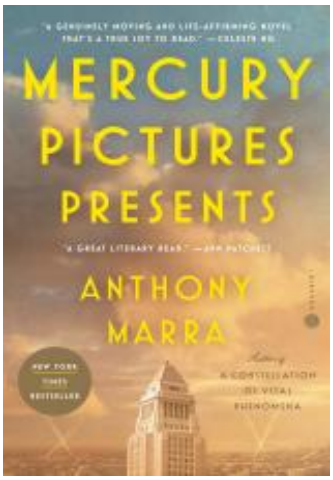
Mercury Pictures Presents

by Anthony Marra



About the Book

The epic tale of a brilliant woman who must reinvent herself to survive, moving from Mussolini?s Italy to 1940s Los Angeles --- a timeless story of love, deceit and sacrifice from the award-winning, *New York Times* bestselling author of A CONSTELLATION OF VITAL PHENOMENA.

Like many before her, Maria Lagana has come to Hollywood to outrun her past. Born in Rome, where every Sunday her father took her to the cinema instead of church, Maria immigrates with her mother to Los Angeles after a childhood transgression leads to her father?s arrest.

Fifteen years later, on the eve of America?s entry into World War II, Maria is an associate producer at Mercury Pictures, trying to keep her personal and professional lives from falling apart. Her mother won?t speak to her. Her boss, a man of many toupees, has been summoned to Washington by congressional investigators. Her boyfriend, a virtuoso Chinese American actor, can?t escape the studio?s narrow typecasting. And the studio itself, Maria?s only home in exile, teeters on the verge of bankruptcy.

Over the coming months, as the bright lights go dark across Los Angeles, Mercury Pictures becomes a nexus of European émigrés: modernist poets trying their luck as B-movie screenwriters, once-celebrated architects becoming scale-model miniaturists, and refugee actors finding work playing the very villains they fled. While the world descends into war, Maria rises through a maze of conflicting politics, divided loyalties and jockeying ambitions. But when the arrival of a stranger from her father?s past threatens Maria?s carefully constructed facade, she must finally confront her father?s fate --- and her own.

Written with intelligence, wit and an exhilarating sense of possibility, MERCURY PICTURES PRESENTS spans many moods and tones, from the heartbreaking to the ecstatic. It is a love letter to life?s bit players, a panorama of an era that casts a long shadow over our own, and a tour de force by a novelist whose work *The Washington Post* calls ?a flash in

the heavens that makes you look up and believe in miracles.?

Discussion Guide

1. MERCURY PICTURES PRESENTS features a vast cast of characters --- some stars, some supporting actors. Which character did you identify with the most? Why?

2. How does the novel treat its bit players? What do you think Marra was trying to say about whose stories matter? How did he illustrate this point?

3. Themes of exile and imprisonment reoccur throughout the novel. How do different characters experience exile, both at home and abroad? How are invisible prisons different from real ones?

4. What does Annunziata?s suitcase represent for her when she fills it with Italian soil and brings it to America? How does this change when she passes it to Maria? When Maria passes it to Eddie?

5. Which of Mercury Pictures?s fictional films would you most like to see? Why?

6. What is at the heart of Artie and Maria?s relationship? How do they balance each other out?

7. Why do you think all of the immigrants and exiles in the novel are drawn to Hollywood and the film industry?

8. Why don?t Artie and Ned get along? What do you think motivated Ned to betray Artie?

9. What does the book have to say about propaganda? Do you think there?s such a thing as helpful propaganda, or is it always, on some level, just a lie?

10. Giuseppe wonders, ?What if confino has remade him into a person that his wife and daughter will not recognize, a person only at home in San Lorenzo?? How do you think imprisonment affected him?

11. Why do you think Inspector Ferrando lets Nino live? How are his fictionalized police reports similar to Mercury?s films?

12. Both Maria and her mother keep their emotions inside. How does this help them survive? How does it hurt them?

13. ?She did not know that the soul she refused to sign away would still feel worthless to her.? Why does Anna Weber, the miniaturist, regret not taking the job designing for the Berlin Olympics, even though she knows the Nazis are wrong?

14. Faustian bargains are mentioned several times throughout the novel. Which characters make Faustian bargains? Is entering into a deal with the devil ever justified?

15. What elements of the book remind you of things happening in our world today?

Author Bio

Anthony Marra is the *New York Times* bestselling author of MERCURY PICTURES PRESENTS, THE TSAR OF LOVE AND TECHNO and A CONSTELLATION OF VITAL PHENOMENA, winner of the National Book Critics Circle?s John Leonard Prize and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, and longlisted for the National Book Award.

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Publication Date: June 27, 2023

Genres: Fiction, Historical Fiction

Paperback: 448 pages

Publisher: Hogarth

ISBN-10: 0451495217

ISBN-13: 9780451495211