

The Musician

Douglas Gardham

iUniverse (Aug 3, 2018)

Hardcover \$34.99 (388pp)

978-1-5320-4633-9

The Musician is an intimate novel that takes place in the spaces where art and madness overlap.

In Douglas Gardham's novel *The Musician*, a gifted performer attempts to outrun his past, only to find it catching up with him when he least expects it.

Ethan is rebuilding his life after time spent in a mental hospital, wherein he would "disappear" from his conscious self and reemerge as a character from his favorite book. After intensive therapy and agreeing to take medication, Ethan forms a band and finds that he is a prolific performer, able to convey emotional takes on covers and original music.

Ethan's unfortunate secret to success is that he is still disappearing; when he sings, he blacks out from his conscious mind. As things heat up for the band, Ethan is tempted by his first love—acting—which threatens to break the band up. When a mysterious person from his past reemerges, Ethan's new world is turned upside down and his life is put in danger.

Ethan has an open, honest, and occasionally untrustworthy inner monologue. When he forgets to take his medication, his thoughts become confused, proffering insights into his past and mental illness. The role of his favorite book in his delusions is underexplained. Descriptions of his songwriting process, including that he stops everything to write down lyrics and repeat licks and progressions before they leave his head, are authentic.

The book's 1980s setting is a highlight. Ethan struggles at a time before technology made recording accessible and works with mixed feelings toward his creative endeavors. His work is both a passion and a compulsion; it is an outlet for his emotions, but threatens his friendships and psychological state.

Supporting characters are most often members of Ethan's family or his bandmates. His parents struggle with his mental health history, and their interactions with him range from being understanding and gentle to displaying outright denial of Ethan's past. His band members know little about his psychological state; they are established with only minimal background information, and their individual personalities are not drawn out.

Drug abuse, sexual attraction, and differences of opinion cause explosive band dynamics, driving the book's tension and excitement. The exhilaration of live entertaining, and anxiety over the band's future, further enlivens their high-energy performances and arguments. Smokey, dimly lit bar venues and high-pressure recording studio environments are captured with realistic details.

The last few chapters deviate from the story in such a drastic way that they feel like part of another novel. Surprising, violent turns include illustrative depictions of torturous acts of revenge. Ethan's band, family, and potential acting career are left behind as the fragmented conclusion makes room for a follow-up installment.

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DELIA STANLEY (March 17, 2020)

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