FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

General

Gino, the Countess and Chagall
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Fresh on the heels of winning the 2000 Benjamin Franklin Award for Young Adult Fiction for The Crouching Dragon (a Harry-Potterish bit of magic realism set in a haunted French castle), comes a slightly more grounded use of European art, amour, architecture, and aristocracy in Gino, a sturdy soufflé of a Tuscan-rags-to-Parisian-riches tale of the guileless, itinerant artist who grows from a frightened soldier in 1943 to a liberating genius of art, and is heralded by André Malraux, Picasso, and Chagall in a 1969 induction ceremony of the French Pantheon.

Told in vivid, lucid flashbacks from that moment in 1969 on the dais as he humbly hears his greatness lauded, Gino unfurls a full complement of tapestry colors: from his devout mother and Fascist-saluting father to the Florence murals he serves as apprentice draftsman for; from his first love affair with the daughter of his exacting employer/patron to his shameful escape to Paris with his one local ally, Pietro; from his bare-knuckled subsistence in Montmartre to his expansive self-imposed exile along the Riviera.

Wonderfully, Paris, and her statuesque landmarks, becomes a character itself, “an imperial courtesan,” showing Gino unexpected riches of perception, intrigue, and tutelage. The latter comes from no less than the genial but sharp Marc Chagall, who admonishes Gino with a peculiar blessing and warning on which the second half of the novel depends. For just as the pure light of the sun informs Chagall’s murals and Matisse’s stained glass, so the ever-present shadows created by Gino’s trusted compatriot Pietro creates the dramatic irony that will alter Gino’s moral universe and artistic vision. The plot turns may be broad, even creaky, but the author (a Californian and former lawyer) fills them with such chiseled observations and atmosphere that one can no more begrudge Gino’s grand amours than one can fault his artwork’s inspiration. That he remains, under such dire provocation, a trusting and optimistic soul, tempered by hard won experience, is a credit to his creator. Part gorgeous travelogue, part astute museum commentary, part lexicon of love and gastronomy, Gino, the Countess and

Chagall is both filling and light at the same time.

Leeta Taylor