



Secrecy

Rupert Thomson

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It is Florence, 1691. The Renaissance is long gone, and the city is a dark, repressive place, where everything is forbidden and anything is possible. The Enlightenment may be just around the corner, but knowledge is still the property of the few, and they guard it fiercely. Art, sex and power - these, as always, are the obsessions.

Facing serious criminal charges, Gaetano Zummo is forced to flee his native Siracusa at the age of twenty, first to Palermo, then Naples, but always has the feeling that he is being pursued by his past, and that he will never be free of it. Zummo works an artist in wax. He is fascinated by the plague, and makes small wooden cabinets in which he places graphic, tortured models of the dead and dying. But Cosimo III, Tuscany's penultimate Medici ruler, gives Zummo his most challenging commission yet, and as he tackles it his path entwines with that of the apothecary's daughter Faustina, whose secret is even more explosive than his.

Poignant but paranoid, sensual yet chilling, Secrecy is a novel that buzzes with intrigue and ideas. It is a love story, a murder mystery, a portrait of a famous city in an age of austerity, an exercise in concealment and revelation, but above all it is a trapdoor narrative, one story dropping unexpectedly into another, the ground always slippery, uncertain...

Secrecy Details

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Amra Isovi? says

Dragi moji evo od sino? pokušavam da shvatim kako je ovaj stil pisanja uspio pobrati toliko nagrada i da se poredi sa nekim imenima iz vrha književnog svijeta. Ma dobro rekla sam odavno da se o ukusima neda raspravljati, ali ova knjiga meni nije ispunila o?ekivanja. Stil pisanja mi je u više navrata bio usiljen, kao da je pisao knjigu pod ?izmom izdava?a ili ti što sl.. Glavni lik previše zaposjednut prošloš?u, i problematika njegovog življenja svedena na dvije do tri klju?ne stvari, koje i nisu toliko zanimljive bar meni, opisi nekada previše šturi, nekada pretjerani, ne znam ovo djelo mi je bilo povuci, potegni, a k tome što nikako ne volim , dosta JE nedore?eno...

Prelasci iz stanja sna u budno pisani u ?udnoj formi, sa delikatnim ali nejasnim, nekad ne svarljivim sponama, nekada totalno u pogrešnim momentima , i jednostavno nisu mi imali onu lako?u prelaza koju sam otkrila kod drugih pisaca... Neka mi oprostite oni koji su uživali i otkrili da je ovo djelo odli?no, meni jednostavno...nije

I ocjena zbog samog mjesta zbivanja, i neke dobre po?etne ideje je kao što vidite prosje?na trojka 3....

Chloe Thurlow says

I so much wanted to like this book. From the sumptuous cover with gold titling and a pregnant woman half hidden by drapes of crimson, you are prepared for a feast by the wonderful designers at Granta. The wrappings far outweigh the contents.

Let me say, Rupert Thomson is a good writer. But good writing cannot disguise a messy meandering plot with characters who are unengaging, glibly described and unmemorable. There are lines in this book that I highlighted with a yellow marker pen - but so, too, are there pages of sheer absolute tedium.

Issicratea says

This is a very striking book, one of the best novels I've read for quite a while. The last quarter or so didn't quite work so well for me, or I'd have given it five stars. The writing is nothing less than brilliant: more impressive than Mantel's in Wolf Hall for my taste, as it's much more concise and compressed. The evocation of place and time is amazingly vivid and visceral.

I was attracted to this book by its setting, in Florence—not the familiar world of Renaissance Florence, but the decadent Baroque world of the later seventeenth century. The subject also struck me as fascinating: the protagonist is Gaetano Zumbo (called Zummo in the book), creator of the astonishing, disturbing, borderline-deranged wax sculptures of plague scenes in the museum at La Specola (I saw these first on a special late-night opening when I appeared to be the only person in the museum, not an easy experience to forget).

The best part of the book for me is its remarkable evocation of Florence and the eccentric and perverse world of Cosimo III de' Medici's court. The characters are fabulous, from the strange young daughter of Zumbo's landlady—like most figures in the book, damaged physically or emotionally in some way—to the eccentric French acrobat who lives upstairs from him, to the drunken, vomiting Medici princeling Gian Gastone, the jovial anatomist Pampolino and his urchin sidekick Earhole (more damage), and the affable-but-almost-

bound-to-turn-sinister-at-some-point ducal secretary Bassetti. The grand duke himself is a memorable monster, and perhaps—aptly enough—just about the most damaged character of all. The arch-villain Stufa is perhaps a mite too villainous for my taste, but he's fun in a grand guignol kind of way.

Elements I wasn't quite so taken with: Zumbo's backstory in Siracusa; the love story; the frame story that comes in at the beginning and end. But these are quibbles, it's an excellent novel. There's a scene near the beginning where Bassetti gives Zumbo a 'welcome to Florence' gift of a truffle that reveals itself, when cut open, to be full of maggots. It strikes me as not a bad metaphor for the book itself—in a good way. A lot of the material is very dark, and these are not the last maggots we see.

One historical footnote: although she appears once only briefly in person in the novel, we hear a lot about the nightmarish, ultra-pious dowager grandduchess Vittoria della Rovere, Stufa's patron, who is pretty much held to blame for what is wrong with her son's Florence (and there's a lot ...) This used to be pretty much how Vittoria delle Rovere and all the seventeenth-century Medici wives were regarded, but there has been a lot of research on them recently and they are emerging as much more interesting and less stereotypical and grotesque figures. Vittoria was responsible for founding the first all-female literary academy in Italy and I think Europe, among other things. I don't think you'd guess that from her portrayal here.

Grant Dawson says

I have never read a Rupert Thomson novel before, but I shall certainly seek out others. This is really a novel of atmosphere. One senses the spirit of Florence in the 1600s; one is touched by the intrigue; captivated by the society. Yes, there is a murder mystery in there somewhere, but that is really not the theme of the book. There is, overall, almost a sense of the magical. One expects demons or angels to appear. But such realities lie always just beyond the text, lurking enticingly in the background.

Bettie? says

BABT

BBC BLURB: *"Some see you as a master craftsman. Others say you're a sorcerer. You're mysterious, obsessive. Controversial."*

Zummo - a 17th-century sculptor - makes things out of wax, figures so lifelike they look as if they might move and breathe. He has journeyed throughout Italy over the years in an attempt to flee his past. Now, in 1691, he has been summoned to the Medici court by the Grand Duke of Tuscany. He arrives in Florence, a city in which "everything was forbidden [and] anything was possible." But what does the Grand Duke have in mind for him?

Ten years later, Zummo visits a convent in France and tells the whole story to Marguerite-Louise of Orléans, long-estranged wife of the Grand Duke of Tuscany.

Secrecy is a tale of love, art, murder and concealment, enacted within a beautifully-realised 17th century Florentine and Tuscan setting.

Some of the 'plague pieces' by Gaetano Zummo (1656-1701) can be found in La Specola, Florence.

Rupert Thomson is the author of eight highly-acclaimed novels including Death of a Murderer, which was

shortlisted for the 2008 Costa Novel Award. His memoir *This Party's Got to Stop* won the Writer's Guild Non-Fiction Award.

Episode One In 1701, a frail, dying Zummo arrives at a French convent. He has a story to tell. His audience? Marguerite-Louise of Orléans, former wife of the Grand Duke of Tuscany.

Readers: Greta Scacchi and Owen Teale Abridger: Jeremy Osborne

Producer: Rosalynd Ward A Sweet Talk Production for BBC Radio 4.

half way through: this should of been blindingly interesting given the time, the gore factor, the morbid artistry. All I kept noticing was a spider web formed overnight between that delicious photo of the Norfolk sands and the wind-up pendulum clock. And how aqbout the windows?; fully fly blown.

2.5 upped to 3* because it is such a lovely sunny warm day.

2* Divided Kingdom

3* Secrecy

Maciek says

Forced to flee his native Sicily, Gaetano Zummo journeys first to Naples, then to Palermo before being summoned to Florence at the request of Cosimo III de Medici himself. The Grand Duke of Tuscany is interested in Zummo's skill as a sculptor in wax, and offers him a special commission in reward for a generous stipend. However, Florence in the late 17th century is not an ideal place for a wax sculptor with a particular interest in the macabre; people vanish in its dark, suffocating alleys, and an Office of Public Decency has been established to enforce strict laws which prohibit even minor display of affection between unmarried residents. Everybody whispers rumors full of suspicions, and everybody has a secret.

Secrets should not be a surprise in a novel titled *Secrecy*, and Thomson delights in having a multitude of them. From the method he used to frame his story - having Zummo retell it to another character, with much of what we know of other characters are in fact their own stories that they relay to him. it is worth noting that like Cosimo III de Medici, Zummo was a real person - but unlike the Grand Duke little is known about his life, leaving Thomson plenty of space to make him an intriguing character. Still, fictional Zummo is just as shrouded in secrecy as his real-life counterpart - I never felt that I gained an understanding of what drove him forward, what motivated his interest in body decay and corruption.

Thomson is a good writer, and *Secrecy* is full of descriptive passages which give the book a dreamlike, hallucinatory mood. Readers will feel the eeriness and uneasiness creeping up on them like Tuscan heat, thanks to Thomson's elegant and succinct prose - one almost expects Savonarola to rise from the ashes to again proclaim Florence a city of God, and burn Zummo's sculptures on one of his bonfires - presumably along with our hero.

Where secrecy disappoints is its meandering plot and the very bland characterization and almost forced romance between Zummo and his love interest, Faustina. There is just very little characterization to Faustina - she is presented as a woman full of mystery (a fact that she herself acknowledges in the narrative), and who has many secrets which she does not want revealed. The problem is that aside from her obligatory physical beauty, this very mystery i the only characteristics that pull Zummo to her - logically in hopes of one day

uncovering them and understanding her. While a part of Faustina's story is eventually revealed to the reader, it felt artificial - as if inserted to shock, and not reveal the real character behind the veil of secrecy.

Secrecy is a novel which could have been truly wonderful - Thomson is a fine writer and his setting and themes are fascinating; however, I thought that he himself had no clear idea what particular direction he should pursue with this novel, and it ended up being all over the place. Despite its good qualities, it is an easy book to put down - it lacks something to grab the reader and refuse to let go. If you are curious about Rupert Thomson, I would advise to skip it and go to the book which was my introduction to his work and which I consider to be his great accomplishment - *The Insult*.

Helena says

This book confused me a lot. I wanted to DNF it at least a few times but I kept going although I didn't see any point. Also, it was kind of disgusting. Definitely not a book I'd recommend.

Kate says

This is an ARC that I received from the publisher, Other Press from a Facebook giveaway. It came wrapped in brown paper and sealed with wax which was very cool. This book really was a 3 1/2 star read. This is the story of Zummo, an Italian was sculptor who has found his way to Florence in the early 1700s. He is working for the Grand Duke who enjoys his work and then commissions a very special piece. This is a time of great repression in Italy, where people are spied on and punished for any number of crimes related to adultery and "sexual deviancy." The Roman Catholic Church had a stronghold in this part of Italy and among the Grand Duke's advisors were a number of priests from different orders. This leads to a lot of drama, intrigue and secrets in the duchy. Zummo discovers more secrets in Florence and soon knows more than may be safe. Author Rupert Thomson has written a page turner which comes together well and does not feel rushed at the end and I am looking forward to meeting him at Booktopia Vermont.

Carla says

This isn't Thomson's first foray into historical fiction (see *Air & Fire*) but it was definitely a departure from his last novel, *Death of a Murderer*. As usual, Thomson's ability to paint a vivid picture of the novel's setting is in full force. Thomson's fascination with the macabre and the darker side of human psyche is once again front and center in this beautifully rendered mystery/romance. His characters always have a bit of the unexpected to them, and as you get deeper into the novel the revelations become more surprising and unsettling. He paints his characters and the world they move through like a watercolor - transparent in parts, layered and luminous in others. Although this wasn't my favorite novel of his (that would have to be *The Insult* or *The Book of Revelation*) this is a great introduction to one of today's best writers, in my opinion. He's got a fantastic back catalog and he never fails to disappoint with each new title.

Janet says

A stunning, powerful and bloodcurdling book. It is set in Florence, at the end of the seventeenth century, a time at which the de Medici's still flourished. Florence was in the grip of the Dominican inquisition. In order to survive in this dark period you would have to be careful to make no enemies within higher circles. Jesuits and 'contaminated' people were bound to end their lives being tortured in jail, without any form of justice.

In this lugubrious setting a Sicilian wax artist tries his luck. He is commissioned by Cosimo the third to work on a strictly confidential work of art. Who can he trust and is he to be trusted himself? A beautiful and sensuous work of art. The cover of the book gives one a good idea of the what to expect of the contents.

Jacki (Julia Flyte) says

I enjoyed and disliked this book in almost equal parts. On the one hand, the language is beautiful, the characters are interesting and the setting (17th century Florence) seems meticulously researched. On the other hand, it has a creepiness about it which I found off-putting to read, the prologue gives away twists that would be better held until the book's ending and somehow I didn't get any sense of place. I learned a lot about Florence at that time, but I never felt like I was there.

The story is about Zummo, a wax sculptor who has come to Florence after a scandal forced him out of his native Sicily. The scandal is not explicitly described and there is some doubt over whether it was true or not. He comes to work for the Grand Duke of Florence, a complex character who was scorned by his wife and whose children have all gone off the rails. Florence is a dangerous place, both literally - with murders in dark alleys at night - but also in the sense that someone is always watching and is ready to have you arrested. When Zummo falls in love, he exposes both himself and his lover to danger.

As the title alludes, secrecy is everything. Zummo is secretive about his past, his techniques, his assignments and of course his relationship. Faustina, his lover, also has her own secrets. At one point she comments: "I've got more mystery in me than all these people put together". But in fact, almost every major character is hiding something.

So, an intriguing plot in a fascinating setting, but somehow it fell short for me of what it could have been.

Gabi Coatsworth says

Wonderful historical thriller set in 17th century Florence. The novel drew me in by its fantastic sense of place and time, and then I got engrossed by the plot and the characters. A very satisfying read. great for book clubs, since there are a number of moral questions to discuss.

Violet wells says

For those that don't know there's a museum in Florence called La Specola. It's devoted to works in wax and without question is the most macabre museum I've ever visited. This because many of the exhibits are graphic depictions of what disease does to the organs of the human body. There are sculptures there by the protagonist of this novel – Gaetano Zummo. The author here invents a biography of this mysterious artist. Secrecy deploys the basic tenet of romance fiction – an idealised love affair threatened by an ogre. The

heroine, of course, has green eyes. It's not a novel of character development like *Wolf Hall*; the characters here are like chess pieces, their power of movement fixed from the oft. It's the good guys versus the bad with little nuance.

Zummo has a secret which has forced him to flee from his native Sicily. When the Grand Duke Cosimo III sees his work, he becomes his patron and commissions him to create a life-size beautiful woman in wax. Zummo meanwhile learns his young lover possesses a dangerous secret too. He will code some of these secrets he possesses into his sculpture. All the many secrets in this novel are of a sexual nature. A puritanical spirit reigns in Florence, personified by the sinister Dominican monk Stufa. Women especially are locked up and tortured on hearsay of sexual impropriety. The Jews are locked into the ghetto at night. Stufa, intent on bringing Zummo down but impeded by the Grand Duke's fondness for the artist, turns his attention to the girl. Zummo seems to inspire absolute emotions in those he meets – the good characters love him; the bad characters hate him. This perhaps was the clumsiest aspect of the novel. The psychology was a little rudimentary and lacked the persuasive subtlety of a *Mantel*. The line the author draws between the good and the bad is a little too thick, making it essentially an adventure story. A very engaging adventure story however.

What I most loved about this was the quality of the descriptive writing and the love and imagination with which the author recreates a detailed map of 17th century Florence. It also becomes a gripping page turner when the splendidly sinister Stufa begins closing in on his prey. Not perhaps the most thought-provoking of novels but hugely enjoyable.

Figgy says

I look at this cover and go:

Why can't we have gifs as names of shelves?

Ilija Ili? says

Not bad, definitely original and interesting, maybe a little slow on some parts, but still.. Amazing story..
