

Readers Notes

The Violin Man

by Colin Thompson

SYNOPSIS

An elderly man, Oscar, plays the violin outside a theatre every single day of the year—except for Christmas—and has done so for as long as anyone can remember. Once upon a time, his daughter Marietta had been there too, dancing. But Marietta has since died and now Oscar is alone. He cherishes the times that he can see her ghost, dancing under the streetlights.

Every night, while people queue for their tickets, Oscar takes them into his magical world of music and dreams. For Oscar is a dreamer. He dreams of playing inside the theatre and being a famous violinist. One day, the doorman makes his dream come true: just before closing time, he leads Oscar through the deserted theatre and on to the stage, and Oscar begins to play to the darkness. What he doesn't realise is that the conductor is listening to every note, and is mesmerised. 'That was beautiful,' he says. 'Would you play again tomorrow?'

The next day Oscar gets to play up on stage with the orchestra, in front of a captive audience. He creates magic once again, as the music wraps everyone in its arms. But when Oscar opens his eyes, all he sees is darkness. And when he closes them, he can't even see Marietta. As the lights come back on and the audience stands and cheers, Oscar realises that dreams aren't necessarily better than reality.

The following night, as he plays on the pavement, he appreciates the closeness he feels with the audience. And when he closes his eyes, he can see Marietta once again, dancing in the shadows. 'Don't worry,' he tells her. 'I won't leave you again.'

STYLE

The Violin Man is written in third person, with language that is poetic and full of imagery. But the illustrations tell a lot of the story as well, and create the world of dreams that is central to the story. This is done through the use of symbolism, while reality is depicted in a much simpler fashion. For example, Oscar's dream is conveyed on pages 14-15—this is how he envisages playing inside the theatre will be like. The following spread, however, pages 16-17, shows reality as black—that is, when Oscar does play inside the theatre, all he can see is darkness and hence there is nothing lively or rich or exciting about the experience at all. Note that his stance in both illustrations is identical. This sort of treatment can be observed throughout the book. The illustrations have been done on computer and seem almost 3D, an effect that is deeply captivating and striking. Much time could be spent simply studying the illustrations and their intricate details.

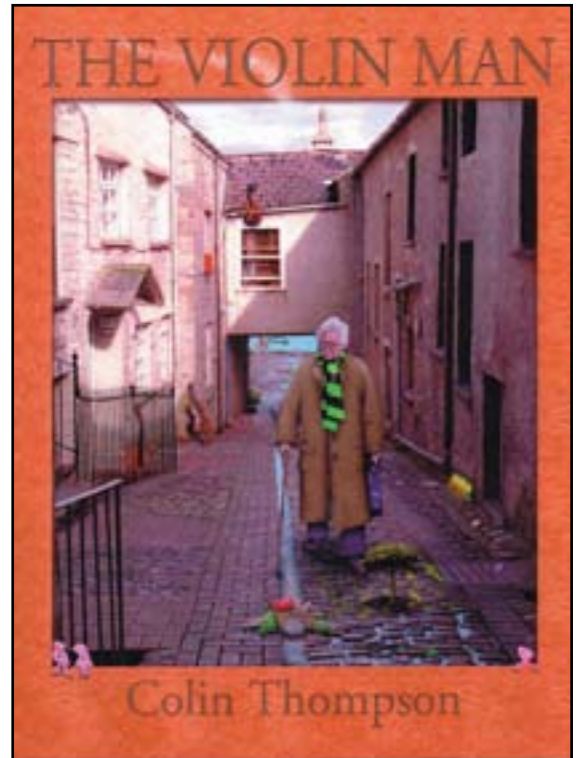
AUTHOR'S COMMENT

What inspired you to write this book?

I honestly don't know. Like almost everything I write, the idea just came into my head one day. The more I thought about it, the more I got ideas for pictures I wanted to draw too.

How did you illustrate the book and how long did it take?

I drew all these illustrations directly on the computer. I use an Apple Mac with a Wacom graphics tablet which is like a smooth drawing surface and you draw on it with a stylus and what you draw comes up on the screen. You can make lines thicker by



pressing harder and the other end of the stylus even works like an eraser! You can make a brush out of absolutely anything. To help, I took photos with a Fuji digital camera and then re-drew them on the computer, sort of like tracing paper over a photo. The software I used was Photoshop 7. I've also recently started using Painter 8 but not on *The Violin Man*.

What was the hardest part about writing and illustrating the book?

The hardest part was being patient enough to finish all the pictures. When I've written a book and worked out roughly what's going in the illustrations, I want to get on with the next book right away.

What is the main message you would like the reader to get out of reading your book?

I really disapprove of children's books with messages. They always end up being patronising. This doesn't mean you can't deal with serious things in children's books and that there can't be messages there for the reader to find.

What can you tell me about the 'pink creatures' and Max?

Max was one of my dogs and you can find out all about him, including his fan club, at - <http://www.colinthompson.com/page6.htm>. The pink creatures have no explanation. They are obviously the product of a disturbed mind and have nothing at all to do with me. Every morning when I turned on the computer and started work on the pictures, they were there.

EDITOR'S COMMENT

The Violin Man is a lyrical and moving tale with themes of love, loss and music. Colin Thompson is an award-winning, bestselling writer whose books consistently touch the heart. This is the first time he has created his illustrations on computer, adding a new and very exciting dimension to his work.

EDUCATIONAL APPLICABILITY

The Violin Man can be used in various ways in the classroom:

1. The main theme in the book is dreams. Everyone dreams of being something they're not. Oscar dreams of being a famous violin player, but in the end he realises that he's really living out his dream. Why are people generally not satisfied with what they've got? Is this a bigger problem nowadays with more 'toys' and distractions in a more commercial world? Get students to write about their dreams. Look at the illustrations, identifying how they depict reality and fantasy. Get students to draw a picture based on reality and one based on fantasy.
2. Play some music, ranging from classical to jazz to pop. Ask students to close their eyes and think about what they see. Discuss how the music made them feel and what images were conjured up. Get students to draw a picture of these images, using colour to depict the feeling of the musical piece.
3. Who is Max? Explore Colin's website to find out the answer. Find Max on every page in the book. Research the origin of Max in Colin's books.
4. Computer studies: get students to create their own illustration using a computer program.
5. Another theme in the book is loss. In the book, Oscar has lost his daughter. Discuss loss as a class, sensitively asking students to relate their own stories of loss, such as that of a grandparent or pet (this may work better as a written exercise, depending on your class)