

Our Review

Secrecy is an enjoyable love story set in 17th Century Florence, well paced and easy to read. One of the novel's strengths is how well it portrays Florence at this particular point in its history. You get a real sense of how hard and cautious life was for those in the city, particularly for foreigners and Jews, against the backdrop of the Duke's erratic rules and justice. He manages to convey the atmosphere of fear and suspicion and the brutality of the time – murders, stabbings starving peasants trying to kill Zummo to eat his horse. But at times the use of historical colour seems a bit laboured.

The novel's central character Zummo creates waxwork models for the Duke and the novel is similar to those of Tracey Chevalier in the way that the artist's work is closely explored and detailed. There are plenty of gruesome details about how the wax models are produced and insights into the darker underworld of Florence. The relationship between the Duke and Zummo and the potential role of the wax models however never really develops and you are left feeling that there is an anticlimax to this part of the story.

The novel takes up instead the love story between Zummo and a young woman he meets in Florence, and the challenge to this relationship from one of the Duke's main advisers. The love story takes the reader to a dramatic ending outside Florence.

The secrecy theme is well developed - Zummo, his mother, Faustina his lover, Stufa the corrupt Dominican, the Duke's wife and even the waxwork all have secrets they are hiding – but this can make the conclusion rather unsatisfactory, as we never really know what became of the waxwork or what really happened to the girl who served as a model.

Overall the novel was a good read but at times the writing and concept felt too laboured.

2nd Review

I'm going to be upfront about this – I was disappointed by the book. It promised much. A beautiful, if slightly cold, cover, an interesting premise (an artist making wax models of plague victims in late 17th Century Italy) *and* a recommendation by Sarah Dunant.

So, what went wrong? The story was highly descriptive and I knew what the characters were doing, seeing and smelling but I never knew what they were feeling. The novel was emotionless. Perhaps this lack of emotion was a proxy for Zummo's material of choice – wax, a material that is cold and hard to the touch? It also felt very fragmented. Sometimes the method of building up the plot and characters in small chunks can work well, but here it failed to engage me with the story and I found the novel frustrating. Although it was historically very detailed, Zummo never came to life as an historical figure. I wanted to know more about him and his work prior to his commission from Cosimo Medici. This might not have been a problem if one of the selling points on the dust jacket hadn't been about Zummo's macabre subject matter – wax models of plague victims.

I also found the lack of chapters made the story relentless and, by the time I reached the end (and I would have given up long before if we'd not been asked to review this), I wasn't sure what the novel had really been about.