



The Universe Playing Strings

R. M. Kinder

University of New Mexico Press (Aug 15, 2016)

Softcover \$19.95 (240pp)

978-0-8263-5741-0

The undertone of a wordless answer to loneliness and doubt runs beneath its lines of elegantly crafted prose.

The Universe Playing Strings, by R. M. Kinder, is a tapestry of middle America threaded with music, as souls drift into each other's spheres humming a common language.

Four lives intertwine in Tucson, Arizona: those of Carl, an elderly fiddler; Cora, a middle-aged intermediate musician; Amy, a talented guitar picker; and Jack, a young rock guitarist and son of a famous author. Though the particulars of their stories vary, all four individuals are seeking a deeper meaning to their lives, and music fills the void. Carl leaves Oklahoma in the wake of a disastrous relationship with a younger woman for a new beginning at a repair shop in Tucson. Amy struggles with her current boyfriend's ego and anger issues. Cora is in love with music but believes herself unworthy of that world. And Jack is forming his own identity separate from anyone else, especially his father. Though their paths cross many times, each finds his or her own self-realization in unique ways.

Jam sessions, contests, and the simple playing of a record form the lifeblood of this novel. Music halls and outdoor venues are painted in evocative detail. Pages breathe with the tuning of instruments and performances. Though some scenes gravitate away from these hallowed sanctuaries, the human drama is still undercut by music. Riffs, strings, chords, and lyrics meld together into philosophies that drive each character forward and prevent stagnation. The theme of belonging echoes between the differing strands of the tapestry.

Each character is flawed in realistic ways, though that does not lessen the ability to sympathize with any of them. Interactions can tend toward the raw and profane—characters often use sex as a coping mechanism—but these moments, always vital to the story, are quickly elevated by music, philosophical contemplation, or both without losing any visceral impact.

A lovely composition, *The Universe Playing Strings* sings the universal song of human longing for connection. The undertone of a wordless answer to loneliness and doubt runs beneath its lines of elegantly crafted prose.

MEAGAN LOGSDON (Fall 2016)

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