

★ **Solo Viola: A Post-Exotic Novel****Antoine Volodine****Lia Swope Mitchell, Translator**

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Antoine Volodine's superb post-exotic novel *Solo Viola* imagines a society that's one step removed from reality. With a narrative spiced up by absurdity and a dead serious message, this is a brisk, engrossing, and phantasmagorical take on tyranny and curbed freedoms.

Taking place over a single day, this timely, universal novel is split into two parts. Its first half plows forward in amusing fits and starts, introducing a host of characters: a trio of paroled prisoners who have good reason to loathe the government; a mercurial viola player, Tchaki; an anthropomorphic bird fleeing the authorities; a rebellious clown; and a horse thief who gets brainwashed by political rhetoric. Looming over them all are the Frondists, the all-seeing and all-knowing ruling party that governs the land with a cruel fist, subjugating minority groups like the negs. When Tchaki's string quartet schedules a recital featuring pieces by neg composers, it sets off a devastating chain of events. These are chronicled in the story's second half, which is told from the point of view of Iakoub, a writer who himself specializes in the post-exotic.

Volodine's arch, knowing prose chronicles a world that's a fun house mirror image of our own, where hygiene patrols stamp out dissents, chance encounters between characters lead to comedy and calamity, and the political powers-that-be ally themselves with a local carnival for a rally that's fitting in its buffoonishness. By its second half, the novel moves beyond satire into tragedy: Tchaki's concert is interrupted by Frondist sympathizers, and all the narrative threads converge in a violent climax that ups the narrative intensity to a fever pitch.

Haunting and elegiac, *Solo Viola* has its share of whimsy, but it's all in service of an earnest meditation on the dangers of fascism that lingers long after the story is concluded.

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