



The Secret Knowledge

Andrew Crumey

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A lost musical masterpiece is at the heart of this gripping intellectual mystery by award-winning writer Andrew Crumey.

In 1913 composer Pierre Klauer envisages marriage to his sweetheart and fame for his new work, The Secret Knowledge. Then tragedy strikes. A century later, concert pianist David Conroy hopes the rediscovered score might revive his own flagging career.

Music, history, politics and philosophy become intertwined in a multi-layered story that spans a century. Revolutionary agitators, Holocaust refugees and sixties' student protesters are counterpointed with artists and entrepreneurs in our own age of austerity. All play their part in revealing the shocking truth that Conroy must finally face – the real meaning of The Secret Knowledge.

A novel for readers who like intellectual game-playing and having their imagination stretched.

The Secret Knowledge Details

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Author : Andrew Crumey

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From Reader Review The Secret Knowledge for online ebook

Shawn says

In some ways a great companion piece to "Dark Matter". Mysterious, engaging, political and metaphysical. One of those books you can't say too much about without giving things away but certainly my introduction to Crumey was a fine one. I'll definitely check out more.

Favorite quotes:

"Urban industrialized life is dependent on fear of being alone, but manufactures isolation."

"Mass culture replaces critical appreciation with mere recognition, to hear anything often enough is the equivalent of liking it."

Andrew says

Laboured hotch potch of thriller, pick n'mix history, and philosophical remarks. He ain't no Umberto E. Main problem was the hum drum writing, so there wasn't much pleasure in the enterprise at any level.

James says

more than likely a 4.5, just not quite enough to bump to posting a 5-star... this book was immensely entertaining and edifying and strange... just enough depth of mystery and possibility to make it nearly impossible to put down... interweaving music, philosophy, actual historical characters, emotions, science fiction, mysticism... just wonderful... i had put this one down to read ages ago as i loved his other books quite a lot, but just never picked it back up... so glad i did... superb writing, great pacing, time jumps that work, factual interjections, vignettes from possible histories and real ones too... just a fabulous thinking book...

Ian Mond says

In a month from now the Hugo Award nominees will be announced. As has become tradition there will be a slew of blog posts taking apart the ballot with specific focus on the Best Novel category. These critiques will generally bemoan the fact that the best novels of the year have been ignored; that the actual nominees – for the most part – only appear on the ballot because of their internet and social media presence; that by ignoring the work of auteurs in the field were actually undermining the genre as a whole.

Not that I'm having a crack at people who blog about the Hugo nominees. For one, I enjoy ranting about the ballot and furthermore some of the best genre discussions in recent history have been sparked by these blog posts. It's critique and discussion of award ballots in general that keep the genre alive, keep it vital. That's why I get upset when others try to quash these discussions.

However, I'm also aware that there's a paradox at the heart of these sorts of blog posts. On the surface, a

critique of a list of nominees is an attack on popular culture. But the underlying message – which annoys those who have a problem with this sort of criticism – is the need and desire for the novel I like, for the novel I believe is deserving, to be recognised by the masses. The same masses who foolishly chose the original bunch of nominees.

It's precisely this paradox that Crumey explores in *The Secret Knowledge*. In particular, both David Conroy – a pianist at the end of his career who has never realised the potential of his youth – and Theodor Adorno – a European / American philosopher who argued against the commodification of culture by capitalism – typify this paradox. As characterised by Crumey, both hate popular culture. Both crave recognition. Both are awash in bitterness.

For Conroy that bitterness turns into madness as he gets caught up in the mystery surrounding a rediscovered score by little known composer Pierre Klauer. Conroy sees the music as encapsulating the “fraught opposition between autonomy and commodification that is the essence of bourgeois art.” The irony, of course, is that Conroy believes he will find the fame he's been searching if he brings this music to the public.

The sections of the novel set in the past introduce the possibility of multiple realities – something that Crumey dealt with far more successfully in his earlier novel *Mobius Dick*. In this case, the multiverse is essentially a plot device to show what Pierre Klauer's life would have been like if he hadn't committed suicide in 1913. What's interesting here is how Klauer turns his back on being a composer, how in one iteration he leaves France and becomes part of the Clyde Worker's Committee in Scotland. Klauer has decided that being an artiste is not worth the hassle. As Klauer, or a parallel version of him, says:

"I thought of retrieving my last work and burning it. And as I walked in that once-familiar room I truly felt myself to be a ghost, for my mother has made the place a shrine to my memory. Here is posterity, I said to myself, here is what you craved, to be remembered, and what does it amount to? The tears of those few who knew you, the continued indifference of the multitude who did not. Pierre Klauer can be removed from the world like a loose brick and who will notice the hole he leaves?"

The message is a simple one. If you're going to be an artist accept the fact that people may never notice you. Accept the fact that mainstream and popular culture will find its own path, most likely leaving you behind. If you can't accept this, then walk away.

Thankfully Andrew Crumey has never walked away. Even if he doesn't get the plaudits his focus is on the art. As he says in this interview with John Self:

"It would be nice if some day my backlist could go up in value and earn Dedalus some more money. Of course, for that to happen, I'd need to win some high-profile prize that would make me a more marketable commodity. How do I feel about all that? It's quite simple: writing is an art, publishing is a business, and I concentrate on the art, leaving business people to do the stuff that they're good at and I'm not."

I would also love for Crumey's work to be recognised. In the meantime, though, his novels are challenging, vibrant with philosophy and ideas and a unique insight. *The Secret Knowledge* is no different. The plot never levels out or feels comfortable and familiar, the style and voice changes from chapter to chapter and yet the novel is never anything less than engaging.

While I don't expect to see *The Secret Knowledge* on the Hugo ballot I hope that this years Clarke Award judges have taken note. Otherwise I might write a blog post...

Aditi says

Igor Fyodorovich Stravinsky, a Russian composer, pianist and conductor, has quoted about composers as:

"A good composer does not imitate; he steals."

Andrew Crumey, an English author has penned down this spectacular historical and musical masterpiece, called *The Secret Knowledge* which is about an unfinished musical piece by an unknown music composer, which goes down in the history to the modern times when a struggling composer gives life to it.

Before beginning my review, **I'd like to thank the author, Andrew Crumey, for giving me this opportunity to read and review his novel.**

In the beginning we see a classical sonata is being invented by a Franco-German undistinguished and unfortunate composer named Pierre Klauer in the year 1913. But due to pressures and threatens from some shady conspirators and secret societies, Pierre commits suicide without finishing the piece and leaving behind his beautiful fiancée. Fast forward to the modern day, where we see a young composer, named David Conroy, is struggling with his career as well as the time of capitalism and road to fame along with his student named, Paige. We also see how the piece of Klauer passes down from the hands of philosophers to the secret societies and finally on Conroy's hands, thus giving life to the piece and reorganization to the original composer.

To be honest, it's a very intellectual book, but if I've to say how I liked the book, then I'll confess that I loved it. Although you've seen that I've not delved much into the synopsis of the book, since there is a mystery surrounding *The Secret Knowledge* musical piece that you need to find it out by yourself. I enjoyed the flow of the story, how the author has represented two different timelines so strikingly and most importantly, the author has portrayed his narration so eloquently. Conroy is one such character who is bound to arrest your soul from the very beginning and he is so talented composer that I can promise that, most of the times, you can hear him play. And Klauer is another notable character in the book who will strike you as one brilliant and utterly lost pianist in the times of popular culture and ideas of societies.

Don't miss this novel, because it will encapsulate your soul and mind and you'll find yourself lost in the beautiful composition of *The Secret Knowledge*.

Antonomasia says

I'm grateful to the review on John Self's Asylum for prompting me to read this little book, which I'd had lying around for a couple of weeks*. There was no need to delay because it really does zip along for most of its 234 pages, with the possible exception of a few paragraphs about philosophy. The pliable, flippy texture of the book and a very reasonable font size made it all the easier.

Recently I'd seen a useful distinction between "readability" and "accessibility" in fiction. *The Secret Knowledge* is a perfect example of a book which is incredibly readable whilst being quite intellectually complex and less "accessible" in those terms.

As Self's post says, it's not easy to review this book without giving too much away; this is a mystery, an unconventional one. At the heart of the story is a rediscovered avant-garde classical sonata from 1913, also named 'The Secret Knowledge', by obscure and tragic composer, Pierre Klauer (fictional). With faint echoes

of *The Ring* or *Infinite Jest*, those who come into contact with the work appear to be in danger - here from a cabal of shadowy conspirators. One narrative follows the work and associated papers forwards through time and various owners, and the other, in the present, involves Paige, a music student, and David Conroy, a brilliant concert pianist who was on the brink of success before everything went wrong and has spent the years since in teaching and occasional small-time performance. (Those who are as tired as I am of the academic affair trope will be glad it's absent here.) Conroy is drawn to the works of those who have been almost as forgotten as he is.

Whilst I don't believe the character to be any sort of Mary-Sue, on reading about this side of him I couldn't help notice the similarity of the names "Crume" and "Conroy". Crume's books had quite a bit of attention in the past, yet now he's back with a small publisher and teaches. As if in retort, Conroy later says *People can interpret it how they like, I don't care for biographical analysis. Too much room for error.* I do love a book which seems to talk back to me without becoming full-on metafiction. The whole thing contains a lot of ideas and quotations I love.

This is an idea-driven, puzzlish story - I sometimes thought of Peter Greenaway - not one which strives for emotional connection. Yet it never treated its characters coldly. My enjoyment was, admittedly, enhanced because I was bewitched by Conroy. Especially he is in the first hundred pages or so, I could listen to him for hours.

Despite occasional allusions to the internet in the present day sections (wisely without buzzy site names) the book seemed rather timeless. Perhaps it was the influence of the cover. You can't see on here but the title font, the spine, the back, made it look like something I should have found in a charity shop, 20-40 years old, musty, battered and out of print, in harmony with its central characters. The current fashion for two or more narratives usually (based on the small sample I've read) now involves characters telling a story in succession, rather than seeing different sides of the same events as we do here. *The Secret Knowledge* uses the present tense and a historical storyline which are both very current - and like *Life After Life* it uses the 1910s-1960s period and some allusions to the multiverse idea. Yet it felt like a refreshingly unfashionable change from a lot of the new fiction I've read recently. Perhaps it's the focus on ideas. At the beginning of *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* Josipovici mentions how insubstantial English novels seemed to him compared with the European. In that way *The Secret Knowledge* - which also alludes to Modernism and Futurism - does feel relatively weighty, though it lacked the seriousness of characterisation in *The Leopard* (which I started a few days ago). And the seriousness in this book is done well - it was never laughably precious.

The Secret Knowledge is appropriately titled as far as I'm concerned. It's full of material about subjects I don't know huge amounts about, so I can't comment on the way they're handled: Marxism, quantum physics, Theodore Adorno (who, faced with the fictional depiction of a real person thinks *outrageous... This ... is the limit point of historical sentimentalism. His gorge was rising even before the first words*). And the conversations spoken from that virtuoso level of felt insight into music which, when I first witnessed it in reality, made me feel as if all my life I'd been missing, or entirely failed to develop, an entire sense without knowing it.

It's never just the sort of stuff that you can check in Wikipedia. Even when I did see fit to quibble - *it is in opposition to the crowd [in the nineteenth century] that the modern concept of the individual arises* - it was something I'd be happy to see suffixed by "Discuss. (3000 words)".

Intriguing but approachable. One of those books that makes me feel there is some point to reading all these new novels after all.

* = There's some confusion over the release date; I've seen another recent blog post saying it isn't published yet, Amazon is selling it now but says 19th July, yet the site where I bought it said 1st July and sent it to me

then after pre-order.

Hugh says

I first encountered Crumey last year when I read his earlier novel *D'Alembert's Principle*, which I picked up cheap in a sale just because the title intrigued me, and enjoyed reading. This seems very relevant to this book, another novel of ideas, partly based on quantum physics (random choices and the now familiar extension to parallel universes), but it ranges freely through music, philosophy, politics and 20th century history, with bit parts for real people such as Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt and Theodore Adorno.

At the start of the book we are in Paris in 1913. A young musician, Pierre Klauer, proposes to his fiancée, and immediately involves her in a test, in which he gives her a key to the cabinet containing the symphony he is working on, and asks her to wait a few minutes. During this period he shoots himself.

We then meet Conroy, a concert pianist with a declining career who is offered Klauer's lost final work, entitled *The Secret Knowledge* by a rare book dealer. The chapters on Conroy and his pupil Paige are alternated with the past timelines about Klauer and his associates.

I won't say any more about the plot, which is very clever but to me at least not entirely convincing. I found it an enjoyable and compulsive read. A writer who deserves a wider readership.

Rebecca says

I love Crumey, and this has now become my favorite Crumey. *The Secret Knowledge* gushes provocative explorations of what happens to new ideas, theory vs practice, art and passion vs career and even sanity, all with a splash of theoretical physics. Stylistically so very elegant in that Crumey way, even when painting vulgarity. Read Crumey for the sumptuous ideas; if you are just looking at plot, then frankly you're missing most of the journey here and you'll likely become lost. I found this book to be a philosophical delight, and I don't usually use that word.

Vit Babenco says

“Destiny, chance, fate: all are illusory in the magic-lantern show of history, the eternal now that makes everything feel new when really it is unconscious repetition.”

Music, mysticism, mystery... *The Secret Knowledge* cleverly illustrates Schrödinger's cat's principle. Is the composer Pierre Klauer dead or is he alive? Is his symphony genuine or fake? Or probably everything is just an illusion...

“False histories offering infinite variety at the expense of value, multiplied lives worthless as dust. A desire for everything that instead yields nothing; the essence of modernity.”

Life is a mystery and mysticism is an ultimate transcendental dream... Are we here or are we just not all there?

“Who knows? But since entropy rises inexorably, the universe must fade and decay.”

Existence is a pattern, music is a harmony but entropy is inexorable and it turns everything into the irreversible chaos.

Monica says

It reads like a draft for many different promising books. The author has obviously style, knowledge and ideas but the result is sad though. The end is an attempt to bring everything together, yet the whole book seems to me written by a bot with wikipedia access.

Thom says

Beginning in 1913 at a Parisian fair, Andrew Crumey's *The Secret Knowledge* is a shadow history of the twentieth century, following a thread of thought from early modernism through the Marxism of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin to the 'post-theory' present. The title brings to mind *The Secret Agent* and *The Secret History*, which are both appropriate comparisons; the opening sections occupy the same milieu of anarchists, 'dreamers and scholars' as Conrad's novel, while the present-day sections explore the harmful effects of attempting to live up to old-fashioned ideals in modern society, as in Donna Tartt's book.

The 'secret knowledge' of the title refers to an unfinished piece of music, written by the unknown composer Pierre Klaur. Commissioned by a mysterious group to give musical form to their ideas about alternate realities, Klaur commits suicide before the piece can be finished, sparking a clandestine struggle for control of his legacy between his family, fiancée and various mysterious strangers. In the present day, washed up concert pianist and music tutor David Conroy is presented with the original score of *The Secret Knowledge* by the dealer Claude Verrier, seeing it as an opportunity to revive his career. In between these events, the novel takes in Scottish trade union meetings, the suicide of Walter Benjamin and the later battle between Adorno and Hannah Arendt for control of Benjamin's legacy.

Klaur's score, which passes through the hands of all these philosophers and artists, represents a moment in time when musicians like Arnold Schoenberg were struggling to come to terms with modernism, creating work which used atonality and dissonance to reflect the jarring effects of industrial society. His work is evasive, impossible to pin down; Conroy describes the piece's 'formless progressions of bewildering complexity... its shape constantly altering'. When he asks his pupil Paige to play *The Secret Knowledge*, 'he senses a different orchestration from what he had previously imagined'. Describing Klaur's work, Conroy (who has more than a passing acquaintance with the critical studies syllabus for Manchester University undergrads) says it 'encapsulates the fraught opposition between autonomy & commodification that is the essence of bourgeois art'.

The Secret Knowledge is variously stolen, traded, gifted and bought, with each owner adding a level of mystique to the physical artifact. As this process continues, the music becomes divorced from its original meaning, becoming something of a floating signifier. By the time it reaches Adorno, it is little more than a work of 'genuine, if modest, artistic talent'. Further still down the line, for Paige it is merely a chance to launch a career in pop-classics, bereft of any deeper meaning. Roland Barthes's essay *The Death of The Author* is important here. Because Klaur is unknowable, the owners of *The Secret Knowledge* are forced to deal directly with the score. Each generation therefore assigns its own valuation and interpretation to Klaur's work. Crumey is critical of this process; in a profit-obsessed society, and without the anchoring presence of the author-figure, *The Secret Knowledge* becomes devoid of meaning. What began as a radical piece of art is now no more than a commercial opportunity.

Conroy is the last person to try to connect with Klaur's work on an intellectual level, but the struggle to

reconcile the ideas contained within *The Secret Knowledge* with the demands of life in late capitalist society forces him to the brink of a breakdown. While Klauer could move easily between the light of the surface and the depths beneath, now the surface spectacle is so all-encompassing that anyone attempting to dive deeper will end up getting the bends.

Klauer's tale finds a parallel in that of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin committed suicide in Spain whilst trying to flee the Nazis, leaving his masterpiece, *The Arcades Project*, unfinished. His papers (*The Secret Knowledge* among them) find their way to Adorno, via Arendt, but are subject to severe editing by his former friend. Adorno wishes to force his work into an existing conceptual framework, whereas Arendt seeks to sanctify him. Crumey dramatizes a 1967 conference at which five speakers give radically different interpretations of Benjamin's life and work, before being drowned out by a shambolic and irrelevant student protest. Benjamin has been sentimentalised, the story of his death taking precedence over the content of his work.

A sense of incompleteness, and lack of agency, permeates the novel. Klauer and Benjamin leave their work unfinished, allowing their writing to be manipulated by others. Paige is haunted by memories of a miscarriage, and is used as a pawn in a power struggle between Conroy and Claude Verrier, who alternately flatters and dismisses her. Throughout the novel, Crumey challenges the notions of dialectical progress – narrators are unreliable, conspiracies are hinted at but unresolved – truth and experience here are slippery, elusive, hard to pin down. The characters build up webs of belief around themselves, seeing the world through conspirator's eyes – shared experience is impossible with this post-modern mindset.

To be critical, while *The Secret Knowledge* is intellectually exciting and well-plotted, the prose doesn't always rise to the same heights. It is never clunky, but only occasionally soars. The female characters lack dynamism, too often being passed from one man to another, operating in roles allocated to them by others rather than defining their own existences; whereas Klauer and Benjamin leave behind philosophically important works, Paige's unfinished business is a 'formless lump like a pink cabbage stalk'.

The novel represents a perfect match between author and publisher; Crumey's text occupies the same shadow world of conspiracy and idealism as many of Dedalus's fin-de-siecle reprints, and hopefully the relationship will be a profitable one for both parties. Fittingly, there are a number of interpretations open to readers, and Crumey resists easy conclusions. It is exciting to see a writer engaging with the likes of Adorno, Benjamin and Barthes in a modern novel, and hopefully this ambition will be embraced by readers. This is a novel with real cult appeal, and looks set to make a big impact as word of mouth spreads.

Liviu says

Andrew Crumey is one of the authors I buy everything on publication as his novels are interesting and different from both genre and more conventional mainstream, combining aspects of both.

At about 224 pages *The Secret Knowledge* is a very readable novel which contains a lot of things to make one think and look up. The novel alternates between a present timeline following David Conroy, a washed out former young pianist of promise, and Paige, a young student of his of great promise too but who has been passing through her own personal difficulties, and an evolving timeline that starts in 1913 Paris with the ambitious Franco-German composer Pierre Klauer proposing to his fiancée and then moves to important periods of the past century.

The book has as common thread the "secret knowledge" composition of the title and assorted related paraphernalia - secret books, codes, societies etc and of course the many worlds theory from Quantum

Mechanics, where the gun pressed to the head fires a bullet and kills one here, but fires a blank and the character escapes, or maybe he just refuses to fire and moves away to start a new life. Or in the same vein another character may have a wife, a partner or may be delusional about that...

The novel has superb vignettes of personalities and events - Walter Benjamin, Adorno, Hannah Arendt, the events in George square in 1919 Scotland, flashbacks to the life of French revolutionary Blanqui - generally kind of obscure today but it made me look them up and overall is a composition of very good to great scenes that ultimately do not quite add up to as fulfilling a whole as I expected.

Maybe that is because I've seen the secret societies, multiverse etc stuff way too many times - and the author as former practicing physicist definitely knows his stuff and there is nothing jarring there - maybe because the underlining Marxist and anti-capitalist message of the novel sounds quaint as the once well known names mentioned above who today are just footnotes when history has passed them by, maybe because it is ultimately too short for its ambition.

Highly recommended for an entertaining and page turning experience that makes one think, not quite the awesome top 25 novel I expected
