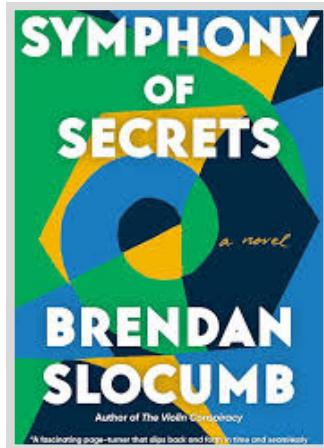




Symphony of Secrets by Brendan Slocumb



Summary

Bern Hendricks has just received the call of a lifetime. As one of the world's preeminent experts on the famed twentieth-century composer Frederick Delaney, Bern knows everything there is to know about the man behind the music. When Mallory Roberts, a board member of the distinguished Delaney Foundation and direct descendant of the man himself, asks for Bern's help authenticating a newly discovered piece, which may be his famous lost opera, RED, he jumps at the chance. With the help of his tech-savvy acquaintance Eboni, Bern soon discovers that the truth is far more complicated than history would have them believe.

In 1920s Manhattan, Josephine Reed is living on the streets and frequenting jazz clubs when she meets the struggling musician Fred Delaney. But where young Delaney struggles, Josephine soars. She's a natural prodigy who hears beautiful music in the sounds of the world around her. With Josephine as his silent partner, Delaney's career takes off—but who is the real genius here?

In the present day, Bern and Eboni begin to uncover more clues that indicate Delaney may have had help in composing his most successful work. Armed with more questions than answers and caught in the crosshairs of a powerful organization who will stop at nothing to keep their secret hidden, Bern and Eboni will move heaven and earth in their dogged quest to right history's wrongs.

Courtesy of Penguin Random House



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About the Author

Brendan Nicholaus Slocumb was raised in Fayetteville, North Carolina. He is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a degree in music education, concentrations on Violin and Viola. For the past two decades, he has been a public and private school music educator from kindergarten through twelfth grade, teaching general music, orchestra and guitar ensembles. His students were often chosen for district and regional orchestras. In 2005, Brendan was named Teacher of the Year for Robert E. Lee High School; he has been named to Who's Who of American teachers, and is a Nobel Teacher of distinction. Brendan also serves as an educational consultant for the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

In 2022, Brendan published his first novel, *The Violin Conspiracy*, a GMA Book Club Pick, the riveting story of a young Black musician who discovers that his old family fiddle is actually a priceless Stradivarius: when it's stolen on the eve of the world's most prestigious classical music competition, he risks everything to get it back. In 2023, Brendan published his second novel, *Symphony of Secrets*, about a music historian who discovers that the world's greatest composer may have stolen the music from a neurodivergent Black woman – and the powers-that-be will do anything to silence the historian. His third novel *The Dark Maestro* was released on May 13, 2025.

Courtesy of the author's website: brendanslocumb.com/about-me



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Discussion Questions

Please be aware that this discussion guide will contain spoilers!

1. Was Freddy wrong, given who he was and when he lived, to "help" Josephine the way he did?
2. Is Freddy a hero or a villain, and why?
3. If Josephine hadn't been Black, do you think that Freddy could have gotten away with what he did?
4. If Josephine hadn't been neurodivergent, do you think that Freddy could have gotten away with what he did?
5. In the author's note, he says that he wrote this book to be a "voice for the voiceless". What do you think he meant and have you ever felt silenced? Have you ever tried to help others who could be seen as "voiceless"? If so, how?
6. Was the Delaney Foundation inherently greedy or evil, or were they just trying to preserve their legacy?
7. How important, or unimportant, was it that most of the Board members were white, and that Bern and Eboni were Black?
8. In the 1920s, many composers would go to jazz clubs and appropriate melodies and themes from other musicians. Is this appropriation necessarily bad, or is that just what art is – to adapt someone else's vision and make it your own? How much is too much?
9. Bern struggled when he discovered that his idol, Freddy Delaney, had done some really rotten things. Have you ever had your idealism destroyed when someone you looked up to turned out to be not what you expected?
10. Do you think it's important that the present-day story line never discovered what happened to Josephine?
11. The author has said that the book is about the limits of human knowledge. How do you think the story lines and themes play into that?
12. Who's your favorite character and why?

Questions originally posted on author's website: brendanslocumb.com/book-club-q



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Professional Review

Kirkus Reviews (02/23/23):

Starred Review When Bern Hendricks, a musicology professor at the University of Virginia, is contacted by the Delaney Foundation, he's shocked—the organization, dedicated to the legacy of Frederic Delaney, the man Bern considers "the hands-down best composer...in the entire world," is a worldwide phenomenon, with "its name and logo as recognizable as Walt Disney's." Bern is even more floored when it turns out the group has discovered the manuscript of RED, a long-lost Delaney opera, and wants him to prepare it for performance. Bern enlists the help of his friend Eboni, a computer scientist who's worked on musical analysis of Delaney's other operas. Bern discovers a mysterious notation in the copy of RED, which puts him and Eboni on the track of a Black woman named Josephine Reed who knew Delaney, but they can't quite figure out what the relationship entailed—until they do and begin to realize that Delaney, who died of suicide in 1936, might not have been the genius Bern thought he was. The Delaney Foundation is, of course, none too pleased with their discovery. Slocumb's narrative alternates between the present day and the early 20th century, and his transitions are seamless. The dialogue in the novel, particularly between Bern and Eboni, sparkles, and the author does a brilliant job building suspense. This is a superb novel that will appeal to any thriller fan, not just readers with an ear for classical music. Sophomore novels don't get much better than this.

Library Journal (02/01/23):

In 1936, composer Frederick Delaney's reputation is in tatters after the premiere of RED. Why were his earlier pieces so eloquent and this one so bad? A lifetime later, musicologist Bern Hendricks receives an email from the Delaney Foundation asking Bern to work on a newly discovered manuscript of RED, richer and fuller than the hack version presented in 1936. But Delaney's notation system is indecipherable. On top of pages are letters as well: JaR. What do they stand for? Aided by computer whiz Eboni, Bern cracks the code, and they're off on a wild ride. By the end, it's a case of murder and the systematic erasure of the musical contribution of a Black woman who almost certainly authored the music Delaney claimed as his. VERDICT Slocumb's second novel is an improbable but fun mystery that will attract fans of Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code (a lot of readers, in other words).