

The Craftsmen

Victor Walter

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“The violin is my life, but the viola my destiny,” says Paganini upon receiving the infamous Destiny viola, or

the Voice of Manush. This second book of the “Destiny Suite,” a grand mythology of classical music, chronicles the story of how the instrument found its way into the hands of the composer-musician. Allegedly, this viola catalyzed the writing of the “Sonata for Large Viola and Orchestra in C Major” and, according to one of Walter’s characters, led to Paganini’s commissioning Berlioz to write “Harold in Italy.”

Walter has published magazine stories and nonfiction books, as well as the first book of the Destiny Suite. With lavish and often confusing historical detail in this novel, he steers his characters through the crowded workshops of luthiers where the violin and viola become the only instruments suitable for the translation of the soul. This premise both idealizes and befits Paganini’s grandiose, haunting music.

This story loosely follows the life of a luthier—nicknamed Minugia, or cat gut—a descendent of famous craftsmen Bergonzi and Strodivari and musician Rolla as well as godson to Paganini. Minugia is the man who found the Destiny, a viola capable of three voices (violin, viola, and cello), for Paganini. Like the story, the viola moves constantly, from the Gypsy Manava family in Hungary to the vibrant workshops of Parisian luthiers to the attic quarters of an old Gypsy collector and salesman, where violins hang in rows, like meat at the butcher. This novel pays homage to the craftsmen who made and restored beautiful instruments and to the instruments themselves.

It begins with Minugia’s lineage and then his early life in Italy learning his craft. In his teens, he apprentices at the famous Vuillaume’s shop in Paris where he meets Italian revolutionaries and Gypsies. From Paris, stories expand in all directions, stories from the men and women who pass in and out of the shop and Minugia’s life.

Rich with detail and vignettes, Walter’s book presents history as an ever-increasing series of aftershocks and what-ifs. What if Minugia never met Paganini? What if the Gypsies had never chosen Paganini to play the Voice of Manush? Tiny details compound into a dizzying number of coincidences that constitute the fate of the men of this story. Like the music, this book creates harmony between fact and poetic license, work and the dreams of a perfect instrument and the legacy it would leave.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (July / August 2001)

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