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Young Adult Fiction

The Drowned Violin: An Alan Nearing Mystery
Mel Malton
Napoleon Publishing
978-1-894917-23-0
(April 30, 2006)

Summer vacation for a preteen is a time of innocent freedom, a life without the pressures of dating, without the time constraints imposed by a job, stolen months of pure enjoyment. The author captures the sweet simplicity of these golden times in this novel.

Eleven-year-old Alan Nearing and his two best friends of the same age, Ziggy and Josée, slide through these months in Ziggy's canoe, where the fun and freedom are as open as the vista: "On the river, they could go wherever they wanted, no yellow lines to keep to one side of, no pushy mountain bikers or big speeding cars or skateboard bylaw officers."

From the reader's first glimpse of the three friends, the strange events begin. On their way back to shore, they spy an odd object floating in the river. As they draw near, they see it's a broken violin, but as they try and retrieve it, the jagged piece of wood sinks to the bottom of the water. Little did they know that this strange find, this drowned violin, would eventually give them the answer to even more bizarre events.

A famous violinist comes to town bringing with him a priceless Stradivarius violin. Within hours, the musician is left unconscious and the famous instrument goes missing, giving Alan—who has dreamed of becoming a private detective ever since the mysterious disappearance of his photojournalist father—fodder for his natural investigative abilities.

Malton has penned short crime stories featured in different anthologies and four adult mystery novels, including *Down in the Dumps*, her first book, which was short-listed for an Arthur Ellis Award for Best First Crime Novel. *The Drowned Violin* is her first foray into young adult fiction. A descriptive writer, Malton is artful with imagery and scene setting: "The music lifted up and carried out over the water like a beam of light. It was bright and brilliant and sad and melancholy, all at once, and in the middle of it, at one point when the bow stilled for a moment, resting on the strings as if an invisible hand had stopped it, the loon called again. The Strad answered. And again, and the wild bird and the priceless violin seemed to play a duet

together.”

Targeted at readers eight to twelve years old, this novel features the characters that are enjoyable, a mystery that is intriguing and accompanied by an amusing, highly identifiable subplot: the curse of the musical lessons forced upon kids by well-meaning parents and abhorred by most (save the naturally gifted child).

The mystery offered is not an overly complicated one—young readers could possibly solve it if they followed the clues—but it is a satisfying one, with all the ends tied up nicely together in a neat, logical, and believable package.

Donna Russo Morin