

Chaconne in J Minor

Christine Juhl

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Juhl's captivating debut lesbian romance features a multilayered plot and musical phrasing.

Christine Juhl's captivating lesbian romance, *Chaconne in J Minor*, explores the nervousness associated with a first love affair, recovery after trauma, and the redefinition of family.

Two years after killing in order to save her adopted daughters' lives, psychiatrist Jocelyn Lache-Reits, age thirty-two, finds herself in the midst of a nervous breakdown. The multilingual doctor switches languages when she gets stressed, which occurs throughout the story. Despite scolding herself to "stay in English," she repeatedly breaks into Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, or German when flustered. Additionally, classical music pieces play in her head, mirroring her feelings.

When Jocelyn witnesses wealthy, world-famous violinist Parker Réage playing at a local mall, her disorientation increases as she falls head over heels. Parker, a twenty-four-year-old veteran of many lesbian relationships, declares Jocelyn her "last stop" after seeing her calm a rampaging man with schizophrenia on the day of the mall concert. Will Jocelyn heal and realize herself worthy of Parker's affections?

The world of the novel is worth the plunge because Juhl has so much more going on than just a straightforward romance. She fleshes out the dynamic main characters. A victim of PTSD, Jocelyn starts out berating herself but becomes more comfortable in her own skin as the story progresses. As seen through Jocelyn's eyes, Parker represents perfection, but even the self-assured violinist has moments where she breaks down. Cassandra and Ripples, Jocelyn's daughters, remain close even as they adjust to their mom's lavish new lifestyle with Parker.

The stream-of-consciousness prose, which often includes strings of adjectives or nouns without commas, perfectly mirrors the protagonist's confused and sometimes contradictory emotions and mental states: "Steady in her slowness, Parker expresses each musical phrase as a perfect sentiment of reverence wonder force and order." Although it is difficult to get used to the writing style at first, this brilliant choice ultimately fits well with the story because it mimics the rolling rhythm of the classical music that often occupies Jocelyn's mind.

The narrative's polyglot protagonist and musical diction without commas function as a double-edged sword, however. Jocelyn's tendency to switch languages risks becoming tedious because the author neglects to provide explicit translations for each phrase. Coupled with continual mentions of various classical music pieces, at times it feels as though Juhl is trying to underscore her erudition.

Furthermore, some of the novel's multilayered plot lines, which make the book so nuanced, get short shrift. For example, after Ripples suddenly agrees to go to rehab for thirty days, her drug addiction gets quickly wrapped up and dropped far too tidily. Likewise, the murders Jocelyn commits and the rescue of her daughters, which precipitate her breakdown, are inadequately and confusingly described.

At the end of the story, Jocelyn continues to speak foreign languages when under stress, and she also mentions that

Parker is more brilliant and better than her. As such, it is unclear whether she has indeed recovered from her nervous breakdown and gained self-acceptance.

Despite biting off more than it can chew, *Chaconne in J Minor* represents a juicy debut.

JILL ALLEN (April 21, 2014)

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