



# The Crooked Maid

*Dan Vyleta*

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## **The Crooked Maid** Dan Vyleta

Vienna, 1948. The war is over, and as the initial phase of de-Nazification winds down, the citizens of Vienna struggle to rebuild their lives amidst the rubble.

Anna Beer returns to the city she fled nine years earlier after discovering her husband's infidelity. She has come back to find him and, perhaps, to forgive him. Traveling on the same train from Switzerland is 18-year-old Robert Seidel, a schoolboy summoned home to his stepfather's sickbed and the secrets of his family's past.

As Anna and Robert navigate an unrecognizable city, they cross paths with a war-widowed American journalist, a hunchbacked young servant girl, and a former POW whose primary purpose is to survive by any means and to forget. Meanwhile, in the shells of burned-out houses and beneath the bombed-out ruins, a ghost of a man, his head wrapped in a red scarf, battles demons from his past and hides from a future deeply uncertain for all.

In *The Crooked Maid*, Dan Vyleta returns to the shadows of war-darkened Vienna, proving himself once again "a magical storyteller, master of the macabre" (David Park).

## **The Crooked Maid Details**

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Author : Dan Vyleta

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# From Reader Review The Crooked Maid for online ebook

## Susan says

This is set nine years after, "The Quiet Twin," and, although not a sequel as such, it helps if you have read the earlier book as many characters from that book feature or are mentioned.

It is 1948 and Anna Beer is returning to Vienna to meet her estranged husband, Dr Anton Beer. On the train journey with her is Robert Seidel, whose father, Detective Teuben, also featured in "The Quiet Twin." The two arrive in a Vienna which is hardly recognisable from the city they left before the war.

Robert's mother had remarried after the death of his father and he has become concerned by her odd letters. He arrives at the family home to find his step father has been pushed out of a window, his brother, Wolfgang, arrested for the crime and Poldi, Wolfgang's young and pregnant wife, installed in a bedroom listening to music and flicking through magazines. Nobody seems to be interested in his arrival and the new maid (the 'crooked maid' of the book's title) seems openly hostile, while a strange man appears to be watching the house.

Meanwhile, Anna returns to her apartment to find her husband gone. She enlists the help of Karel Neumann, a Czech who was in a prisoner of war camp with Anton, to help find him. There is also a side story about the Rothman family, who claim they were the original owners of the home the Seidel's are currently living in.

I really loved "The Quiet Twin," but, although I really enjoyed this, it seemed to lack the coherence of the earlier book. Both books have a good cast of intertwining characters and a fantastic sense of place. However, somehow, the plot of this book got a little confused and lost for me. I enjoyed the atmosphere of a post-war Vienna, going into the Cold War, and there were many nods to Dostoevsky (one of my favourite authors) which I also appreciated. However, somehow this sadly did not quite make a 5 star read for me. There is, though, no doubt that Dan Vyleta is an immensely talented author and I would like to re-read this in the future and feel I will perhaps appreciate it more if I come back to it later.

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## Krista says

What an amazing experience is The Crooked Maid. I picked it up because it made the Giller Prize shortlist, and judged alongside the other books I've read on that list so far, this would have been my choice for the prize -- with apologies to the actual winner, Hellgoing, which I also quite enjoyed. Absolutely thrilling and rich in detail, Dan Vyleta's goal -- "I wanted to write a world, not a book" -- is fully and compellingly realised (I do believe I'm gushing).

Set in Vienna in 1948, a time and place I haven't given much thought to, Denazification is wrapping up and the Cold War is just beginning. The streets are still filled with wartime rubble and the citizens go about with their threadbare coats and ration books, escaping their bleak realities with homemade schnapps in rundown bars, rubbing elbows with those who thought Hitler was martyred and those who were broken in his concentration camps. An early scene from the city:

Across from the gateway, in a house thrown open to the public eye by a bombed-away wall, a woman woke to her doll's house existence. She stretched, sang a snatch of Wehrmacht song, put a pot of water on the cooker; and, in the coarsest of Viennese dialects, tilting the "a" in arse into a drawn-out, listing oh-ah-rse, she cursed in lazy succession first the Germans, then the Allies, then the Jews, all of whom stood invited to insert into their backsides some unidentified object she seemed to think was clinging to her palm as she thrice performed a shoving motion in front of her broad hips.

That doll's house view of the crazy lady perfectly captured the mood of the city and is one of dozens of such vignettes that are inserted throughout the book by Vyleta -- the Cambridge-educated Historian; the Czech-born, German-raised, now-residing-in-Canada author . As Vyleta himself said: "I'm a Czech-German writing in English — I'm screwed!" That Vyleta can so perfectly capture the time and place that is so foreign to me is, perhaps, no great authorial feat, but that English isn't his first language *is* a wonder -- the writing in *The Crooked Maid* is note perfect: whether describing someone's appearance or the bang-on dialogue or the mood-setting or the historical details that begin each section or the mysterious inclusion of a murder of crows or the breaking of the fourth wall (*Chekhov said that if you introduce a gun in Act One, it has to go off in Act Three. He does not tell us what happens if you introduce it in Act Three*), I was intrigued and beguiled at every turn.

This book begins with two wealthy strangers meeting on a train (with postscript acknowledgement given to Dostoevsky for the inspiration) -- Robert, a student returning from abroad, and Anna, a middle-aged, beautiful woman, who is also returning to Vienna after a long absence -- two people who wouldn't expect to cross paths again once they reach their destination, but who (a la Dickens, who is also acknowledged in the endnotes) find themselves joined by coincidences and a motley cast of characters: a "ghost" in a red scarf; a police detective; a foreign journalist; a Czech giant; and Eva, the titular "crooked maid":

It was her back that was twisted: not hunched, but spun like a twist of hair around a finger. It was as though she'd been caught in a perpetual pirouette, one hip higher than the other, the right shoulder leading, an odd sideways prancing to her ever-shuffling feet. If she could but unscrew herself: throw her chest out, gain some range of movement in that stiff and leaning neck; tuck in the shoulder blade that stuck out like a broken flipper.

There are murders to solve and missing persons to find and the mysteries are drawn out just long enough to keep the reader engrossed and engaged. There are also former-Nazis and anti-Semites and a people, the Austrians, who are attempting to distance themselves from the Germans; to paint themselves as Hitler's first victims, not his first collaborators. To those who have been away, the attitudes and justifications of those who had to live through the war -- who had to find ways to survive the daily facts of their existence in occupied territory -- can be horrifying. When Robert confronts his brother Wolfgang over rumours of his behaviour in the SS, he explains:

"You remember, Robert, when we were children, Dad would take us fishing sometimes. He insisted we clean our own fish. First you slit them open with a narrow knife. From asshole to gills, so to speak. And then --" Wolfgang hooked two fingers, mimed the process of wrenching out the guts, then wiped his hand upon his tie. "I remember you didn't like it at first. You may

even have cried. But after a while --" He shrugged, sour, amused. "You got to be pretty good at it, little brother. The blood didn't bother you at all."

In addition to his brother's callousness, Robert finds that his mother is also still pro-Nazi and unapologetic for the Aryanization that funded her rise in riches (*She had learned Nazism the way one learns any language: through constant repetition.*) and when he confronts Eva about the immorality of his family's attitudes, she replies:

"We are a people," she intoned, playful and serious all at once, "who have already forgiven themselves."

And just as the threat from the SS is finally over, as the few surviving Jews are returning to find that the homes and businesses they were forced from are now occupied by Austrians who don't quite feel guilty enough to give them back ("*The truth is that half the people on this street, they have a Jew walled in their closet. God, how they are hoping the mortar will hold.*"), there is a growing threat from the Soviets (one of four occupying powers in the postwar city) as people are being disappeared. This brings to full circle a book I read about a year ago, Nonna Bannister's *The Secret Holocaust Diaries*, a memoir written by a Ukrainian who had been captured by Nazis as they invaded the Soviet Union. She and her mother were sent to work as slave labour in a factory in Germany, and although Nonna herself survived the war, her mother was eventually sent to her death in a concentration camp. Nonna was able to make her way to America after WWII was over, but as related in *The Crooked Maid*, many liberated Russians were afraid to be repatriated, for fear of being branded German collaborators and sent off to the frozen Gulags.

This is an incredible story set in an extraordinary time; a thrilling and thoroughly literary page-turner (pretty much what *The Luminaries* aspired to be), I can't recommend *The Crooked Maid* highly enough.

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## Sandy S. says

I've got splinters in my @\$\$ from sitting on the fence about this one. I didn't love it, but I liked it enough to finish it. I liked some of the characters, but not many. I liked the writing but at times found it rather windy. Hence my 3 star, middle-of-the-road review. Okay, I would have given it 3.5 stars, but I can't, so 3 it is.

*The Crooked Maid* is a murder mystery, actually more than one, at its heart, but it takes a while for the story to get going to gel into something cohesive (at least it did for me, and while I can be admittedly thick at times, I stand by this observation). Anna, a middle aged woman heading to Vienna to find the husband she abandoned a decade ago, and Robert, a high school boy heading home after hearing that his stepfather has been pushed out a window are the central figures, and their chance meeting on a train at the start of the story leads to a chain of events, coincidences and connections that drives the tale. The setting is postwar Vienna and, with the war a still burning ember in the minds of its citizens, the characters we find are in a desperate state – motivated variously by fear, greed, and suspicion, and occasionally, love too.

Robert and Anna go their separate ways initially after their train ride, she to find her now missing husband, and he to confront the utter weirdness that has become his home life. Anna encounters Karel, a fellow p.o.w

pal of her husband's who ostensibly helps her trace her husband's last moves before he disappeared. Robert encounters the "crooked maid" of the title, a hunchbacked servant who may have had a hand in pushing his step-pa out the window, a crime for which his step-brother sits in jail. His mother meanwhile is a pill-popper who hates the maid. Slowly, and I mean *slowly*, their paths all begin to intersect again in a Venn diagram of lies, murder and happenstance. Through all this, a mysterious man in a red scarf watches them and has a sort of connection to it all, but one that I didn't feel was really necessary to the story. I kinda wondered what he was supposed to represent – at one point another character describes him as "...*the ghost of the past*." He's probably some sort of literary device that I'm too daft to pick up on, but then again, that sort of stuff doesn't interest me when I'm reading. I'm just not that deep.

This is the first book I've read by Vyleta, and I loved his characterizations and felt all of his peeps were flesh and blood real, with real motivations and actions. I loved lines like:

*"Just drive," she said, and dug in her handbag for makeup and mirror, intending to paint new life upon her fading lips.*

This pretty much sums up Anna in a nut shell, middle-aged, self absorbed and *be-yoch-y* most of the time. But sometimes I felt the descriptive passages got a little too wordy, with lots of (extra comments in parentheses) that could (really drive you nuts) if you're like me and want things a bit more streamlined. Passages like:

*To believe, then, that of all these birds we should find the very one we last saw swooping from a windowsill in grubby Hernals alight two miles to the west (as the crow flies), in a narrow courtyard once dominated by a chestnut tree and lying open to view to the back windows of Anna Beer's apartment, is to believe in coincidence as the prime mover of all story...*

It goes on like this for a while.

All in all, I liked *The Crooked Maid*, and I'll probably check out some of Vyleta's other work. *The Quiet Twin*, in particular sounds interesting, and is in fact the prequel to this book, but from what I can tell, not necessary to read beforehand. I think I'll just have to be in the mood for it, kind of like being prepared to sit down to a full course meal rather than breezing through the drive-thru.

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## Chaitra says

I learned after reading *The Crooked Maid* that this book had some characters who first appeared or were connected with Vyleta's previous novel *The Quiet Twin*. It's not a break the deal situation, as this book is a standalone, but it would have been nice to know going into it. As it is, it's an interesting book. Set in a broken Vienna a few years after the World War II, a few of the strands in the story examine the mystery of a missing Dr. Anton Beer (the main character in the *Twin*) and some intrigue involving the family of Detective Teuben (also from the *Twin*), Teuben himself not making an appearance.

These are just two strands of a fractured narrative that obviously comes together in the end. I liked it for the most part. War-torn Vienna was extremely well depicted and so was the beginning of the red menace. It was well written and all the diffuse narratives were intriguing. It was only towards the end that I felt the narrative, if not fell apart, certainly became too much follow. To be fair to Vyleta, he mentions in the Afterword that he

fashioned the novel in the mold of Dickens, stacking co-incidence upon co-incidence. Except, some of it is rather too far-fetched. The strands are also a little late in coming together and when they do, they're not completely satisfactory.

In the end, even if it's a little disappointing, it's a fun and weird book. I'll certainly keep an eye out for Vyleta's future books. 3 stars.

*I received a copy of this book for review via NetGalley.*

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## **Jennifer says**

this was my first time reading dan vyleta and i thought this book very strong. i do wish, now, that i had read his previous novel, *The Quiet Twin: A Novel*, first. while each book can stand alone, characters recur. given the nature of my personality, i feel like i just did it wrong. heh!!

so, *the crooked maid* is many things - historical fiction, mystery, literary fiction, homage. vyleta's ticking a lot of boxes with this book. is it always awesome? no. but it's very good and vyleta can really write. his ability with description is pretty stellar.

in vyleta's acknowledgments, he says:

*When I set out to write The Crooked Maid, I had contracted the Balzacian bug: I wanted to write a world, not a book. All the same, the world must be assembled piece by piece. The train ride came to me early, as did the theme of patricide, both in conscious homage to Dostoevsky, whose books I love. Other, less conscious, Dostoevskianisms have crept in, further proof that books are dangerous things: you read them and they impose on you not just their words but a whole sensibility; not incidents but a mode of seeing reality.*

vyleta also notes dickens as another influence, because of dickens' "...daring in stacking incident upon incident (and coincidence upon coincidence); his ability to connect characters high and low through crime, family scandal, and the brittle threads of chance..."

vyleta is certainly not comparing himself (or his novel) to balzac, dostoevsky or dickens. he is only giving recognition to some heavy-weight writers with distinct styles who have impacted his writing. within 'the crooked maid' chekhov's gun makes an appearance, so that was cool too!

so, given all of these mentions, it's not surprising that, in 'the crooked maid', we have a story about parricide, making use of coincidence, with a side of social commentary. it's all a bit meta, but i enjoy that. (and usually i am not a fan of coincidence...at all. here, vyleta just makes it work in a way that didn't have me rolling my eyes while mumbling 'cop-out!'.)

i am not being terribly coherent here, so apologies for that. there's a lot going on in this novel - but it's not overwhelming or confusing. i really enjoyed unravelling it all and felt as though i was in very good hands.

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## **Janice says**

Amazing story and great writing.

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## **Carrie Smith says**

The Crooked Maid by Canadian writer Dan Vyleta is a murder mystery set in 1948 post war Vienna. The Third Reich has fallen and the Cold War is just beginning and a young Robert Seidel is returning home from Switzerland to Austria's capital by train. He travels in the same train car as Anna Beer, the wife of a Viennese Doctor Anton Beer, who is en route to a planned reconciliation with her husband. The two train travelers arrive home to respective mysteries, who killed Robert's father and where has Dr. Beer disappeared to?

The book is riveting, it transports you to Vienna at a time when the rubble of the war and transition from Hitler's epoch to the new reconstruction is taking place. Within the physical and political residue of the devastation of war, the mysteries unravel. As Robert arrives home he finds his brother Wolfgang, a past member of the Nazi SS, about to go on trial for the murder of their father. Robert's mother is dealing with her grief and coping by the use of pharmaceutical drugs, while being caught in a battle of wits with the maid.

This is a book of coincidences with some of the pivotal ones being tied to Annelise Grotter, the maid in the Seidel home. Annelise is a young woman with a crooked spine, and is connected by coincidence with the missing Doctor Beer. She becomes a love interest to Robert. Upon Robert's arriving home Annelise grounds him with a clear review of his situation.

"So," she summarized, picking through his story and wondering distractedly if she should tell him hers, "your brother is a war criminal, your mother an addict, and there is a man watching the house. It's like something by Dumas."

Dan Vyleta's book is a cold war spy novel containing court room drama, double-agent style behavior and the inevitability of Russian conspiracies, within the historical context of denazification. It also deals with the dark side of the cultural framework of antisemitism of the time. Pivotal to the story line is the issue of transference of property from the Jews to the non-jewish during the war and secrets that were still quite fresh in 1948. Just because the war was over, that did not mean those that lost the war immediately changed their perceptions of the Jews, the Gypsies, the Ukrainians etc. The murder trial of Wolfgang Seidel brings out the undercurrents within society and the outcome is unique.

The book is one of the best I've read in a long time, it receives the illusive sixth star. It was nominated for the Giller prize and rightly so. There is an earlier book by Dan Vyela The Quiet Twin, which has some of the same characters but is a separate novel unto itself, set in prewar Austria.

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## **Steven Langdon says**

This is another of the five books on the shortlist for Canada's 2013 Giller Prize. The novel tells a sprawling but ultimately searing story of post-war distress, family violence and social dislocation in the grim poverty of occupied Vienna after its period under Nazi control. The dark characters that people its pages and the sombre plot lines make for an atmosphere that veers from threatening to macabre.



Such shadowed novels can be powerful and gripping -- witness, for instance, Carlos Ruiz Zafon's books set in the crumbling bleakness of Franco's Barcelona ("The Shadow of the Wind," "The Angel's Game.") The depth of characterization for several key figures seems central to achieving such strength (in Zafon.)

In "The Crooked Maid," there is a large number of such key characters. There are the two figures whose train journey starts the book -- the beautiful Anna Beer and the young Robert Seidel; these two remain important throughout, though each becomes overshadowed by others, and neither is ever probed very deeply by the author (in my view.) There are also Robert's family members, particularly his Nazi-oriented mother and his inscrutable brother, Wolfgang, who becomes more and more important as the book moves forward. Meanwhile, Anna moves another direction once she reaches Vienna, and connects to another set of people -- journalist Sophie Coburn, refugee Karel Neumann and policeman Nepomuk Frisch, to whom Anna reports that her husband Anton is missing. Plus two key characters come eventually to link the two groupings together -- Eva Grotter (the "crooked maid") and Timofey, the man with the red scarf.

This is, one has to say, a somewhat overwhelming list -- and there are at least five who are central to the main stories. Add to that the intersection of three major plot lines (what has happened to the father of Robert and Wolfgang? where is Anna Beer's husband? and what will happen to Eva's love affair with Robert?) The consequence is a fairly helter-skelter book, without either a core plot line or a focused character probing to tie the novel together and give it depth.

Perhaps this is mainly an atmospheric immersion into post-war Vienna, a striking time and place that should resonate for readers as an experience in re-creation. Perhaps the goal is to convey the uncertainty and confusion of lives in such a convoluted context. Certainly, overall, this is another Giller nominee that tells an interesting story. But the result for me is far less powerful and gripping than with "Caught" or "Cataract City," the previous novels reviewed.

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## **John says**

I'm not usually one for historical fiction, but this book held my interest well, although I was flagging a bit by the end. I have not read *The Quiet Twin*, set nine years earlier (pre-war vs. post-war) featuring some of the same names; I didn't feel I missed anything.

Many of the characters are not likeable, but they are *interesting*. The mother is the only one I didn't care for, but she has a limited presence in the story. One feature that didn't thrill me was having a couple of characters give long monologues about their pasts; in those cases, I looked out of the window and let the scenery roll by.

The title character herself was quite fascinating. Kate Reading gave her a very sharp voice, highlighting how her blunt directness from being raised in an orphanage contrasted with the obfuscatory, upper class Seidels. The Soviet prison camp scenes struck me as grimmer than the references to Nazi atrocities, but those were more direct presentations. The book is touted as having a Cold War backdrop, but that angle was lost on me I'm afraid. I was more struck how three years later there was still a way to go in getting lives back to pre-war normalcy. Doings at the Usher-like Seidel mansion (townhouse) serves as a terrific contrast to scenes in rat-infested cellars and dive bars.

Kate Reading does her usual outstanding job with the voices, mastering German here as she has so well French in other books I've heard her read.

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## **Shirley Schwartz says**

This is a macabre but a fascinating story set in post WWII Vienna. This book was a 2013 Giller Prize finalist, and an odds-on favourite to take the coveted prize. It didn't win the prize, but it certainly is a book that belongs on the short list. This book's strength is its remarkable sense of time and place. Vyleta describes post-war Vienna so well that it felt like I was there. The people and the city are all trying to recover from the war that took so much from them. It's almost post-apocalyptic as I'm sure a lot of German cities were after the allied invasion. Vyleta does a remarkable job with his characters too. As in so many books that I've been reading lately, I didn't really like any of the characters. They are certainly an imperfect lot in this book too, but I had to keep reading the book to see what happens to each of them. So many people that survived the War try to come back to their birthplace to try to determine what happened to their loved ones, their homes and their lives. There are so many pieces to try to find and a lot of the pieces are never found. Two very different people - Anna and Robert - are two of the people who are trying to come home to take up their lives, and they find that nothing is at all the same. Lost in a sea of uncertainty, they both turn to the strangest people for comfort and solace. The strangest of all is Eva, the crooked maid. Robert finds her at his familial home and is strangely drawn to this girl with the bent spine. Anna finds Karl, the Czech ex-soldier, and finds that she is inexplicably drawn to this huge and uncouth man. As events play out and as buried secrets come to light, Robert and Anna eventually are able to fill in some of the blanks from their previous lives. This is a dark and suspenseful story that certainly kept me turning the pages.

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## **Tripfiction says**

### **Intrigue and more in VIENNA**

Vienna, 1948 – the War had ended, and the Cold War is beginning. Vienna is a very different city to that which it was ten years' previously... largely in ruins with much destroyed. Two people heading back to the city meet on a train from Switzerland – Anna Beer to perhaps reconcile with her husband who has been in a Soviet POW camp while she spent the War in Paris, and the young and innocent Robert Seidel who has just left school in Switzerland and is returning to see his mother and brother.

Robert finds his father dead and his brother, Wolfgang, on a murder charge (from which he is later, somewhat questionably, exonerated). His mother has become a drug addict and they live with the hunchbacked (but attractive to Robert) Eva – the crooked maid of the title – and Poldi, Wolfgang's pregnant wife.

Anna returns to her apartment and finds evidence of recent occupation – though no occupiers in evidence until Karel, a vast and bumbling drunk appears and lets himself in with a key... claiming he had been given it by Anna's husband with whom he says he was in the POW camp.

The third strand of the story concerns the Jewish Rothman family with whom Seidel senior did a deal at the beginning of the War – to buy outright both the factory they jointly owned and the apartment the Seidels live in, with the consideration that they could re-purchase either at any time in the future. Is the family dead or alive – are the communications the Seidels receive from them genuine, or not?

These three very different stories – Wolfgang’s trial, Anna’s search for her husband, and the Rothman mystery – are all bound together by Eva. I will say no more!

At one level, *The Crooked Maid*, is an exciting and suspenseful tale of intrigue and double dealing in a city recovering from the War. But it is a great deal more than this – it is a BIG book with BIG characters. Vyleta captures the feel of a dark and foreboding city and its shadowy inhabitants. All the main characters have wartime experiences (Wolfgang, for example, was a Gestapo officer...) from which they are trying to run or pretend did not exist. The book is like a Russian novel in its scope.

I honestly found the book a tad confusing as I read it, and found inclusions which I did not think added anything to the story. But (and it’s a big but...) the story has returned to me several times in the days since I finished it – it is a work that is very definitely thought provoking and draws you in.

I would recommend it.

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## **Liviu says**

Loose sequel to *The Quiet Twin* and a suspenseful edge on the seat read that kept me turning the pages till the great ending; superb characters in Anna de Beer, Robert Siedel, Annelise (the crooked back girl from *Quiet twin* who is now the title character) and the mysterious and seedy former POW and current "bum and survivor at all costs", German Czech Karel Neumann, though 1948 Vienna is in a way the main character though we take a tour to the tragic past too.

I will just add the author's afterword to get a sense of the book as it reflects superbly what is in; depending on how it wears in time, this could go to my top 25 list too

"When I set out to write *The Crooked Maid*, I had contracted the Balzacian bug: I wanted to write a world, not a book. All the same, a world must be assembled piece by piece. The train ride came to me early, as did the theme of parricide, both in conscious homage to Dostoevsky, whose books I love.

Other, less conscious, Dostoevskianisms have crept in, further proof that books are dangerous things: you read them and they impose on you not just their words but a whole sensibility; not incidents but a mode of seeing reality. Structurally, the book owes much to Dickens.

I read *Our Mutual Friend* early into its writing, and took note of Dickens’s daring in stacking incident upon incident (and coincidence upon coincidence); of his ability to connect characters high and low through crime, family scandal, and the brittle threads of chance; of his book’s unstable tone that drifts from comedy to tragedy and back and is capable, despite its author’s much-decried sentimentalism, of calling forth real emotion; and of his deft management of the book’s vast cast (Dickens would have made a good film director).

The trial at the centre of *The Crooked Maid* owes much to Kay Boyle’s wonderful 1950 *New Yorker* reportage on a Frankfurt war crimes trial. Many of its details are directly inspired by this report, which is a wonderful literary performance in its own right and (along with Boyle’s other essays on postwar Germany) deserves to be rediscovered by a wider readership. *The Crooked Maid* is set only two years after my first book, *Pavel & I* (albeit in a different city), but the postwar moment it depicts is quite distinct.

If Pavel & I captures the catastrophe of deprivation at its lowest—and coldest—point, *The Crooked Maid* is interested in the social and moral flux that accompanied the early years of reconstruction. The year 1948, when the book is set, was a year of change. West Berlin had been cut off by the Soviets and had to be supplied by air; Czechoslovakia had gone Communist; and Vienna was rumoured to be riddled with spies: the Cold War had started in earnest.

At the same time, identities were shifting, and an assertive type of Austrian nationalism that distanced itself from Germany, and was given licence by the Allies to describe Austria as the first victim of an expansionist Reich rather than its willing bride, was gaining ground. POWs were still returning home, displaced persons languished in camps, denazification was slowly being wound down. In Vienna itself—a city that combines aspects of the metropolis and the village—neighbours, work colleagues, and families faced each other across the chasm of their respective war experiences, a drama played out in the shadow of entire strata of society who had been murdered by the Nazi regime.

I did not want to exploit the suffering that took place in this age of uncertainty but simply to understand it: so I started far from it, in a cozy train compartment, over a cup of sweet (yet bitter) tea"

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### **VWrulesChick says**

Where to start, post-WWII in Vienna, Austria whereby you follow Robert (student) and Anna (wife of DR) both returning to Vienna for different reasons, but their paths cross. Little do they know that there are other people they both know that will cross both of their paths. The author is descriptive and allows to you hear, feel and smell the surroundings as Vienna is picking itself up from the war. Survival and struggles with the past surfaces, but not in means anticipated. Enjoyed the mystery.

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### **Aditi says**

*"The world is full enough of hurts and mischances without wars to multiply them."*  
----J.R.R. Tolkien

Dan Vyleta, a Czech author, has penned a thrilling and compelling novel called, *The Crooked Maid* which is set across Vienna and traces two unraveling mysteries that somehow shook up almost the entire nation with it's outcome.

### **Synopsis:**

*Vienna, 1948. The war is over, and as the initial phase of de-Nazification winds down, the citizens of Vienna struggle to rebuild their lives amidst the rubble.*

*Anna Beer returns to the city she fled nine years earlier after discovering her husband's infidelity. She has come back to find him and, perhaps, to forgive him. Traveling on the same train from Switzerland is 18-year-old Robert Seidel, a schoolboy summoned home to his stepfather's sickbed and the secrets of his family's past.*

*As Anna and Robert navigate an unrecognizable city, they cross paths with a war-widowed American journalist, a hunchbacked young servant girl, and a former POW whose primary purpose is to survive by any means and to forget. Meanwhile, in the shells of burned-out houses and beneath the bombed-out ruins, a ghost of a man, his head wrapped in a red scarf, battles demons from his past and hides from a future deeply uncertain for all.*

Two people meet on the train heading towards their home city- Vienna. The war has just ended and the city is on the brink of cold war, the condition of Vienna is very grim with people overcrowding the city, soldiers returning back from their prison- in short, a city in ruins! Robert is returning back from his school in Switzerland to his mother and his step-father, whereas Anna is heading back to the city after 10years to meet her husband who just returned from the prison in Russia.

Two lives intermingle with common attraction, entwined mystery surrounding both these characters- missing husband and murdered step-father and lot of back-story about those characters who are surrounding their lives. But there's another mystery-which is bit nerve-wracking to figure that out, which is about a family-Rothman family, with whom, Robert's step-brother did a deal to purchase their factory and the estate owned by Robert's family. And the mystery was whether the communication and the contact with the Rothman family is real or not, whether they really exist or not is another part of the mystery in this book. Then why crooked maid? Well, there is one interesting character in the book, who is connected to all the three parts of the mystery. And for that you need to read this book.

The author only takes us back down the memory lane to the destroyed city of Vienna after the end of war in the year 1948. But we don't see Vienna from the eyes of the author or through his detailing or portrayal of the city, instead we feel the dreadfulness of Vienna lurking in the air through the eyes of the characters.

The characters are the building blocks of mystery, plot, back-drop etc in this book. Yes, the author had that psychological grip on his flawed yet brilliant characters thus making their imperfections fall for them. But in someway, I felt, the characters are bit heavy with all their deep and mystifying back-stories to support their reasons of every act. Complicated? Yes, totally, which made the plot bit confusing enough for us. Each and every other character in the book are some how related to one another, this where the confusion lies. Robert, Anna and Eva are the central characters in the book and they are quite appealing in their demeanor moreover the author have featured them brilliantly. There is a huge cast of other characters which play an equally important role like those central characters. The author's narrative style is crisp and eloquent layered with the on-going events surrounding the city.

Overall, this multi-layered historical thriller is intriguing as well as captivated, but not that engaging instead the events and the characters will keep you on the loop.

**Verdict:** *This book may appeal to the non-traditional thriller fans.*

**Courtesy:** *Many thanks to the author, Dan Vyleta, for providing me with a copy of his book, in return for an honest review.*

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## **Steven Buechler says**

The thing that drives many of us to read literature is the fact is that we know humans are not just good or bad. There are complex levels in each of us depending on the situation we encounter and our station in life,

etc. etc. Literature deals with the human condition and when a good writer explores the different hues of characters and leaves a reader wondering which of their characters is really moral or immoral, well, that makes for a fantastic read. And that is what Dan Vyleta has done in *The Crooked Maid*.

my complete review

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