

Fiddle Game

Richard A. Thompson

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Music is written in layers—bass, baritone, alto, and soprano—one upon the other. Like music, author Richard A. Thompson has layered beautiful language, charismatic characters, and witty dialogue to create a symphony of a mystery.

Herman Jackson is a bail bondsman in St. Paul, not because he wants to be a bail bondsman but because it's the best he can do after losing his shirt as a bookie with a gambling problem. Amy Cox appears to be a young, innocent musician relinquishing the ownership of a centuries old, priceless violin as bond for her repeat-offender brother. Within minutes, Amy Cox is brutally murdered and it's clear to Jackson that this was no common transaction, but the beginning of an elaborate con game, a genuine *fiddle* game, and he's one of the main players. Jackson's search for answers takes him on the road and on the run from the police, a killer, and a band of Gypsies.

Fiddle Game is told from Jackson's point of view with his tough-guy colorful and succinct language.

The characters are the highlight of the story, quirky yet believable, starting with Jackson himself. "I grew up in a neighborhood where people thought *The Godfather* was a sitcom," the character says. "Becoming a bondsman was a way of graduating, not running away, from my own violent past." Helping Jackson in his quest is sharp-tongued, quick-witted Angie, his own PA Friday. There's also Wide Track Willie, the 300-plus-pound local pool hustler and bounty hunter; Prophet, the enlightened homeless man; and Rosie, the diner waitress cum arms dealer who wields her own products a little too well.

Author Thompson is himself a unique character. Though *Fiddle Game* is his first novel, he recently retired from a forty-five-year career in construction. He's a building official and professional engineer who's worked as a carpenter, a short-order cook, an apprentice surveyor, a folksinger, a part-time maker of stringed instruments, a member of the U.S. Coast Guard, and a boat builder.

These years of diverse experience shine clearly in the informative yet appropriate details interspersed throughout the book. *Fiddle Game*'s plot, while sometimes stalling and other times spinning on its tail, finds redemption in the end.

Thompson's debut novel offers much more than a foregone conclusion: the spin become a trilling flourish; the long notes, the climactic finale of a virtuoso.

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