

Sixteen

Auguste Croteau

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Humming with emotion, Auguste Croteau's *Sixteen* plumbs mysteries both sonic and spiritual. It's a globe-spanning and deeply personal alternate history.

The Soviet Union seems on the verge of collapse in 1953. Mass defections to the West are blamed on *Sixteen*, the final symphony of the famous composer Rabinovich, who committed suicide shortly after its first public performance. Alexei Mikhailovich Samoilenko, a music composition professor and longtime student of Rabinovich's, finds himself pressed into espionage on behalf of Khrushchev.

Alexei follows the journey Rabinovich took in preparation for *Sixteen*'s composition, which leads him to Switzerland, the Vatican, Poland, and Israel. The external puzzles of the defections, the symphony, and Rabinovich's murky origins run parallel to Alexei's own puzzle: himself. Even as he contends with the constant threats of Khrushchev's minions, he wrestles with suppressed forbidden desire—particularly for Vittorio, a nuncio he first met in Paris, though their mutual attraction was unconsummated. As the conclusion draws nearer, no concrete, empirical answers are provided in regards to Alexei's original state-sanctioned mission. Questions unfold with mystical awe.

Rabinovich and the potency of music are the threads holding the narrative together. In the face of sublime melody, boundaries of space, time, and societal taboos are transcended, and the novel is not afraid to contemplate religion and the divine in a positive light. Vittorio's Catholic background is a lovely foil to Alexei's more atheistic experience within Soviet Russia.

Though the scope is wide and the settings varied, relationships—familial and romantic—are the primary focus. With engaging and often elegant prose, the novel dares to examine the full meaning of love, its relation to music, and how both may affect someone on a fundamental level.

Sixteen is a refreshing exploration of the ties that bind and music's ability to defy barriers. Between these lines, despite the darkness of inner and outer worlds, holiness is singing.

MEAGAN LOGSDON (January/February 2019)

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