



## Francine Prose

**Caravaggio**  
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My desire to write a brief biography of Caravaggio began with an intense passion for his work, a fascination with his violent and dramatic life, and above all with the experience of visiting museums in this country and abroad, walking through room after room of masterpieces, rooms that were often empty — and then turning a corner to find an enormous crowd gathered in front of the Caravaggios. No matter what time of day I went to the Church of St. Maria del Popolo in Rome, there was always a mob — students, tourists, men and women, young and old, American and European — who had come to see his paintings. For a long time now, I've been curious — and wanting a reason to explore — the question of what has made Caravaggio so immensely popular, what makes him seem so modern, why his work speaks so directly and immediately to us, at this particular moment in our history.

The facts of his life are at once mysterious and well known.

Born most likely in Milan, around 1570, he was in his 20's when he moved to Rome, where he began his painting career and fell in with a group of (to put it mildly) rowdy fellow artists, thieves, criminals, and prostitutes. From the beginning, his work attracted attention — partly for his dramatic lighting, his intense and violent subject matter, and for his preference for using ordinary people as models for religious scenes. At the same time, he was displaying an erratic and ungovernable temper, getting into fights, being wounded, being sued, getting into trouble with the law — and being rescued by influential patrons. Finally he was accused of murder after a man was killed in a street fight that broke out near a tennis court. He fled Rome for Naples, and the last part of his life was a saga of wandering from Naples to Malta to Sicily and back to Naples, constantly seeking pardon, getting into more fights and more trouble, and all the time painting some of his greatest masterpieces. As a narrative, it's simultaneously horrible and extraordinarily redemptive. His early death in the malarial swamps outside Rome was among the most romantic and tragic in art history.

For all these reasons, his story is a writer's dream to tell, and — since so relatively little is known about him — the brief biography seems like the perfect form. And the question of why his work moves us so profoundly is one I would love to consider, and write about.