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The Detour

Andromeda Romano-Lax
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Ernst Vogler seems to have found a dream job creating a master list of the world's artwork based on taste, significance, and desire. Except the year is 1938, and Ernst is working for Hitler's *Sonderprojekt*, collecting—or looting, depending on the point of view—great art from across Europe for the Third Reich. After the disappearance of his mentor, Ernst is sent to Rome to supervise the transportation of the famous classical sculpture *The Discus Thrower* to Germany.

From the beginning, the mission goes wrong. Ernst arrives too late to see the sculpture crated and can only hope he is accompanying the real artwork and not a decoy. He has three days to get the sculpture across the border, but the Italian twins who have been assigned to escort him—Cosimo and Enzo—immediately deviate from the prescribed route. Even while Ernst struggles to assert control, he begins to suspect that one or both of them are involved in a plot to steal the sculpture. Following an accident, Ernst is forced to temporarily abandon his assignment, detouring to the twins' hometown in the Piedmont region of Italy. What follows is a race against the clock that will include death, retribution, and finally, love.

Although the characters in the book are fictional, *The Detour* deals with a factual event: the purchase of *The Discus Thrower* by Hitler in 1938 and its repatriation ten years later. The book will appeal to those interested in historical fiction, particularly Nazi Germany. Though Ernst's extreme naiveté detracts from the narrative, and the high-stakes chase often lacks tension, the ethical issues of the book are thought provoking, contrasting the artistic perfection of classical sculpture with basic human values.

Ultimately, the sculpture itself provides the answer. Just as the discus thrower leans to balance the weight of the outstretched arm and the heavy disc, Ernst must learn to balance his love for classical art with personal morality, to reach for love, even while acknowledging it is more than any of us deserve.

Romano-Lax's debut novel, *The Spanish Bow*, also explored the intersection between artistic ideals and twentieth-century European politics. It was chosen as a *New York Times* Editors' Choice, a BookSense pick, and one of *Library Journal's* Best Books of the Year. Romano-Lax lives in Anchorage, Alaska, with her family and is the director of the 49 Alaska Writing Center.
KAREN ACKLAND (February 29, 2012)

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