



Us Conductors by Sean Michaels

About the author:

Sean Michaels was born in Stirling, Scotland, in 1982. Raised in Ottawa, he eventually settled in Montreal, founding *Said the Gramophone*, one of the earliest music blogs. He has since spent time in Edinburgh and Kraków, written for the *Guardian* and *McSweeney's*, toured with rock bands, searched the Parisian catacombs for Les UX, and received 2 National Magazine Awards.

Source: Penguin Random House Canada (<http://penguinrandomhouse.ca/>)

About this book:

Winner of the 2014 Scotiabank Giller Prize.

A beautiful, haunting novel inspired by the true life and loves of the famed Russian scientist, inventor and spy Lev Termen – creator of the theremin.

Us Conductors takes us from the glamour of Jazz Age New York to the gulags and science prisons of the Soviet Union. On a ship steaming its way from Manhattan back to Leningrad, Lev Termen writes a letter to his “one true love”, Clara Rockmore, telling her the story of his life. Imprisoned in his cabin, he recalls his early years as a scientist, inventing the theremin and other electric marvels, and the Kremlin’s dream that these inventions could be used to infiltrate capitalism itself. Instead, New York infiltrated Termen – he fell in love with the city’s dance clubs and speakeasies, with the students learning his strange instrument, and with Clara, a beautiful young violinist. Amid ghostly sonatas, kung-fu tussles, brushes with Chaplin and Rockefeller, a mission to Alcatraz, the novel builds to a

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crescendo: Termen's spy games fall apart and he is forced to return home, where he's soon consigned to a Siberian gulag. Only his wits can save him, but they will also plunge him even deeper toward the dark heart of Stalin's Russia.

Us Conductors is a book of longing and electricity. Like Termen's own life, it is steeped in beauty, wonder and looping heartbreak. How strong is unrequited love? What does it mean when it is the only thing keeping you alive? This sublime debut inhabits the idea of invention on every level, no more so than in its depiction of Termen's endless feelings for Clara – against every realistic odd. For what else is love, but the greatest invention of all?

Source: Penguin Random House Canada (<http://penguinrandomhouse.ca/>)

Discussion Questions:

1. How did you feel after you finished the first chapter? Do you have a clear understanding of Leon and his situation? Do you find the story compelling? Could you picture the theremin? (Bonus question: have you ever seen or played a theremin?)
2. On page 45, Pash tells Leon, "You are more unwitting than you think." Do you trust Leon as a narrator? Do you like or sympathize with him? So far, do you enjoy the tone and style of Leon's voice? Why or why not?
3. *Us Conductors* walks an interesting line between fact and fiction. How does your understanding of the references the author makes to the composers, inventors, and political figures of the era affect your engagement with the novel? Does knowing that the novel is "inspired by the true life and loves of the famed Russian scientist, inventor and spy" (cover copy) change your experience of the book as work of fiction? (Further, where is the line between fiction and non-fiction? Does defining that line matter?)



4. How do you feel about Leon's treatment of the women in the novel? Do you find Clara as compelling as Leon does?
5. Leon lives a double life, as both inventor and spy. How does this back and forth between worlds affect the pace and tone of the story?
6. What was your reaction to Leon's encounter with Danny Finch on page 148? Does this scene change your opinion of Leon?
7. How do you feel about the novel moving into Part 2? Do you find the story and characters compelling at this stage in the narrative?
8. When Leon returns to Russia, he finds himself in a political climate he no longer understands. Do you think that Leon emphasizes his naive perspective in order to elicit Clara's (and the reader's) sympathy? Or, is Leon really as unwitting as he presents himself to be?
9. What is your reaction to Leon's journey to Kolyma? Did you find it difficult to read? How does Michaels' style affect your emotional response?
10. Discuss the role of the setting in the development of the story. Russia and America are obviously quite different, but do you also see any similarities?
11. What do you think of the title? Now that you have finished the book, do you think that Leon is a conductor, or is he conducted by others?
12. Would you recommend this book to others? Why or why not?

Source: *Toronto Word on the Street Blog* (<https://torontowots.wordpress.com>)

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