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VOX HUMANA: *Until I find you*

If you have read the review pages in this journal over the years, you notice that there have been but three or four critiques of fiction amounting to a select few titles that portray musical realms. It is not the point of this column to put forth reviews, though it has at least once before. But, as the role of the organ in fictional narrative has been fairly limited by tradition, it bears noting anything that rises above the typical horror genres or religious treacle.

Last fall, an academic colleague e-mailed to recommend a new title by novelist John Irving (remember the *World according to Garp?*). This new Irving tale, she said, included a prominent role for a character who was an organist and traveled and played around the world. Because discretionary reading is something enjoyed by people with greater leisure than me, I had to wait for a fairly long flight to Western Canada to have enough uninterrupted seat-time to sink into Irving's 800 pages. It was barely page 29 while waiting at the gate that had me scrambling for my Blackberry to tell my colleague, "hey, I know these folks he's writing about!"

In Irving's bizarrely twisted coming of age saga, *Until I find you*, a number of plot pieces swirl together – the organ and organists for sure, but also the murky world of tattoos, wrestling, innocence, and interpersonal dysfunction. Amid these are strong and graphic sexual themes. So a disclaimer, this is adult reading and *don't* read it on the bench during the sermon!

That said, what other novelist has taken the organ so seriously and so refreshingly without stereotype?

Protagonist Jack Burns spends this book coming of age and trailing his father, a globe trotting organist. William Burns. The organist slogs the world from Halifax to Amsterdam, Oslo, Zurich and just about every stop in between, not because he is an itinerant virtuoso, but because he puts himself into an unceasing string of unfathomable dilemmas with a string of dalliances (probably too generous a term for his one-night liaisons) with women of all ages. Burns senior is also addicted to being tattooed, going so far as to have scores of choral preludes etched into his body. Jack's mother, Alice, is a Toronto tattoo artist, and the eye-catching young Jack is ever appealing to women himself (though Irving describes his looks as nearly feminine), especially older women with whom he has a chain of relationships. These lead to episodic career experiences including a stint as a Hollywood actor.

Odd and guilty stuff, for sure, but the organ is the Alpha and Omega in this narrative, a moral unpinning, and the ultimate redemption of these blotched souls. Irving portrays our instrument crisply, and accurately, blending reality with fantasy. Torvald Torén, organist of the Hedwig Elanora Church in Stockholm, among others, is one of Irving's characters, one described with graphic perfection. "Torén was a slight man with quick movements and lively eyes. Jack had the feeling that his mom was as utterly

disarmed by Torén...” The elder Burns, while escaping his last transgression, takes turns serving as assistant to these players.

The organ’s repertoire is equally manifest.

“During William’s brief apprenticeship to [Ankar] Rasmussen [in Copenhagen], the young man had mastered several Bach sonatas as well as Bach’s Präludium und Fuge in B Moll and his *Klavierübung III*. (Jack was impressed that his mom could remember the German names of the pieces his dad had learned to play.) William was quite the hand at Couperin’s *Messe pour les couvents*, too...”

What looms large in this intricate mesh of a tale is the deep discernment that Irving has developed about the organ, its repertoire, people and, in his world, its connection to the emotions, the futile grasp for innocence, and the unceasing quest for a goal in life. When Jack and his mother prepare to leave Oslo (where William had again seduced a young girl) and follow William to Helsinki, Irving remarks that “once again William would have vanished, the way the greatest music from the best organ in the most magnificent cathedral can drown out any choir and displace all other human sounds – even laughter, even grief, even sorrow of the kind Jack heard his mother give in to when she believed he was fast asleep.”

Why and how Irving has coupled these far-flung worlds is known only to him and his imagination. One factor, though, stands out. His subcultures, populations, predilections, and pastimes are respective alcoves of existence. As Jack muses about actually catching up with and confronting his father, “surely William must have known they were looking for him. Church music and tattooing were both small worlds.”

While Irving couples these many small worlds, each assumes more prominence. Were we to plot out a stratagem for making the organ prominent in literature, would it include body art and off-center sex? Probably not. But, without divulging the ending, in this tale, it is the organ and its music that endure and among the least of the bystanders at that – prostitutes who heard William play Bach at the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam, or a group of construction workers in Zurich who cry out over the fading strains of the Boellmann Toccata, “*Venite exultemus Domino!*”

The intersection of anomalous, small worlds, including our own.

- Haig Mardirosian