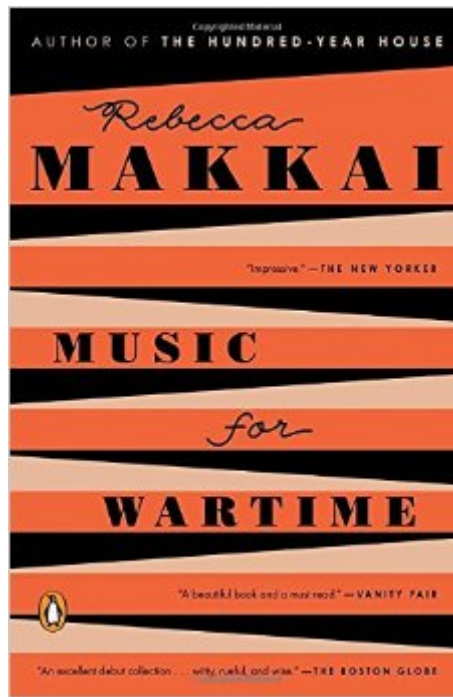


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Music For Wartime: Stories



Synopsis

Named a must-read by the *Chicago Tribune*, *O Magazine*, *BuzzFeed*, *The Huffington Post*, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, and *The L Magazine*. Named one of the best short story collections of 2015 by *Bookpage* and *Kansas City Star*. Rebecca Makkai's first two novels, *The Borrower* and *The Hundred-Year House*, have established her as one of the freshest and most imaginative voices in fiction. Now, the award-winning writer, whose stories have appeared in four consecutive editions of *The Best American Short Stories*, returns with a highly anticipated collection bearing her signature mix of intelligence, wit, and heart. A reality show producer manipulates two contestants into falling in love, even as her own relationship falls apart. Just after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a young boy has a revelation about his father's past when a renowned Romanian violinist plays a concert in their home. When the prized elephant of a traveling circus keels over dead, the small-town minister tasked with burying its remains comes to question his own faith. In an unnamed country, a composer records the folk songs of two women from a village on the brink of destruction. These transporting, deeply moving stories—some inspired by her own family history—amply demonstrate Makkai's extraordinary range as a storyteller, and confirm her as a master of the short story form. • *Chicago Tribune* • *O Magazine* • *The Oprah Magazine* • *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* • *W Magazine* From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

seventy years ago to the day of April 22, 2015, that I first saw images of her artwork, Kathe Kollwitz died. Her name is mentioned in the short story, *GOOD SAINT ANTHONY COME AROUND*, by Rebecca Makkai. The events of the story take place in the art world of Lower Manhattan during the late 1980s, when the exorbitant prices works of art commanded were drying up, the same time when AIDS entered our collective consciousness. The sculptor, Francisco Ling, afflicted with the virus, is being cared for by Chapman, a photographer who builds a show around punching famous artists in the face while catching their expression on film. Another story has Celine, a fairly successful cellist, returning to her rural home and finding on her lawn a kitschy memorial of plastic flowers and cross, commemorating a young woman killed in a motorcycle accident on the cellist's lawn. In a discussion about the cross, Gregory, one of the violinists in their quartet who believes himself Celine's star-crossed lover, says to her that the way events in her life are going that she must believe in signs, to which Celine responds that she does not. Gregory counters that she must believe in signs if she believes in music. Add to Celine's observations of signs, the four members of the quartet playing the fourth movement of Bartók's fourth quartet, and the four points of the cross on her lawn. Signs, suffering, music and innocence are part of Makkai's stories, the belief that anyone can know the suffering of another simply by being in tune with the moment as historical. Is that empathy?

As a musician myself, I am generally leery of authors who use music in their fiction, as it is so often only half understood. But by the same token, writers who get it right are a sheer joy; I am thinking especially of Vikram Seth (*AN EQUAL MUSIC*), Richard Powers (*THE TIME OF OUR SINGING* and *ORFEO*), and now Rebecca Makkai. There is not music in every one of these seventeen stories, but those that do use it are memorable. "The Worst You Ever Feel" has a twelve-year-old prodigy playing the violin with his father's old teacher, a Romanian who escaped the Holocaust only to be imprisoned by the Communists. The Soviet era comes back in several other tales, such as "Exposition," a chilling partially-redacted report of the execution of a dissident pianist during her concert. But not all are shaded by war; one of my favorites, "Cross," features a female Asian cellist and some younger musicians from the Marlboro Festival playing a Bartók string quartet; any violence in the piece has to do with the tacky shrine that some neighbors have erected in her front yard to remember a girl killed in a motorcycle crash, and the cellist's own defensive withdrawal from normal social or sexual life. And others are even funny, such as "Couple of Lovers on a Red Background," in which J. S.

Acclaimed for her novels *The Borrower* and *The Hundred-Year House*, Rebecca Makkai demonstrates that she is a younger master of the short story form in her compelling, quite superb, collection; *Music for Wartime*. Drawing partly upon her Hungarian Jewish family history, Makkai offers memorable tales in which searching for one's personal identity is a reoccurring theme. Her tales vary in length from being as short as approximately two pages (*The Singing Women*, *Other Brands of Poison (First Legend)*, and *A Bird in the House* (Third Legend)) to the longest, *Painted Ocean, Painted Ship*, approximately thirty pages, yet not once does she falter in offering readers less than superb explorations into personal memory and identity, in settings that range across mythical landscapes set in Eastern Europe to those far more realistic in the Midwestern United States. One of the early gems is the collection's second story, *The Worst You Ever Feel*, in which the son of a noted classical musician finally realizes why his father fled Hungary for the United States in 1941, sometime in 1989, soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In *Peter Torrelli, Falling Out*, two gay men who have been friends since high school visit the Art Institute in Chicago, with one wondering how to save the other, since his life seems to be on the brink of disaster. *Couple of Lovers on a Red Background* demonstrates richly, and quite compellingly, Makkai's penchant for ample intelligence, wit, and heart in these stories, with her protagonist, a younger woman, realizes that she is dating a centuries-old giant of Western Civilization music, introducing him to some of the finest contemporary pop music and art.

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