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CAPTAIN CORELLI'S MANDOLIN

LOUIS DE BERNIÈRES

CORELLI'S MANDOLIN

"An exuberant mixture of history and romance, written with a wit that is incandescent." —*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

CORELLI'S MANDOLIN

A Novel by

Louis de Bernières

Vintage International

Vintage Books

A Division of Random House, Inc.

New York

TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER,
*who in different places and different ways fought against the
Fascists and the Nazis, lost many of their closest friends,
and were never thanked*



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Acclaim for

Louis de Bernières's
CORELLI'S MANDOLIN

"A captivating read . . . a daring work. De Bernières writes with a sense of the fantastic [and] his writing takes on a terrible force. To embrace *Corelli's Mandolin* is to be enveloped."

—*Boston Globe*

"Dazzling . . . a fabulous book in the tradition of Tolstoy and Dickens. . . . So joyous and heartbreaking, so rich and musical and wise, that reading it is like discovering anew the enchanting power of fiction. With great skill, *con brio* and *amore*, de Bernières dances nimbly from bawdy humor through parody, satire, chronicle, idyll, romantic comedy and epic chant. That breathtaking virtuosity serves a humane vision in which the wildest comedy and the starkest tragedy join seamlessly."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"A wonderful, hypnotic novel of fabulous scope and tremendous, iridescent charm."

—Joseph Heller

"Great fun. . . . De Bernières has amazing powers of invention. He peoples his world with a dazzling variety of humanity at every level of society and with every shade of morals. It was writers like him who invented the novel, and it's writers like him who keep it alive and well."

—*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

"Witty and profound . . . resonates with implications of grace."

—*Philadelphia Inquirer*

"Louis de Bernières is in the direct line that runs through Dickens and Evelyn Waugh, and will give pleasure to all sorts of readers." —A. S. Byatt, *Daily Telegraph* (London)

“Irresistible.”

—USA Today

“Behind every page of *Corelli's Mandolin* we sense its author's intelligence, wit, heart, imagination, and wisdom. This is a great book.”

—Richard Russo

“If you like your novels hearty and sustaining, Louis de Bernières is the writer for you. He writes with gusto and reveals a fine comic sensibility which is captivating. . . . Not to be missed.”

—*The Times* (London)

“An utterly gorgeous, funny, and deeply affecting book. . . . A perfectly pitched love story about a doctor's daughter and her two exuberant suitors. As the men woo her, de Bernières woos us—and succeeds splendidly.”

—*Details*

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—*The Atlantic*

“An ambitious, multi-layered novel. . . . Humor and humanity make the chorus of voices telling de Bernières's story not only comprehensible but harmonious.”

—*The Times Literary Supplement* (London)

“Astonishing. . . . His work encompasses cruelty, humor, love and friendship, hope and horror. . . . Both very funny and profoundly moving, sometimes at the same time.”

—*Literary Review* (London)

Louis de Bernières

CORELLI'S MANDOLIN

Louis de Bernières was born in 1954. After four disastrous months in the British army, he left for a village in Colombia, where he worked as a teacher in the morning and a cowboy in the afternoon. He returned to England, where he was employed as a mechanic, a landscape gardener, and a groundsman at a mental hospital. He has published a trilogy of tragicomic novels, the last being *The Troublesome Offspring of Cardinal Guzman*.



INTERNATIONAL

ALSO BY Louis de Bernières

The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts

Señor Vivo and the Coca Lord

The Troublesome Offspring of Cardinal Guzman

CORELLI'S MANDOLIN

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Louis de Bernières

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New York

The Soldier

Down some cold field in a world unspoken
the young men are walking together, slim and tall,
and though they laugh to one another, silence is not broken;
there is no sound however clear they call.

They are speaking together of what they loved in vain here,
but the air is too thin to carry the thing they say.
They were young and golden, but they came on pain here,
and their youth is age now, their gold is grey.

Yet their hearts are not changed, and they cry to one another,
'What have they done with the lives we laid aside?
Are they young with our youth, gold with our gold, my brother?
Do they smile in the face of death, because we died?'

Down some cold field in a world uncharted
the young seek each other with questioning eyes.
They question each other, the young, the golden-hearted,
of the world that they were robbed of in their quiet paradise.

HUMBERT WOLFE

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I *Dr Iannis Commences his History and is Frustrated*

Dr Iannis had enjoyed a satisfactory day in which none of his patients had died or got any worse. He had attended a surprisingly easy calving, lanced one abscess, extracted a molar, dosed one lady of easy virtue with Salvarsan, performed an unpleasant but spectacularly fruitful enema, and had produced a miracle by a feat of medical prestidigitation.

He chuckled to himself, for no doubt this miracle was already being touted as worthy of St Gerasimos himself. He had gone to old man Stamatis' house, having been summoned to deal with an earache, and had found himself gazing down into an aural orifice more dank, be-lichened, and stalagmitic even than the Drogarati cave. He had set about cleaning the lichen away with the aid of a little cotton, soaked in alcohol, and wrapped about the end of a long matchstick. He was aware that old man Stamatis had been deaf in that ear since childhood, and that it had been a constant source of pain, but was nonetheless surprised when, deep in that hairy recess, the tip of his matchstick seemed to encounter something hard and unyielding; something, that is to say, which had no physiological or anatomical excuse for its presence. He took the old man over to the window, threw open the shutters, and an explosion of midday heat and light instantaneously threw the room into an effulgent dazzle, as though some importunate and unduly luminous angel had misguidedly picked that place for an epiphany. Old Stamatis' wife tutted; it was simply bad housekeeping to allow that much light into the house at such an hour. She was sure that it stirred up the dust; she could clearly see the motes rising up from the surfaces.

Dr Iannis tilted the old man's head and peered into the ear. With his long matchstick he pressed aside the undergrowth of stiff

grey hairs embellished with flakes of exfoliated scurf. There was something spherical within. He scraped its surface to remove the hard brown cankerous coating of wax, and beheld a pea. It was undoubtedly a pea; it was light green, its surface was slightly wrinkled, and there could not be any doubt in the matter. 'Have you ever stuck anything down your ear?' he demanded.

'Only my finger,' replied Stamatis.

'And how long have you been deaf in this ear?'

'Since as long as I can remember.'

Dr Iannis found an absurd picture rising up before his imagination. It was Stamatis as a toddler, with the same gnarled face, the same stoop, the same overmeasure of aural hair, reaching up to the kitchen table and taking a dried pea from a wooden bowl. He stuck it into his mouth, found it too hard to bite, and crammed it into his ear. The doctor chuckled, 'You must have been a very annoying little boy.'

'He was a devil.'

'Be quiet, woman, you didn't even know me in those days.'

'I have your mother's word, God rest her soul,' replied the old woman, pursing her lips and folding her arms, 'and I have the word of your sisters.'

Dr Iannis considered the problem. It was undoubtedly an obdurate and recalcitrant pea, and it was too tightly packed to lever it out. 'Do you have a fishhook, about the right size for a mullet, with a long shank? And do you have a light hammer?'

The couple looked at each other with the single thought that their doctor must have lost his mind. 'What does this have to do with my earache?' asked Stamatis suspiciously.

'You have an exorbitant auditory impediment,' replied the doctor, ever conscious of the necessity for maintaining a certain iatric mystique, and fully aware that 'a pea in the ear' was unlikely to earn him any kudos. 'I can remove it with a fishhook and a small hammer; it's the ideal way of overcoming un embarras de petit pois.' He spoke the French words in a mincingly Parisian accent, even though his irony was apparent only to himself.

A hook and a hammer were duly fetched, and the doctor carefully straightened the hook on the stone flags of the floor. He then summoned the old man and told him to lay his head on the sill in the light. Stamatis lay there rolling his eyes, and the old lady put her

hands over hers, watching through her fingers. 'Hurry up, Doctor,' exclaimed Stamatis, 'this sill is hotter than hell.'

The doctor carefully inserted the straightened hook into the hirsute orifice and raised the hammer, only to be deflected from his course by a hoarse shriek very reminiscent of that of a raven. Perplexed and horrified, the old wife was wringing her hands and keening, 'O, o, o, you are going to drive a fishhook into his brain. Christ have mercy, all the saints and Mary protect us.'

This interjection gave the doctor pause; he reflected that if the pea was very hard, there was a good chance that the barb would not penetrate, but would drive the pea deeper into its recess. The drum might even be broken. He straightened up and twirled his white moustache reflectively with one forefinger. 'Change of plan,' he announced. 'I have decided upon further thought that it would be better to fill his ear up with water and mollify the supererogatory occlusion. Kyria, you must keep this ear filled with warm water until I return this evening. Do not allow the patient to move, keep him lying on his side with his ear full. Is that understood?'

Dr Iannis returned at six o'clock and hooked the softened pea successfully without the aid of a hammer, small or otherwise. He worked it out deftly enough, and presented it to the couple for their inspection. Encrusted with thick dark wax, rank and malodorous, it was recognisable to neither of them as anything leguminous. 'It's very papilionaceous, is it not?' enquired the doctor.

The old woman nodded with every semblance of having understood, which she had not, but with an expression of wonder alight in her eyes. Stamatis clapped his hand to the side of his head and exclaimed, 'It's cold in there. My God, it's loud. I mean everything is loud. My own voice is loud.'

'Your deafness is cured,' announced Dr Iannis. 'A very satisfactory operation, I think.'

'I've had an operation,' said Stamatis complacently. 'I'm the only person I know who's had an operation. And now I can hear. It's a miracle, that's what it is. My head feels empty, it feels hollow, it feels as though my whole head has filled up with spring water, all cold and clear.'

'Well, is it empty, or is it full?' demanded the old lady. 'Talk some sense when the doctor has been kind enough to cure you.' She took Iannis' hand in both of her own and kissed it, and shortly

afterwards he found himself walking home with a fat pullet under each arm, a shiny dark aubergine stuffed into each pocket of his jacket, and an ancient pea wrapped up in his handkerchief, to be added to his private medical museum.

It had been a good day for payments; he had also earned two very large and fine crayfish, a pot of whitebait, a basil plant, and an offer of sexual intercourse (to be redeemed at his convenience). He had resolved that he would not be taking up that particular offer, even if the Salvarsan were effective. He was left with a whole evening in which to write his history of Cephallonia, as long as Pelagia had remembered to purchase some more oil for the lamps.

'The New History of Cephallonia' was proving to be a problem; it seemed to be impossible to write it without the intrusion of his own feelings and prejudices. Objectivity seemed to be quite unattainable, and he felt that his false starts must have wasted more paper than was normally used on the island in the space of a year. The voice that emerged in his account was intractably his own; it was never historical. It lacked grandeur and impartiality. It was not Olympian.

He sat down and wrote: 'Cephallonia is a factory that breeds babies for export. There are more Cephallonians abroad or at sea than there are at home. There is no indigenous industry that keeps families together, there is not enough arable land, there is an insufficiency of fish in the ocean. Our men go abroad and return here to die, and so we are an island of children, spinsters, priests, and the very old. The only good thing about it is that only the beautiful women find husbands amongst those men that are left, and so the pressure of natural selection has ensured that we have the most beautiful women in all of Greece, and perhaps in the whole region of the Mediterranean. The unhappy thing about this is that we have beautiful and spirited women married to the most grotesque and inappropriate husbands, who are good for nothing and never could be, and we have some sad and ugly women that nobody wants, who are born to be widows without ever having had a husband.'

The doctor refilled his pipe and read this through. He listened to Pelagia clattering outdoors in the yard, preparing to boil the crayfish. He read what he had written about beautiful women, and remembered his wife, as lovely as her daughter had become, and

dead from tuberculosis despite everything he had been able to do. 'This island betrays its own people in the mere act of existing,' he wrote, and then he crumpled the sheet of paper and flung it into the corner of the room. This would never do; why could he not write like a writer of histories? Why could he not write without passion? Without anger? Without the sense of betrayal and oppression? He picked up the sheet, already bent at the corners, that he had written first. It was the title page: 'The New History of Cephallonia'. He crossed out the first two words and substituted 'A Personal'. Now he could forget about leaving out the loaded adjectives and the ancient historical grudges, now he could be vitriolic about the Romans, the Normans, the Venetians, the Turks, the British, and even the islanders themselves. He wrote:

'The half-forgotten island of Cephallonia rises improvidently and inadvisedly from the Ionian Sea; it is an island so immense in antiquity that the very rocks themselves exhale nostalgia and the red earth lies stupefied not only by the sun, but by the impossible weight of memory. The ships of Odysseus were built of Cephallonian pine, his bodyguards were Cephallonian giants, and some maintain that his palace was not in Ithaca but in Cephallonia.

'But even before that wily and itinerant king was favoured by Athene or set adrift through the implacable malice of Poseidon, Mesolithic and Neolithic peoples were chipping knives from obsidian and casting nets for fish. The Mycenaean Hellenes arrived, leaving behind the shards of their amphorae and their breast-shaped tombs, bequeathing progeny who, long after the departure of Odysseus, would fight for Athens, be tyrannised by Sparta, and then defeat even the megalomaniac Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander, curiously known as "the Great" and a more preposterous megalomaniac still.

'It was an island filled with gods. On the summit of Mt Aenos there was a shrine to Zeus, and another upon the tiny islet of Thios. Demeter was worshipped for making the island the breadbasket of Ionia, as was Poseidon, the god who had raped her whilst disguised as a stallion, leaving her to give birth to a black horse and a mystical daughter whose name was lost when the Eleusinian mysteries were suppressed by the Christians. Here was Apollo, slayer of the Python, guardian of the navel of the earth, beautiful, youthful, wise, just, strong, hyperbolically bisexual, and the only

god to have had a temple made for him by bees out of wax and feathers. Here Dionysus was worshipped also, the god of wine, pleasure, civilisation, and vegetation, father by Aphrodite of a little boy attached to the most gargantuan penis that ever encumbered man or god. Artemis had her worshippers here, too, the many-breasted virgin huntress, a goddess of such radically feminist convictions that she had Actaeon torn to pieces by dogs for accidentally seeing her naked, and had her paramour Orion stung to death by scorpions for touching her fortuitously. She was such a fastidious stickler for etiquette and summary chastisement that entire dynasties could be disposed of for one word out of place or an oblation five minutes late. There were temples to Athene, too, the perpetual virgin who (with great forbearance, compared to Artemis) blinded Tiresias for seeing her naked, was formidably gifted in those crafts which are indispensable to economic and domestic life, and who was the patron of oxen, horses, and olives.

'In their choice of gods the people of the island displayed the immense and intransigent common sense that has been the secret of their survival throughout the centuries; it is obvious that the king of the deities should be worshipped, obvious that a seafaring people should placate the god of the sea, obvious that vintners should honour Dionisios (it is still the most common name on the island), obvious that Demeter should be honoured for keeping the island self-sufficient, obvious that Athene should be worshipped for her gifts of wisdom and skill in the tasks of daily life, just as it also fell to her to oversee innumerable military emergencies. Nor should it be wondered at that Artemis should have had her cult, for this was the equivalent of an infallible insurance policy; she was a troublesome gadfly whose mischief should in preference have been made to occur elsewhere.

'The choice of Apollo as a Cephallonian cult is both the most and the least mysterious. It is the most inexplicable to those who have never been to the island, and the most inevitable to those who know it, for Apollo is a god associated with the power of light. Strangers who land here are blinded for two days.

'It is a light that seems unmediated either by the air or by the stratosphere. It is completely virgin, it produces overwhelming clarity of focus, it has heroic strength and brilliance. It exposes colours in their original prelapsarian state, as though straight from the