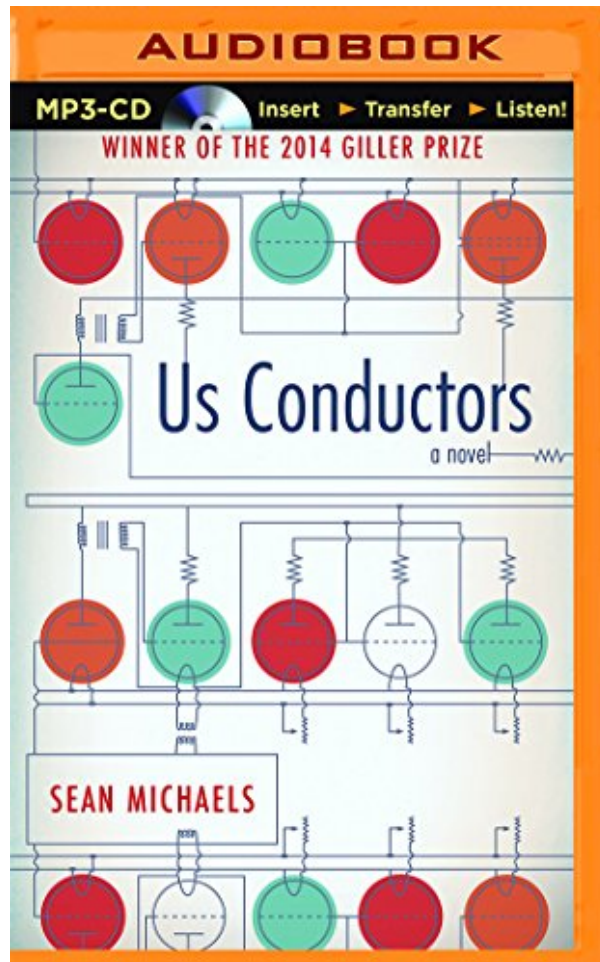
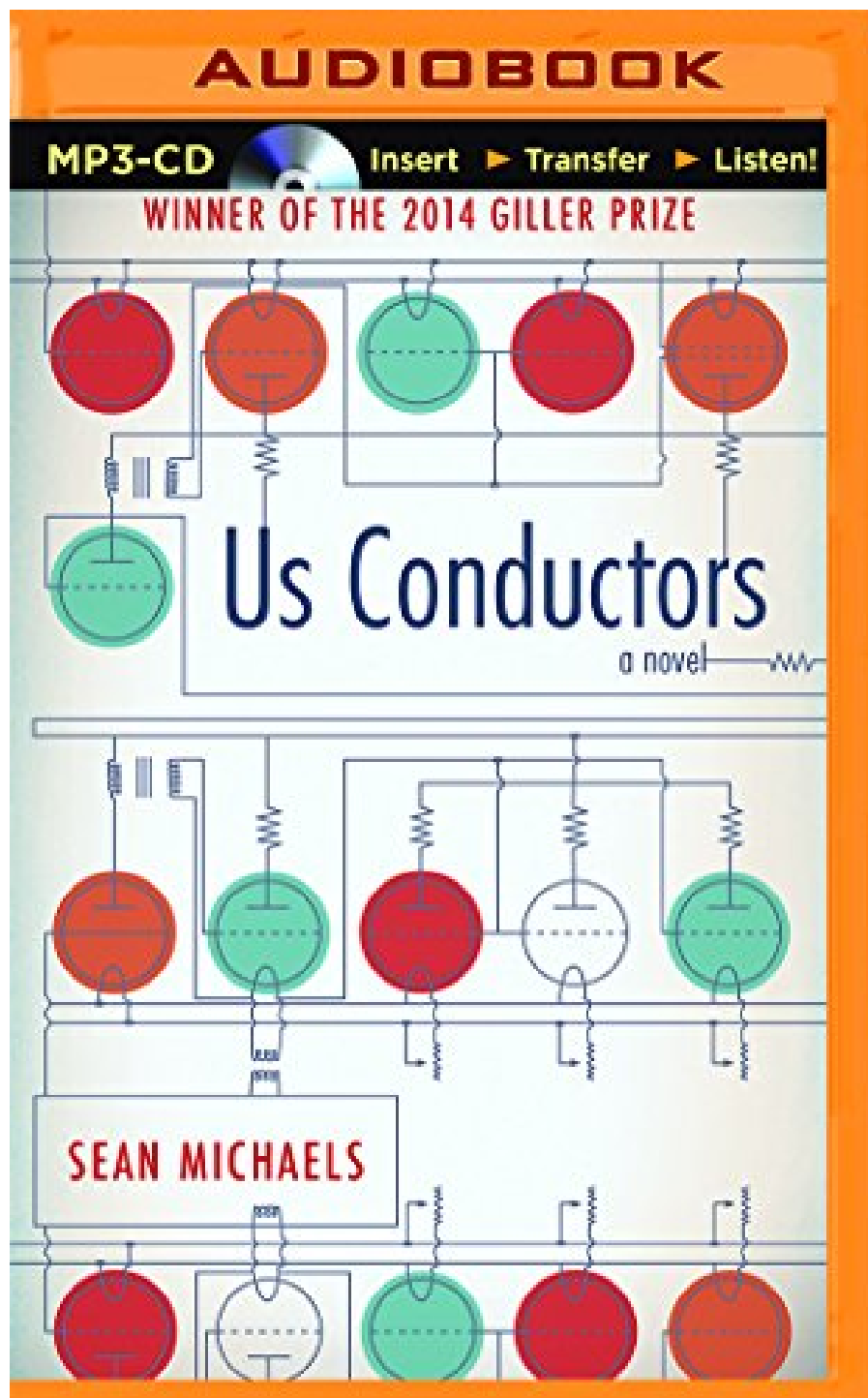


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Us Conductors is the imagined story of Lev Sergeyvich Termen, inventor of the theremin—one of the first electric musical instruments—and his unrequited love for Clara Rockmore, its greatest player. A tale of espionage and electricity, it takes listeners from the gardens of St. Petersburg to the Jazz Age nightclubs of New York, through concert halls, speakeasies, and the Siberian wastes.

Sean Michaels' debut novel is based on the true events of Termen's life: his invention of the theremin in Russia shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution; his decade as a Manhattan celebrity and secret spy, jostling with Gershwin and building weapon detectors for Alcatraz; and his eventual return to Stalin's USSR.

As the novel reaches its devastating climax, Termen is sent out into the gulag—first to a forced labor camp and then to a prison for scientists—and bears witness to some of the Cold War's deepest atrocities. But like the theremin, *Us Conductors* is also an eerie and magical invention. Subtle, thrilling, and melancholy, it is a story of secrets, of human ingenuity, of the lengths one goes to survive, and ultimately of the undiminishing hope for love that keeps us alive.

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10 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

Here's hoping for a fantasy consummation scene in the movie version

By Jeff Walker

This is a heck of a novel, be it the author’s first or his tenth. It certainly casts a spell on the reader, from which he or she emerges blinking 340 pages and many decades later. The book’s key themes seem to me to

be obsession for an unrequited never-consummated love, the advent of an exotic unearthly musical instrument called the theramin, and how the most bizarre and horrific political regime in history (to that point) contorted countless lives even when it failed to destroy them utterly, the protagonist here being spared destruction only by dint of his inventive brilliance .

When Termen plays his theramin for celebrity-studded audiences in American venues, there is almost the sense that this is the musical embodiment of Lenin's revolution, an innovation that will sweep away the existing infrastructure of the music establishment. When Rachmaninoff and Toscanini attend one of his theramin recitals, reminisces Termen, "They were imagining, I am certain, the chopping and splintering of ten thousand cellos, violins, and trumpets, rendered obsolete by the theramin's ethereal tone." They compliment his performance and the device that produced it, but "...in both men's voices there was the faint faraway tremor, the shiver of men who are shaking hands with their executioner." Ironically, it will be Termen himself who one day will shiver in the ghastly presence of Beria, one of Stalin's chief executioners.

For me the key irony of the book is Termen's periodic mention of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, always followed by "(may his memory be illuminated)." It's both humorous and saddening. Had it not been for Lenin and the horrors that he and Trotsky unleashed upon Russia, Termen would likely have wound up in America and stayed, rather than been sent back to Russia for internment in various camps, one of them an absolute nightmare he barely survived. The likes of Stalin was practically inevitable during the consolidation phase of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat', which had to be the worst idea in all of history.

There's also plenty of humor here. One of my favourite passages is Termen's description of the two NKVD lunk-heads serving as his controls: "I know that all suits are made of cloth but I was struck by the way their suits looked particularly made of cloth." Another line captures the spirit of budding romance, but with a wink: "For the first time in the history of the world, since the seas cooled and birds alighted in the trees, Clara Reisenberg and Lev Sergeyvich Termen danced together."

One great advantage of a novelist's version of Termen's life is that not many scientists/engineers are capable of memoirs full of lyrical observations and reflections. And the professional biographer can only go so far in re-creating scenes and events from long ago.

It's a bit difficult to give an account of the story without 'giving away' the various plot-turns, so I'll refrain. Suffice to say that the multiple flash-forwards and flash-backs on two continents and in between, from revolutionary Russia, through America's Roaring Twenties and Great Depression, and then back to Russia and Stalin's gulag, would translate very well into a movie, which this novel will surely become. As an indication of the hold this tale had on me, I've ordered the 'Clara Rockmore plays the theramin' CD as well as the standard biography of Termen, just to get some more mileage out of the Us Conductors experience.

11 of 13 people found the following review helpful.

brilliant

By Ray Garraty

This novel is a fictional biography of Leon Theremin, the Soviet inventor of the musical instrument theremin, and a number of other inventions. The novel consists of two parts – Theremin's memoirs about two periods of his life, both parts, coincidentally, written in captivity. The first part was written in 1938 during the return (forced) of Theremin from the United States back to the USSR, and the second - in the Soviet sharashka where during the war and postwar years, along with other scientists, Theremin worked for the NKVD. Although Theremin lived a long life (he died only in 1993), this novel covers only a part of his life, mostly related to his beloved Clara Reisenberg.

Success and fame comes to Theremin after the First World War. A young physicist, he worked in St.

Petersburg on multiple devices, and then created an unusual and original musical instrument theremin, a complex design that responds to human movement and make sounds. After some practice you can perform classical music on this instrument. The instrument makes a huge impression on everyone, Theremin is even invited to Lenin, where he performs several musical pieces. The scientist and inventor begins to tour within the Soviet Union, gradually perfecting the instrument and doing other developments (including the prototype of a modern TV). In 1928 the scientist moves to the USA to continue his work there, reinforcing his glory and bringing money to the Soviet Union.

Very strange thing this novel is. If you do not pay attention to the writer's name, you can assume that the book was written by a scientist-ex-Gulag prisoner, who after the Gulag escaped to the United States, there learned the language, and wrote this brilliant novel based on other people's stories and the official biography of Theremin. But this novel, who would have thought, was written by an American journalist, and not just a journalist, but that man of almost nonexistent profession – a music critic. For a non-immigrant from the USSR, Sean Michaels has a phenomenal eye for detail. Typically, an aspiring author (and for Michaels this is the debut novel) feels very shaky on unfamiliar territory. The book covers very different societies: the birth of the USSR, and jazzy New York, and Kolyma, and closed scientific bureau. And there was a good chance that the American author could slip somewhere. But Michaels hasn't lost a step.

Of course, someone will be outraged, saying that there are many assumptions in the book. Theremin didn't know Kung Fu, and he didn't kill an FBI agent, and much more other things here are distorted and added. However, the reader should understand that *Us Conductors* is, in the first place, a novel, an invention, as it is called by Michaels, only based on the life of the scientist and inventor. Facts can be distorted, but overall details - there is no falsehood.

There are small mistakes, though. For example, back in the early 30's one of the scientist's friends calls him «rocket scientist», although the term had not yet appeared at that time. "Black Marusyas" here are called "Black Marias." Michaels politely calls prison snitches informers. Growing up in Russia, Theremin doesn't yet know what "brusnika" is. In a conversation with the prison authorities Theremin uses as a measure of the length a mile and his superiors don't correct him.

But all this is stuff that English-speaking readers will not notice. Though the story underlying the novel hardly will leave anyone indifferent. From the outset, the narrator chooses detached tone to his narrative. Yes, he is also the main protagonist, but he seemed to flow through life. He is a talented, successful, sociable, honest, but at the same time gutless and too naive. Having found his love, Theremin doesn't take actions to win Clara. Generally relationships with women scientists put a stain on the inventor. He married Katya by stupidity, he was young, he says, but almost immediately and broke up with her, not even broke up, just forgot. He tried to win Clara, but it was too late (although he has not lost love for her). He married a black dancer for mercenary motives, and left her, though not by choice.

A lack of will power of the protagonist can be traced throughout the entire novel. After losing his main love, Theremin lost interest in life. Perhaps because of that he relatively easy suffered expulsion, arrest, jail, camp, sharashka. He has survived because of love - and his genius. It is impossible not to admire Theremin: he made many inventions, but he was not particularly proud of them and didn't have patents. In the United States other people had patents, and his inventions in sharashka was kept as top secret.

For all his life the hero of the novel carried loyalty not only to Clara Reisenberg, but also to Lenin. Meeting with the leader left a mark on the mind of the scientist. For the reader the memories of Lenin may seem ridiculous, but in them we can see all sincerity and inner purity of Theremin. Characteristically, in his memoirs Theremin does not condemn the Soviet government, neither Beria or Stalin. Rather, he remains

loyal to the Soviet regime, even after Kolyma. For him, the Soviet Union is not Stalin, it's still Lenin.

Michaels writes equally captivating about music, camp labor, dancing under the jukebox, testing of new inventions. *Us Conductors* captures the essence of the XX century through the tragic fate of one scientist. Not every year we read debut novels of such power and brilliancy.

11 of 13 people found the following review helpful.

A beautiful, finely-crafted tale

By Maxim P.

I'm surprised this book has so few reviews. As a musician and a Russian-American, I was drawn to read it right away. I don't read a lot of fiction, but I couldn't put this book down. The writing is beautiful, the author's voice unique, and the pacing is effective. From one scene to the next, not a single passage in the book is a bore. I couldn't stop reading - the carefully-placed humor, the simple-yet-elegant second person narration; everything about this book is artistic, talented, and beautiful, even when it is heartbreaking.

Do yourself a favor and get a copy. And prepare for a ride.

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