

Cages

Sylvia Torti

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This quiet novel explores the little-traversed ground of birdsong and the science of communication.

Sylvia Torti's *Cages* is a thought-provoking novel about the complexity of birdsong and how it parallels human communication, related with an ardent narrative voice and a studious tone.

Set in Utah at a university, the novel focuses on three characters: David, a professor studying birdsong; Rebecca, his young, attractive lab assistant; and Anton, a postdoctoral student from South Tyrol. *Cages* addresses how memory and language are linked, and also looks at animal research, animal cruelty, and how birds learn their songs.

David is involved in a complicated love triangle with his longtime partner, Sarah, and his friend and mentor, Ed. David turns memories and absences over in his mind to understand why there's new distance in his relationships. Their pasts are revealed in snippets, allowing the narrative space and time to make David's emotional process, and his interactions with Anton and Rebecca, clear.

David's memories reveal a shared love of birds, though it sets them all in different directions. Ed travels to tropical locations, continually expanding his species list and sharpening his ear for birdsong, while David stays in Utah to study zebra finches and the neuroscience of language. His memories of Sarah are filled with spirited intellectual dialogues, but also reveal the developing fissures in their relationship.

Meanwhile, Rebecca's love of birdsong brings her to work with David—as well as to an affair with Anton. Her interests are tested as David and Anton lose birds during surgeries. Anton handles his nostalgia for home through his deep need for Rebecca. The lab becomes a place of refuge for each character, though their priorities within it create dissonance between them. Their journeys bump up against one another, with each holding the ultimate goal of self-discovery.

Cages shows that communication is as vital to self-understanding as it is to interactions with others. This quiet novel explores the little-traversed ground of birdsong and the science of communication, resulting in an engaging, philosophical, and subtle story.

MONICA CARTER (May/June 2017)

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