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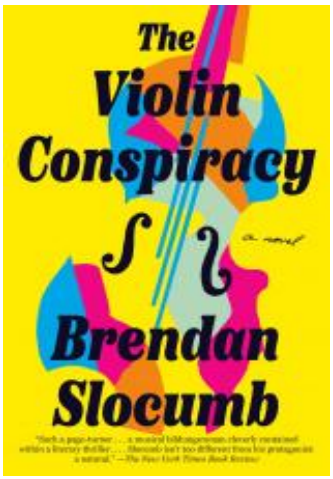
The Violin Conspiracy

by Brendan Slocumb



About the Book

Ray McMillian is a Black classical musician on the rise --- undeterred by the pressure and prejudice of the classical music world --- when a shocking theft sends him on a desperate quest to recover his great-great-grandfather?s heirloom violin on the eve of the most prestigious musical competition in the world.

Growing up Black in rural North Carolina, Ray McMillian?s life is already mapped out. But Ray has a gift and a dream --- he?s determined to become a world-class professional violinist, and nothing will stand in his way. Not his mother, who wants him to stop making such a racket; not the fact that he can?t afford a violin suitable to his talents; not even the racism inherent in the world of classical music.

When he discovers that his beat-up family fiddle is actually a priceless Stradivarius, all his dreams suddenly seem within reach. Together, Ray and his violin take the world by storm. But on the eve of the renowned and cutthroat Tchaikovsky Competition --- the Olympics of classical music --- the violin is stolen, a ransom note for five million dollars left in its place. Without it, Ray feels like he's lost a piece of himself. As the competition approaches, Ray not only must reclaim his precious violin, he must prove to himself --- and the world --- that no matter the outcome, there has always been a truly great musician within him.

Discussion Guide

1. What were your initial theories about the disappearance of Ray?s violin? How did the novel?s multilayered timeline enhance the suspense?

2. Ray finds solace and invigorating challenges in a musical style that originated in Europe. He says that when considering the many facets of his identity, he?s a musician first. Is music a universal medium? Do the cultural origins of your favorite music matter?

3. What does Ray and Nicole?s shared creativity demonstrate about compatibility in a relationship?

4. Who is the Janice in your life? When have you served as a Janice for someone else, lighting the way for others who lack the tools (or the hope) they need to thrive?

5. As you watched Alicia pursue leads, what did you observe about her ability to combine practical skills with an understanding of human motivation --- including the motivation of an artist?

6. When Ray is forced to procure a replacement violin from Mischa, what did you discover about the personalities of the various instruments, and the way music can become an extension of a performer?s soul?

7. What does Leon?s story teach us about the power of legacies that endure across generations? As music became the key to his survival, how did it also become his voice? What did that voice whisper to those around him, and, years later, to Ray?

8. What enables the Marks family to justify and distort their own legacies? Do you think their attitude is typical of the way most Americans approach the realities of slavery in the nation?s history?

9. What traits does Ray share with his Serbian rival, Mikhail Lezenkov? What advantages does each of them bring to the Tchaikovsky Competition? What distinguishes high achievers who thrive on competition (in any endeavor, from music to sports) from those who are more comfortable as aficionados?

10. In his Author?s Note, Brendan Slocumb reveals that the novel?s wedding scene and the Baton Rouge shakedown are based on his own experiences. How did this knowledge affect your experience of the book? How hopeful are you that such outrageous incidents of racial profiling and abuse will diminish in your lifetime?

11. One important aspect of THE VIOLIN CONSPIRACY is economics. Until he develops star power, Ray must continually scrimp and calculate to get by on far less than a living wage. What are the forces that created his poverty? What are the forces that make a Stradivarius worth millions? Besides a price tag, what other methods can we use to assess value?

12. Discuss Ray?s family. What does the novel say about the families we inherit and the families we create (such as the nurturing mentorship Ray receives from Janice)? What accounts for the warmth and generosity of Grandma Nora, compared to the self-centered greed of Ray?s mom? How would you respond if your extended family asked you to share the bounty of your labor with them?

13. Ray?s musical skill and his incredible self-discipline make him distinct. Do you attribute these distinctions to genetic inner strength --- perhaps inherited from Leon Marks --- or to other factors?

14. Throughout the novel, we learn about the pieces that have special significance to Ray, forming an extensive playlist

for you to enjoy while discussing the book with your reading group. What do you notice about the emotions that permeate these works?

15. The Author?s Note ends with the observation, ?Together, we are a symphony.? In your opinion, has society become less symphonic and more populated by soloists? What could we achieve if our symphonies of community grew bigger and more numerous?

Author Bio

Brendan Nicholaus Slocumb was raised in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and holds a degree in music education (with concentrations in violin and viola) from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. For more than 20 years, he has been a public and private school music educator and has performed with orchestras throughout Northern Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, D.C. He is the author of THE VIOLIN CONSPIRACY, SYMPHONY OF SECRETS and THE DARK MAESTRO.

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