Viewpoint on books for young adults

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Young Readers’ Viewpoint

Book and Audio Notes

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Producing a worthy successor to the Carnegie Medal-winner *A Gathering Light* (2003) was never going to be easy, but with her second novel for young adults, Jennifer Donnelly cements her reputation as one of the best writers in the genre. *Revolution* is a big, gutsy, emotional ride that sweeps the reader through place and time, from present day New York and Paris to eighteenth century Versailles and the revolutionary streets of the French capital.

In the privileged surrounds of Brooklyn Heights, where the high school seniors at St Anselm’s are familiar types for anyone who has watched TV’s *Gossip Girl*, all that is keeping Andi Alpers from jumping off the roof (and later, into the Seine) is music. Deeply depressed over the death of her younger brother, constantly sedated, supported only by her boyfriend Vijay, and trying to cope with a mother on the verge of a mental breakdown, Andi eases the ache in her heart by literally playing her guitar until her fingers bleed. Failing all her classes except music, she can’t bring herself to submit any college applications and she hasn’t got around to writing, or even planning, her senior thesis on an eighteen-century French composer. The headmistress offers some encouragement:

“I like the title … ‘Who’s Your Daddy?’ Tracing the Musical DNA of Amadé Malherbeau to Johnny Greenwood.”

“Thanks, Vijay came up with it. He said my old title – ‘Amadé Malherbeau’s Musical Legacy’ – was nowhere near pretentious enough.”

As a narrator, Andi is sharp, edgy and sarcastic, but always engaging and often very funny. In a long novel – over 460 pages – it is Donnelly’s major achievement to maintain the reader’s empathy and emotional bond with a damaged, self-absorbed girl who is sometimes her own worst enemy. A chance to investigate that musical DNA comes about when her estranged father, a Nobel-winning scientist, insists she accompany him to Paris where he will be genetically testing a heart (the site of Alex’s last diary entry) and she stupidly agrees to a plot to可能存在 a heart.

The narrative alternates between the two stories of these young women who are linked by the diary and by the pain and guilt they suffer because of the fate of two beloved little boys. Music figures heavily, as Andi takes to street busking and pursues her thesis on the links between past and contemporary composers. Not entirely original: anyone who has read Alex Ross’s monumental *The Rest is Noise* (2007) will be familiar with what he calls ‘the long-running conversation’ between classical and popular music. But while Andi is well versed in what the harmonic designs of Radiohead owe to the Baroque, it comes as a shock when she witnesses the reverse: via her iPod and a slippery sort of time-slip, she is able to introduce her eighteenth-century composer Malherbeau to the joys of Led Zeppelin’s electric guitar. ‘This is a wondrous thing’, he exclaims, rushing back to his own composition.

I was worried that, once Andi found the diary, the plot of *Revolution* would inevitably take the well-trodden time-slip route, but Donnelly resists it as long as possible. Only in the last part of the book, when Andi and Virgil are attending a party in the catacombs (the site of Alex’s last diary entry) and she stupidly combines her medications and alcohol, does the plot begin to wobble a little as it plays around with time. But this is a plot so cleverly and tightly constructed it can well withstand a tremor or two, although as layers build, coincidences multiply and threads are woven, some might conclude it is a little too clever. The novel’s three-part structure (Hell, Purgatory, Paradise) takes its inspiration from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and of course Andi has her own Virgil to guide her. There are many, many other parallels.

Nothing changes, a character tells Alexandrine after all the bloodshed: “The world goes on, as stupid and brutal tomorrow as it was today”. Both she and Andi discover that is not the whole truth and not the end of the story; a revolution can also be internal. Teenagers who read this novel will weep and cheer for Andi and learn a lot about music and history in the process. As for me, I could barely put it down; I was gripped until the final word.

*Revolution*

by Jennifer Donnelly

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