

# Boccaccio: The Ultimate Survivor

## Part 1: *Il Decamerone* – Precursor to Reality-Based TV Shows?

Gather ten young, attractive men and women who are seeking to escape the ravages of the Black Death and put them in a beautiful Tuscany villa outside the city of Firenze. Then, to while away the time and to escape the epidemic let each of them take turns telling bawdy stories. Each day ends with one of the storytellers singing a song accompanied by lusty, vibrant dancing.

At first blush it's not much different than: "16 Americans stranded in the rugged Australian outback of Queensland. Will they be able to survive the vast arid lands and fierce crocodiles of the Outback? And perhaps more importantly, will they be able to survive each other?" the premise for *Survivor II: The Australian Outback*.

But the tale of ten Florentines is not the latest reality-based TV show screenplay. In fact, it's the framework for *Il Decamerone*, written by the Italian humanist writer Giovanni Boccaccio almost 650 years ago. Regarded as his masterpiece and a model for Italian classical prose, its influence on Renaissance literature was enormous.

The storytelling takes up 10 days of the fortnight (the other days were reserved for religious devotions and personal adornment) and provides the title of the book, *Il Decamerone*, or "Ten Days' Work." The stories total 100 in all and explore a wide range of moral, social, and political issues, with a candor and wit that may astound the modern reader. The problems of corruption in high office, sexual jealousy, and the differences between the rich and the poor figure directly prominently in a substantial number of the *Decameron's* tales.

**Better Than Temptation Island!** Fox Television's latest entry in the lowest-common-denominator genre, *Temptation Island*, is a short-order unscripted series in which four unmarried couples travel to the Caribbean to test and explore the strength of their relationship. The program, lambasted by media critics as a televised orchestration of infidelity for the sake of ratings, pales in comparison to Boccaccio's lascivious *Story of Patient Griselda*. This tale, told on the tenth day, is one of trust, of betrayal and mistaken identity, when a marquis has two children by his wife Griselda, stages their deaths and an act of infidelity (with one of his daughters, no less) before finally accepting his wife again and bestowing the title of marchesa upon her.

Boccaccio's gift for humor and wit are also evident in *The Beds Confused*, a precursor to the modern-day bedroom farce. Two young men lodge at an inn, and before the evening is over a hilarious round of musical beds ensues that includes the host, his wife and daughter, and the two guests.

The titles alone of some of Boccaccio's tales would be enough to send TV producers, religious fundamentalists, and media critics scrambling. These include: "Masetto da Lamporecchio Pretends to be Deaf and Dumb in Order to Become a Gardener to a Convent of Nuns, Where All the Women Eagerly Lie With Him," and "Two Men are Close Friends, and One Lies With the Other's Wife. The Husband Finds it Out and Makes the Wife Shut Her Lover in a Chest, and While He is Inside, the Husband Lies With the Lover's Own Wife on the Chest." Much more imaginative and exciting than *Destination MIR* and *Combat Missions*, two new additions to reality-TV programming.

## Part 2: *Il Grande Fratello* Is Watching You!

It seems that *Il Decamerone* not only influenced Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and other Renaissance literature, but has lived on in the current generation of game and reality-based TV shows and even spawned a copy-cat program over six centuries later. *Big Brother*, one of the more popular so-called reality-based TV shows, started in the Netherlands, where it was a huge success, and the formula was quickly repeated in several countries, including Italy.

*Il Grande Fratello*, like its brethren, has a concept surprisingly similar to *Il Decamerone*, only with webcams. Ten contestants (!) volunteer to be filmed 24 hours a day without any contact to the outside world. Or as an Italian TV Guide would describe it, "...completamente isolati dal mondo, senza né orologio, né televisione, né telefono." Needless to say, the show has been a commercial success, but not without criticism from the Roman Catholic Church.

The titillating antics of ten young, sexy, sophisticated Italians in a modern apartment with a pool and garden surrounded by 30 cameras and 60 microphones, while possibly entertaining in sound-bites or coming attraction trailers, does not necessarily make for classic, rich culture. *Il Decamerone* examined a society that was self-destructing due to the devastating effects of the plague. The people in 14th-century Italy suffered terribly, as the book's prelude makes clear, and the large numbers of those who fell ill were abandoned by both their friends and family.

Apart from the historical backdrop, though, the great charm of the *Decameron* lies in the wonderful richness and variety of the adventures, in the many types of characters and the close analysis of all shades of feeling and passion, from the basest to the noblest. While the storytellers may have been part of Boccaccio's literary license, the situations don't ring hollow and contrived like they do in MTV's *The Real World*, *The 1900 House* on PBS, and *Making the Band* on ABC.