

Captain Corelli's Mandolin (Louis de Bernières)

Great book, not sure about the ending.

The historical research revealed in the book is impressive. It's hard to believe that de Bernières is not Greek or Italian. The slow build of the background is effective and never dull. The reader's sympathies with the Cephalonian people are firmly established before Captain Corelli appears eventually on page 157. The turbulent events of the main narrative are set in the context of the long history of the island's successive occupations, a tactic which works well. The corrosive effect of war on vulnerable psychologies (e.g., Mandras) is convincingly portrayed. The story is liberally populated with entertaining characters, where 'entertaining' generally means larger-than-life, in some cases literally so. The presentation of the different nationalities carries conviction despite being the familiar caricatures: the courageous but defenceless Greeks, the loveable but incompetent Italians, the efficient but monstrous Germans, and the public school amateurishness of the British.

It is essentially a love story but has, until the end, the great merit of being free of cloying sentimentality. Unfortunately the ending rather reverses the general trend. I sympathise with the author's dilemma. After a tale so grim in many parts it is laudable to wish to leave the reader with a feel-good ending. So, is Corelli to return or not? If he returns it seems impossible to avoid either bathos or the outright saccharine. The book commits the sin of the latter, I think. To avoid it would have been possible by accepting the likelihood of his death, consistent with the realism of the rest of the story, and forging a feel-good ending out of young Iannis alone - via the Mandolin, Antonia. The book is, after all, called "Captain Corelli's Mandolin" - *not* "Captain Corelli".

It is not hard to read Corelli's taste in music as being de Bernières' own (with which I am happy to agree: Vivaldi 10, Wagner 0). I never saw the film. The miscasting of Nicolas Cage as Corelli struck me as so insensitive that I was put off. I note that Louis de Bernières didn't like the film either.

Score: 7oo10