

This review of *The Cipher* will appear in an edited format in the forthcoming *Italian Canadiana* (Spring 2025)

Gunn, Genni. *The Cipher*. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Signature Editions. 2024. Pp 242. ISBN 978-1-77324-142-5 (paperback) \$22.95.

The Cipher is a powerful, cinematic wartime love story destined for the silver screen.

Genni Gunn is not a new comer to the literary scene. She is an accomplished author, musician, and translator. She has published three short stories collections and three books of poetry as well as three other novels, all receiving critical acclaim. She published *Solitaria* (long listed for the Giller Prize), *Tracing Iris* (made into a film, *The Riverbank*), and *Thrice Upon a Time* (Finalist for the Commonwealth Writer's Prize). *The Cipher*, her latest release, is a complex love story culled from Genni Gunn's own research on her father's involvement in the shadowy work of wartime espionage.

The Cipher revolves around Olivia Baldini and Nino Fabris. Olivia is the daughter of an Italian family living in London in the 1930's. She has a rare and extreme neurodiversity (Hyperthymesia), "She wasn't sure how or why it happened exactly, but she could recall every single moment of her life since then, in extreme detail, and re-experience all the original emotions as if they were occurring in the present..." (19). Nino is from Pozzecco in Udine, Italy, whose parents and grandfather were early casualties of the growing Fascist movement in that country. Independently and under different circumstances, Olivia and Nino are recruited by the British government to serve as Special Operation Executives (SOE), in other words, as spies for the Allied side. Olivia's 'giftedness' and Nino's hatred for the Fascists made them perfect recruits for Churchill's newly established volunteer force to wage a secret war against Hitler and Mussolini.

The novel, covering the years 1939 to 1954, is mostly written in third-person omniscience only to be interrupted by three short chapters rooted in the present (2010) which the author calls "Intermissions". In the first of those "Intermissions", written interestingly in the first person, Genni Gunn links the wartime love story of Olivia and Nino to a present day Vancouver archivist who having returned to her father's ancestral town asks, 'Is my father really the monster I've created' (11).

That Genni Gunn can write prose is never in doubt. She immediately engages her readers within the first few pages, 'After my mother died, I gouged him out of my life' (11) and '[I] prowl dank darkened rooms for clues, tiptoe past six identical bedrooms, their doors ajar, their walls alive with the austere portraits of the dead, whose remains lie in the cemetery nearby, whose youthful faces stare from photos encased in glass tombstones' (11). In the first three chapters you are regaled with a flawless introduction to *The Cipher*.

Olivia and Nino's intermingled, passionate and complicated relationship is shrouded by the horrors of World War II. It begins when Olivia's innocent world comes undone the day the Headmaster announces, 'Britain has declared war on Germany' (20). Soon after, her parents' store is vandalised. Her father, classified as an Italian enemy alien, is first sent to an internment camp, then along with his wife he is given the option to be deported. Her brothers gone to war, Olivia is left with her grandparents to make sense of this new reality. Nino's world is equally shattered as Fascist "squadristi" attack his home in Udine, searching for communists, 'If Nino closed his eyes, he could almost hear loud cracks, his mother's screams, his aunt wails, his father's cry then the hiss and bursts of flames that had engulfed his mother...' (36).

Genni Gunn agile descriptive prose brings her readers close to the battlefields and throws them into the trenches of this nasty and disastrous war. There, the readers can hear the blazing machineguns and exploding bombs, feel and see the dirt and grime of the battle ground, and watch the fear, courage and desperation of the men and women caught between enemy lines engaged in heart-stopping missions. The brilliantly described darkness of war is interspersed by the combatants' attempts to find human warmth, companionship, and sometimes love, amidst this tragic, sordid destruction and loss of lives.

The reader, glued to the page, follows the zig-zagging intersecting journeys of Olivia and Nino as they, sometimes separately and at other times together, trudge from England, to Abyssinia, to Kenia, to Algeria, to Egypt, to Italy, and back to England. Along the way, the novel interlaces youthful innocence, love, lust, desire, sadness, death, and last, unforgivable betrayals. In effect, a spectrum of life's best and worst moments, except that these moments are made more acute, more visceral, as they play-out in a world charred by fear and danger.

This powerful love story is enrobed with copious amount of World War II history, some that we know, some that we didn't know, and some made much clearer and more meaningful by the author's narrative skills. There are sanguine description of war's atrocities, 'Nino existed amid the groans and wails of the wounded, in a slow-motion blur of bombshells, grenades, and explosions' (39). And again, '...when one of the American ships – the USS John Harvey – had exploded, it released a poisonous cloud of sulphur into the air and an oily substance into the sea that burned the American sailors who had jumped into the water to save themselves' (148). There are moments of unadulterated humanity, '[Nino] raised his rifle, and while the boy flinched, he shot into the air. "Go now, run," he said, motioning the pilot away. "Run."...' (33). There are also moments of passion, of true love, 'They fell into each other on the bed, and Olivia's heart thudded against his' (149).

Lost and sidelined by Nino and Olivia's love story is the beautiful Bianca, the other main protagonist. Mostly in the shadows, she is an enigmatic and fascinating character. Her pivotal, painful role in the novel is early foreshadowed, 'Nino shook his head. "No, not my wife." He handed the photo to Elio. "*Fidanzata*," uttering the promise he wasn't sure he believed in' (35). The reader can't help but feel the pain of this woman living on the sidelines of her husband's true love, '... "Olivia" my mother said, her lips trembling with the effort, "was a spectre who haunted all our married life."...' (192). It is that pain that makes Bianca's actions almost pardonable.

With *The Cipher* Genni Gunn proves once again that she is a creative, talented and masterful story teller, able to weave meticulous research material into a complicated and passionate wartime love story with a delectable and surprising ending.

John Calabrò
Toronto