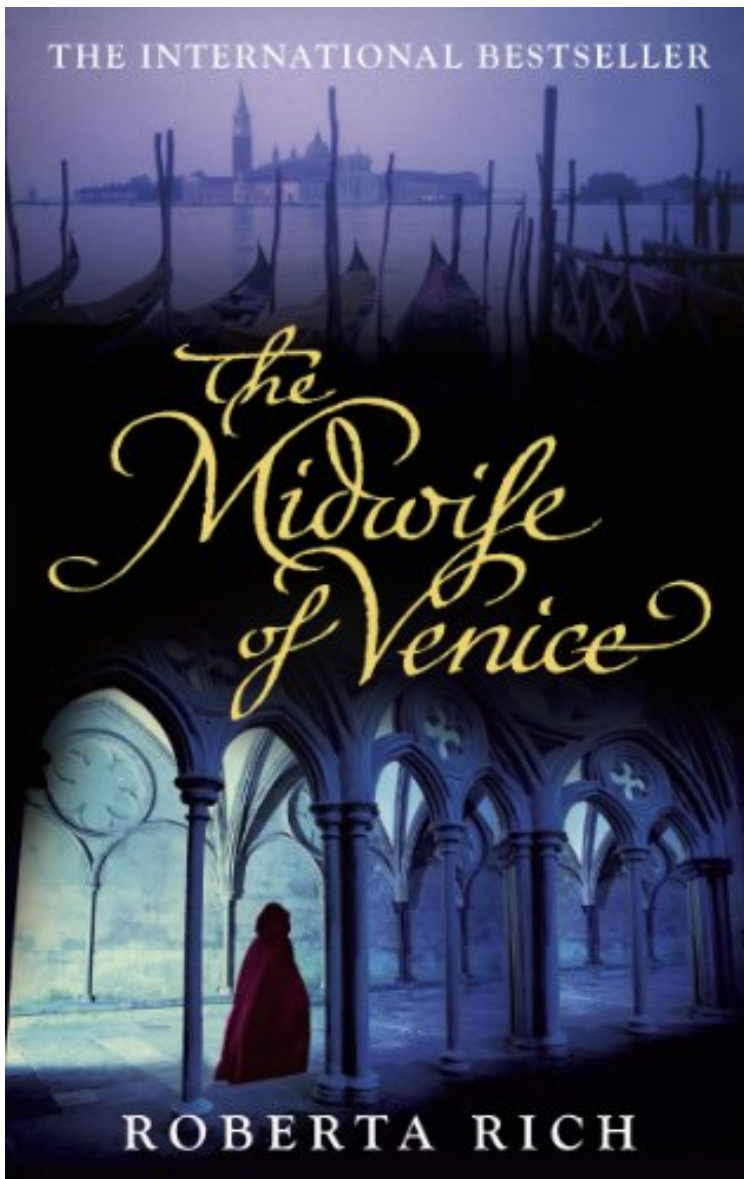


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The Midwife of Venice



Par Roberta Rich
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAt midnight, the dogs, cats, and rats rule Venice. The Ponte di Ghetto Nuovo, the bridge that leads to the ghetto, trembles under the weight of sacks of rotting vegetables, rancid fat, and vermin. Seeping refuse on the streets renders the pavement slick and the walking treacherous. It was on such a night that the men came for Hannah.Hannah Levi is famed throughout Venice for her skills as a midwife but, as a Jew, the law forbids her from attending a Christian woman. However, when the Conte appears at her door in the dead of night, Hannah's compassion is sorely tested. And with the handsome reward he is offering, she could ransom back her husband, currently imprisoned on the island of Malta. But if she fails in

her endeavours to save mother and child, will she be able to save herself, let alone her husband? Extrait Chapter 1 Ghetto Nuovo, Venice 1575

At midnight, the dogs, cats, and rats rule Venice. The Ponte di Ghetto Nuovo, the bridge that leads to the ghetto, trembles under the weight of sacks of rotting vegetables, rancid fat, and vermin. Shapeless matter, perhaps animal, floats to the surface of Rio di San Girolamo and hovers on its greasy waters. Through the mist rising from the canal the cries and grunts of foraging pigs echo. Seeping refuse on the streets renders the pavement slick and the walking treacherous. It was on such a night that the men came for Hannah. She heard their voices, parted the curtains, and tried to peer down into the campo below. Without the charcoal brazier heating her room, thick ice had encrusted the inside of the window and obscured her view. Warming two coins on her tongue, grimacing from the bitter metallic taste, she pressed them to the glass with her thumbs until they melted a pair of eyeholes through which she could stare. Two figures, three storeys below, argued with Vicente, whose job it was to lock the gates of the Ghetto Nuovo at sunset and unlock them at sunrise. For a scudo, he guided men to Hannah's dwelling. This time, Vicente seemed to be arguing with the two men, shaking his head, emphasizing his words by waving about a pine torch, which cast flickering light on their faces. Men often called for her late at night; it was the nature of her profession but these men were out of place in the ghetto in a way she could not immediately put into words. Stealing a look through the protection of the eyeholes, she saw that one was tall, barrel-chested, and wore a cloak trimmed with fur. The other was shorter, stouter, and dressed in breeches of a silk far too thin for the chill of the night air. The lace on the tall man's cuff fluttered like a preening dove as he gestured toward her building. Even through the window, she could hear him say her name in the back of his throat, the h in Hannah like ch, sounding like an Ashkenazi Jew. His voice ricocheted off the narrow, knife-shaped ghetto buildings that surrounded the campo. But something was wrong. It took her a moment to realize what was odd about the two strangers. They wore black hats. All Jews, by order of the Council of Ten, were obliged to wear the scarlet berete, to symbolize Christ's blood shed by the Jews. These Christians had no right to be in the ghetto at midnight, no reason to seek her services. But maybe she was too quick to judge. Perhaps they sought her for a different purpose altogether. Possibly they brought news of her husband. Perhaps, may God be listening, they had come to tell her that Isaac lived and was on his way home to her. Months ago, when the Rabbi informed her of Isaac's capture, she was standing in the same spot where these men stood now, near the wellhead, drawing water for washing laundry. She had fainted then, the oak bucket dropping from her arms onto her shoe. Water soaked the front of her dress and cascaded onto the paving stones. Her friend Rebekkah, standing next to her under the shade of the pomegranate tree, had caught Hannah by the arm before she struck her head on the wellhead. Such had been her grief that not until several days later did she realize her foot was broken. The men moved closer. They stood beneath her window, shivering in the winter cold. In Hannah's loghetto, dampness stained the walls and ceiling grey-brown. The coverlet that she had snatched from the bed and wrapped around her shoulders to keep out the chill of the night clung to her, holding her in a soggy embrace. She hiked it higher around her, the material heavy with her nightmares, traces of Isaac's scent, and oil from the skins of oranges. He had been fond of eating oranges in bed, feeding her sections as they chatted. She had not washed the blanket since Isaac had departed for the Levant to trade spices. One night he would return, steal into their bed, wrap his arms around her, and again call her his little bird. Until then, she would keep to her side of the bed, waiting. She slipped on her loose-fitting ciopp with the economical movements of a woman accustomed to getting ready in haste, replaced the coverlet over her bed, and smoothed it as though Isaac still slumbered beneath. While she waited for the thud of footsteps and the blows on the door, she lit the charcoal brazier, her fingers so awkward with cold and nervousness that she had difficulty striking the flint against the tinder box. The fire smouldered, then flared and burned, warming the room until she could no longer see clouds of her breath in the still air. From the other side of the wall, she heard the gentle snoring of her neighbours and their four children. Peering through the eyeholes, now melting from the heat of her body, she stared. The tall man, his voice strident, pivoted on his heel and strode toward her building; the stout man trotted behind, managing two steps for each one of the tall man's. She held her breath and willed Vicente to tell them what they wanted of her was impossible. To soothe herself, she stroked her stomach, hating the flatness of it, feeling the delicate jab of her pelvic bones through her nightdress. She felt slightly nauseated and for a joyful moment experienced a flicker of hope, almost like the quickening of a child. But it was the smell of the chamber pot and the mildew of the walls playing havoc with her stomach, not pregnancy. She was experiencing her courses now, and would purify herself next week in the mikvah, the ritual bath that would remove all traces of blood. Soon she felt vibrations on the rickety stairs and heard mumbled voices approaching her door.

Hannah wrapped her arms around herself, straining to hear. They called her name as they pounded on the door, which made her want to dive into bed, pull the covers over her head, and lie rigid. From the other side of the wall, her neighbour, who had delivered twins last year and needed her rest, rapped for quiet. Hannah twisted her black hair into a knot at the back of her head, secured it with a hairpin. Before they could burst through the entrance, she flung open the door, about to shout to Vicente for assistance. But her hand flew to her mouth, stifling a cry of surprise. Between the two Christian men, pale as a scrap of parchment, stood the

Rabbi. Hannah backed into her room. Rabbi Ibrahim kissed his fingers and reached up to touch the mezzuzah, the tiny box containing Scripture fastened to the right-hand side of her door jamb. Shalom Aleichem and forgive us, Hannah, for disturbing you. The Rabbi had dressed in haste; the fringe of his prayer shawl dangled unevenly around his knees, his yarmulke askew. Aleichem shalom, she replied. She started to put a hand on the Rabbi's arm but stopped herself just in time. A woman was not to touch a man outside of her family, even when not having her monthly flow. These men need to talk with you. May we come in? Hannah averted her eyes as she always did in the presence of a man other than Isaac. They should not enter. She was not properly dressed; her room could not contain all four of them. In a voice pitched higher than normal, she asked the Rabbi, Your wife is better? I heard she was suffering from the gout and has been in bed since last Shabbat. The Rabbi was stooped, his clothes redolent with the fusty odour of a man lacking a healthy wife to air them and ensure he did not sit hunched all night reading over beeswax candles. Perhaps, Hannah thought, Rivkah had finally gone to the Jewish quarter in Rome to live with their eldest son, as she had often threatened. The Rabbi shrugged. Rivkah's hands and feet remain immobile, but, alas, not her tongue. Her words remain as cutting as a sword. I'm sorry to hear that. The Rabbi's marital troubles were not a secret from anyone in the ghetto within earshot of their apartment. He and Rivkah had not enjoyed a peaceful moment in their forty years together. Gentlemen, this is our midwife, Hannah. May she be blessed above all women. The Rabbi bowed. Hannah, this is Conte Paolo di Padovani and his brother Jacopo. May God his rock protect them and grant them long life. The Conte insisted that I bring him to you. He asks for our help. Our help? Hannah thought. Did she deliver sermons? Did the Rabbi deliver babies? But as I have explained to the Conte, said the Rabbi, what he asks is not possible. You are not permitted to assist

Christian women in childbirth. Only last Sunday in the Piazza San Marco, Fra Bartolome, the Dominican priest, had railed against Christians receiving medical treatment from Jews, or as he phrased it, from enemies of the Cross. The Conte tried to interrupt, but the Rabbi held up a finger. Papal dispensation, you are going to tell me? Not for a humble midwife like Hannah. This time it seemed the Rabbi was on Hannah's side. They had common cause in refusing the Conte's request. The Conte looked to be in his fifties, at least twice Hannah's age. Fatigue showed in his hollowed cheeks, making him appear as old as the Rabbi. His brother, perhaps ten years younger, was soft and not as well made, with sloping shoulders and narrow chest. The Conte nodded at her and pushed past the Rabbi into the room, ducking his head to avoid scraping it on the slanted ceiling. He was large, in the fashion of Christians, and florid from eating roasted meats. Hannah tried to slow her breathing. There seemed to be not enough air in the room for all of them. I am honoured to meet you, he said, removing his black hat. His voice was deep and pleasant, and he spoke t... *Revue de presse* "A lavishly detailed historical novel" (*Elle Magazine*) "A lively tale involving love, blackmail, family, murder, plague, intercultural compassion, dramatic last-minute rescues and some very creative disguises . . . Rich capably depicts the strength of women and the precariousness of their lives, regardless of status or religion" (*The Globe and Mail*) "A compelling and engaging novel, a well-researched high-stakes drama written with elegance and compassion: fascinating!" (*Sandra Gulland*) "A meticulously researched page-turner that evokes renaissance Venice with remarkable clarity, radiance, and vigour" (*William Deverell*) "Not only did Roberta Rich transport me to sixteenth-century Venice, with its seductive tapestry of smells, sights, textures and beliefs, she involved me in a poignant story of seasoned love. I don't know which I admired more - the wonderfully realized setting or the suspenseful story of Hannah and Isaac" (*Katherine Ashenburg*)