

[ HARDCOVER: US ]

# There's no solution to love's arithmetic

Strange, beautiful and melancholic, Paolo Giordano's novel deserves all its success

BY TOBIAS JONES  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

I was fully expecting, purely for reasons of professional envy, to dislike this book. Anyone whose first novel sells more than a million copies worldwide, and goes on to win Italy's most prestigious literary prize, the Premio Strega, is bound to turn the rest of us slightly green. Add to that the fact that Paolo Giordano is the right side of 30 and that writing is, for him, but a hobby (he's actually a particle physicist) and you'll understand why I was tightening up my laces to give his pretentiously titled tome a good kicking.

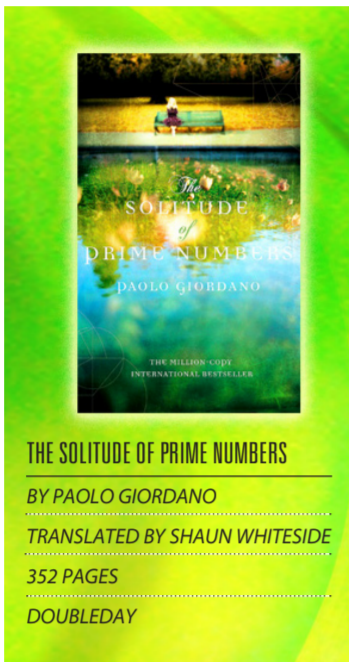
But actually it's a very accomplished book and deserves all its success. It is ostensibly a coming-of-age novel about two people who had traumatic incidents in their childhoods. Alice had a skiing accident, broke her leg and is forever labeled a cripple because of her limp. Mattia, meanwhile, abandoned his twin sister in a park; because she was mentally retarded, he found her an embarrassing encumbrance. She was never seen again. Giordano traces the next 24 years of their lives: their dislocation from society, their discomfort with their overbearing or overly solicitous parents, their distance from their school friends and even from each other. The title comes from Mattia's notion (he's a math buff) that Alice and he are "twin primes", like 11 and 13, or 17 and 19, lonely individuals that are forever linked but forever separated.

Much of the novel is taken up with the pair's painful, awkward teenage years. There are, inevitably, prolonged episodes of self-harm and anorexia. There's a tattooing incident and much anxiety about kissing and physical contact. There are many scenes about the cruelty, self-consciousness and forced spontaneity of adolescence. It's a pretty bleak read but hypnotic at the same time because, like a helpless parent, you come to care so much about these damaged children.

Mattia is the archetypal child prodigy who finds it easier to relate to numbers than humans. He's an antisocial character, unable to look people in the eye or unburden himself of his guilt. His only relationship in life is with mathematical patterns and geometrical shapes, with the result that he pulls out pretty bizarre metaphors: kissing becomes "a banal sequence of vectors"; people wave their hands "as if imitating the shape of a helix"; when his legs tremble the word "anelastic" springs into his head.

Alice is only slightly more functional. She tries to bring Mattia out, to coax him into an adult world, but she herself

## Publication Notes



THE SOLITUDE OF PRIME NUMBERS

BY PAOLO GIORDANO

TRANSLATED BY SHAUN WHITESIDE

352 PAGES

DOUBLEDAY

remains in the grip of a disorder. She's repulsed by the physicality of food and her life starts to stutter to a halt like a car running out of petrol. Other minor characters, such as gay Denis or smooth Fabio, are equally convincingly portrayed, as are a series of tiny observations, such as the fact that during an argument inanimate objects become "terribly insistent."

Part of the success of the book comes from its minimalism. Scenes, dialogue and descriptions are — in sharp contrast to the florid nature of much Italian fiction — brief, almost terse. It would have been easy to fall into melodrama and produce a happy resolution, but Giordano remains as icy as his characters, offering only misunderstandings and missed opportunities until the bitter end. The moment of truth comes with Mattia locked in a bathroom, forced to make a decision. Instead of concluding that "things are meant to be," that there might be meaning or purpose or fate or providence, he simply concludes that people clutch at coincidences "and from them they draw a life." Mattia, it's clear, is not one to clutch at coincidences, let alone a woman.

It all makes for a melancholic, but strangely beautiful, read. Shaun Whiteside's translation is exemplary and the acute descriptions of teenage competitiveness, angst and aspiration bring to mind Alan Warner's writing. In some ways the book's cult status is similar to Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and perhaps for the same reason: it's strangely enjoyable, almost consoling, to read about other people's fictional tragedies.

Tobias Jones's novel, *The Solati Case*, is published by Faber.



SUNDAY PROFILE

Highly regarded flute maker Wang Cheng-jung works on the body of a flute in his workshop.

PHOTO: JIMMY CHUANG, TAIPEI TIMES



It takes a lot of trial and error before a flute maker can really become a master.

— Wang Cheng-jung, flute maker



## The flute doctor

Wang Cheng-jung is set on surpassing his international competitors with the 'healthy' flutes he makes

BY JIMMY CHUANG  
STAFF REPORTER

Flute maker Wang Cheng-jung (汪正榮) has high ambitions. "Japanese and American flute makers lead the world," he said. "But I want to show the world that Taiwanese flute makers can also come up with world-class flutes."

The 53-year-old flute maker currently has his own studio in Kuandu, Taipei County. Making and fixing flutes has been his lifelong job and the only thing, Wong says, that makes him smile.

His two-story studio resembles a small factory, cluttered with machinery and what appear to be metalworking tools, though it's difficult to immediately discern what exactly is made here. It's only when Wong and his assistant pick up the tools and begin bending and hammering thin silver pipes that the object of Wong's affections becomes clear.

"A 'healthy' flute is something that I will always insist on, no matter how much the flute is worth," said Wong.

A healthy flute has a sound that is clean and loud, but is also well-tuned and functions normally and accurately. The finger holes are either completely open or sealed by keys when the flute is played, and there must be a good headjoint, the most important part of a flute, which is also the most difficult to make.

"This is the hardest part of the entire production process," Wong said

as he tested the headjoint he had just constructed by blowing into it, listening to the sound it made, and making adjustments. "It must fit the shape of the [player's mouth] so when he [or she] blows into it, the air will flow smoothly from the headjoint to the rest of the flute."

Wong then demonstrated the production of the instrument's body. Following a manual that he calls the flutemaker's "bible," he installed keypads and neck screws onto a silver tube. "Whether the keys can close completely and open smoothly determines the sound the flute makes," Wong explained. "If they do not work, you will hear the sound of air leaking from the flute as it is played."

### LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

It takes approximately 200 hours for Wong to produce a brand new, hand-made silver flute, which could cost about NT\$180,000. Although flutes can be made of wood, copper, silver or gold, according to Wong, silver is the best and most widely used material in today's market.

Upon encountering his first harmonica when he was 14 years old, Wong fell in love with music. He first played a flute during his junior year in college. "I immediately fell in love with the musical instrument," Wong recalls, adding that he purchased his first for NT\$10,000. "I spent a lot of

time practicing."

It's no surprise, then, that although Wong graduated from Feng Chia University with a bachelor's degree from the Department of Water Resources Engineering and Conservation, his first job, after serving his compulsory military term, was as a flute maker at a Yamaha KHS Music Company factory in Luchou, Taipei County. "Working at KHS was the period when I learned pretty much everything about making a flute," Wong said.

Ten years after he joined KHS, Wong left to establish his own studio, where he has been working for the past 16 years.

Although he is a flute maker, Wong does not always recommend expensive flutes. "Prices do not necessarily mean quality. As long as the flute comes with a good pipe that fits the flutist and tight seals that can completely open and close the instrument's pinholes, it will be the best flute that a flutist can get. It does not have to be very expensive."

### THE FUTURE OF FLUTE MAKING

Nor does Wong always recommend fixing broken flutes. "If it is an expensive flute, I will do my best to fix it for my client. If it is not, I will recommend my client give it up because it usually costs more than NT\$3,000 to fix a damaged flute, which can be more than what it is worth," Wong said.

Even as he aspires to surpass his Japanese and American counterparts, Wong is also worried that the skills he knows will be lost someday, as fewer and fewer people take the time to learn the craft of flute making. "To make a good pipe for the flute, it takes time and experience to test, test and test. This part is not written down in black and white and cannot be described, either. It takes a lot of trial and error before a flute maker can really become a master," Wong said. "Also, most parents would expect their children to become remarkable flutists, instead of flute makers."

Flutist James Lin (林仁斌), who has been one of Wong's regular customers for 20 years, calls Wong a "master" of flute making. "What is so special about him is that he has respect for artists," Lin said.

The 37-year-old flutist said that Wong always insists on making flutes that fit his customers' needs. "Every hand-made flute has its own character. Wong is capable of making the unique character of each flute fit what its owner needs," Lin added. "In addition to the term 'healthy,' I think 'pure' should be another good word to describe his [Wong's] flutes."

According to Lin, "preciseness" is the most important of a flute's attributes. "I always feel like I am in total control of the flute, whenever I am playing one of his products," Lin said.

[ HARDCOVER: US ]

## When affairs of the heart require courage

Shahriar Mandanipour's novel is at once a love story, a postmodern account of censorship, and a meditation on the interplay of life and art

BY MICHIKO KAKUTANI  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

In what now reads like an eerie echo of the killing of Neda Agha-Soltan, a young Iranian woman cut down by a bullet during this month's election protests and captured on video, the Iranian author of this new novel foresees the possible death of his heroine in the streets of Tehran: "The girl does not know that in precisely seven minutes and seven seconds, at the height of the clash between the students, the police, and the members of the Party of God, in the chaos of attacks and escapes, she will be knocked into with great force, she will fall back, her head will hit against a cement edge, and her sad Oriental eyes will forever close."

Her fellow students, "aware that they are about to be attacked, break into a heartrending anthem: My fellow schoolmate, you are with me and beside me, ... you are my tear and my sigh, ... the scars of the lashes of

tyranny rest on our bodies."

*Censoring an Iranian Love Story* by Shahriar Mandanipour — an Iranian writer who is currently a visiting scholar at Harvard — is, at once, a novel about two young Iranians trying to conduct a covert romance in Tehran; a postmodern account of the efforts of their creator — or his fictional alter ego — to grapple with the harsh censorship rules of his homeland; and an Escher-like meditation on the interplay of life and art, reality and fiction.

Although Mandanipour's literary games occasionally make this book read like a Charlie Kaufman movie script run amok, his novel leaves the reader with a harrowing sense of what it is like to live in Tehran under the mullahs' rule, and the myriad ways in which the Islamic government's strict edicts on everything from clothing to relationships between the sexes permeate daily life.

The novel provides a darkly comic view of the Kafkaesque

absurdities of living in a country where movies could be subject to review by a blind censor (in her best-selling memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi wrote about the same blind, or nearly blind, censor); where records of enrollment at a university can be so thoroughly erased by authorities that a student can come to doubt even his own name.

In fact, at its best, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* becomes a kind of Kundera-like rumination on philosophy and politics, exploring the nervous interface between the public and the private in a totalitarian state, even as it playfully investigates the possibilities and limits of storytelling.

Mandanipour's two central characters, Sara and Dara, are both virgins — she is 22, and he is 30-something — and naive about courtship, never mind the mysteries of sex and love. They must contend with the watchful eyes of parents and nosy neighbors, and also with those of

## Publication Notes



CENSORING AN IRANIAN LOVE STORY

BY SHAHRIAR MANDANIPOUR

TRANSLATED BY SARA KHALILI

295 PAGES

ALFRED A. KNOPF

the ever-present morality police, who patrol the city, looking for unmarried couples, public signs of affection, dress-code violations, signs of Westernization. Dara has already served time in prison for selling and renting illegal videos of movies by Western filmmakers like Altman, Kubrick and Welles.

Dara courts Sara by leaving hidden messages for her in library books — he places little purple dots under certain letters in certain words, which she must then decode. Eventually the two contrive to meet in places like a museum, a movie theater and even a hospital emergency room, where they can steal a few moments of conversation.

While Sara finds herself falling for Dara, she is also considering the marriage proposal of a well-to-do entrepreneur named Sinbad, whom her family wants her to marry. Sinbad is not an unappealing figure, and his wealth would enable her to help her relatives and buy the freedom to travel to the West.

While recounting the adventures of his characters, Mandanipour also shares the travails of being an Iranian writer. He says he is "tired of writing dark and bitter stories, stories populated by ghosts and dead narrators with predictable endings of death and destruction," but while he wants to tell a love story, he knows that this is not easy in a country where a censor scours books for "immoral and corruptive words and phrases" that might pollute readers' minds, and where "there is a politico-religious presumption that any proximity and discourse between a man and a woman who are neither married nor related is a prologue to deadly sin."

He tells us about the linguistic acrobatics required to circumvent the censors; the complexities of censorship in Iran, where there is a literary tradition of using ornate metaphors and similes for bodily and sexual attributes (including lots of fruit, flower and food imagery); and the government's

reported use of Western computer software to identify the authors of literary works published under pseudonyms.

As the novel progresses, the author's relationship with a censor who works under the alias of Porfiry Petrovich (the name of the magistrate in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*) grows increasingly complicated, as does his relationship with his own characters, who, he suggests, have begun to escape his control.

Some of Mandanipour's efforts to inject his story with surreal, postmodern elements feel distinctly strained (the intermittent appearances of a hunchbacked midget, in particular, are annoying), but he's managed, by the end, to build a clever Rubik's Cube of a story, while at the same time giving readers a haunting portrait of life in the Islamic Republic of Iran: arduous, demoralizing and constricted even before the brutalities of the current crackdown.