



Music books

Lev's Violin by Helena Attlee review – a musical quest

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One summer's night, at a concert in a small Welsh town, Helena Attlee finds herself blown away by the sound of an exotic stringed instrument. The timbre is sweet and rotund, like nothing she's heard before. After the encore she hunts down the performer, a man named Greg, who plays with one of Britain's major symphony orchestras, to find out more about his instrument. Greg tells her that his violin was once owned by a Russian man named Lev, and that he thinks it may have been made in the Italian town of Cremona, birthplace of the famous luthier Antonio Stradivari. Attlee inspects the body, expecting to find a resplendent antique. Instead she discovers something worn, matted with the sweat of many generations of musicians. The two agree this violin's "voice" is unique in the world. And yet, Greg reveals, the auctioneers have declared it "worthless", little more than junk.

For Attlee this proves the catalyst for a literary adventure. Her previous book *The Land Where Lemons Grow* (2015) carves a fascinating path through Italian history,

with the citrus fruit as its central idea. Her quest this time, ostensibly to find out how this instrument that had so moved her could possibly be of no monetary value, does not map so straightforwardly on to any single nation state. While Italy still plays a major role here, *Lev's Violin* is wider in its scope. This book is concerned with more abstract themes, with questions of aesthetics, emotions and the fundamental mystery of why humans are so drawn to music.

The story begins in Cremona, and it's something of a baptism by fire. Before embarking on this research, Attlee was no expert in violins. So she wisely uses these opening pages to familiarise both herself and the reader with the fundamentals of Renaissance instrument-making. Darting between Italy, Oxford's Ashmolean Museum and Paris, she interviews specialists from various fields to provide an overview of how a quaint folk instrument became a centrepiece at diplomatic events across Europe. Her goal may be to authenticate Lev's might-be-Stradivarius, but she finds plenty of time to reflect on the meaning of the violin as a technology, on how it redefined the relationship between sacred and secular music and opened up a new world of baroque sonatas and concertos.

It's a testament to Attlee's skill as a storyteller that she uses her trip to Cremona to construct a more elegant and ambitious narrative. What starts out as a biography of a single instrument soon gives way to a broader discussion about politics and economics. Each time Attlee learns a lesson about the violin in question, she finds an excuse for historical digression. The fact that Lev's violin is made from Alpine spruce, for example, might have passed by as a minor detail. Instead, she uses this revelation to justify a lengthy discussion about forestry regulations in Habsburg Europe and how they pre-empted modern environmentalism. She takes a similar approach with the rest of the instrument. Descriptions of Asian ebony fingerboards, rosewood tuning pegs, and Balkan maple soundboards, which could have been rather dry, serve instead as a proxy history of early modern globalisation.

In her previous books Attlee has tended to confine herself to the relatively comfortable environs of high-walled gardens. This time she is forced to consider a broader reality. In Florence, a city Attlee loves, she discovers that Lev's violin may have once belonged to members of Italy's Roma community. As she follows this lead, she discovers what she calls an "underbelly" of racism against these people, and worries that she "had never really known" Florence at all. In Abruzzo, the poor, mountainous, earthquake prone region, she follows this train of thought even further and learns how some Roma actively lament their association with violins on the basis that is so closely linked to stereotypes that they are merely buskers and street urchins. By the final scenes, in Rostov, in southern Russia, the author is musing on pogroms, border checks and the practicalities of smuggling antiques out

of the Soviet Union. It's a far cry indeed from the first spritz-soaked pages about Monteverdi's contrapuntal innovations.

Attlee is perhaps occasionally out of her depth in confronting the brutal realities of violence and exile that she uncovers on this journey. To her credit, however, she never tries to disguise this fact, and pursues her story, regardless, with an admirable honesty, diligence and open-mindedness. *Lev's Violin* begins with a rather frivolous obsession with valuing. As the narrative progresses, the author thankfully eschews this narrow framework to celebrate the diverse cast of wood carvers, joiners, cabinet makers, conductors, merchants, ship captains and nomads that shaped the life of the instrument that captivated her attention. It amounts to an original and refreshingly unorthodox approach to history.

Lev's Violin: An Italian Adventure is published by Particular (£20). To order a copy go to guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply.
