

FICTION

Murder, Medicis and Old Masters in a Historical Whodunit

Laurent Binet's novel "Perspective(s)" begins with an artist lying dead in a Florentine chapel.

By Chelsea Leu

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PERSPECTIVE(S), by Laurent Binet; translated by Sam Taylor

In one of the more improbable moments in "Perspective(s)" — a novel filled with improbable moments — the 16th-century painter and author Giorgio Vasari uses the artistic technique of perspective to save his own life. Cornered by an assailant and armed with a crossbow, he sees lines appear in the air, "the laws of perspective taking shape before me, as clearly as if I had traced them myself with a ruler," and fires at the vanishing point — which happens to be right between his attacker's eyes. "Perspective(s)" may be set during the Italian Renaissance, but its vision of the period is absurd, antic, slightly askew, steeped in art history and underpinned by an aficionado's delight.

It begins, naturally, with murder. As 1557 dawns, the aging painter Jacopo da Pontormo is found dead in front of the frescoes he has been laboring over for 11 years in the chapel of San Lorenzo, a chisel plunged into his heart. Cosimo de' Medici, the Duke of Florence, assigns his trusted adviser Vasari to get to the bottom of the case. As the investigation unfolds, so too does the variegated tapestry that is 1550s Florentine society, laid bare in the 176 letters that make up the novel.

Everyone seems to have a motive, from the nuns who loathe Pontormo's "obscene" paintings to the disgruntled color grinder who organizes nighttime meetings to agitate for better workers' rights. Then there's the clue found at the scene of the crime: Part of one fresco has been skillfully but incongruously repainted, which implicates a whole cadre of fellow artists all experimenting with the new style that will one day become known as Mannerism.

To complicate matters further, a scandalous painting is found in Pontormo's studio that depicts the goddess Venus in a "lascivious" pose, with a face that looks suspiciously like that of Cosimo's 17-year-old daughter, Maria. This painting becomes the center of a scheme to weaken Cosimo's reputation, and Benvenuto Cellini, sculptor, goldsmith and all-around scoundrel, is hired to steal it — a choice that leads to some of the most hilarious high jinks in the book. Maria, betrothed to an unpleasant man for the sake of Cosimo's political ambitions, has her own secrets: She's getting love letters from her father's page.

These characters are founded upon fact, but the novel wears its history lightly, filled as it is with irreverent sendups and winking anachronisms. "A specter haunts Italy — the specter of the Ciompi Revolt!" a guildsman's *cri de coeur* begins, in a nod to a much more famous manifesto. Laurent Binet has built a career out of half-historical, half-fictive experiments: A previous novel, "Civilizations" (2019), imagines world history from the perspective of Incas who end up conquering Europe. In this case, you don't need to know much about Florence during the final Italian War to grasp the finer details of the plot.

The letters in "Perspective(s)" — translated with aplomb by Sam Taylor — have a certain giddy perfection, particularly Cellini's. "I am almost certain that Vasari did not recognize me in the heat of the action, my movements being too quick for the human eye," he writes, with trademark modesty, in an update on the heist. (Cellini's real-life autobiography contains the same unreliable swagger.) Each letter comes across as a set piece, a small achievement of style and tone: Vasari's flowery, deferential missives to the duke, Maria's youthful ardor and confusion, the overly pious cattiness of a nun.

And yet they're almost too perfect. Over the course of the novel the correspondents remain largely frozen in static attitudes, emotionally unmoved by the events they're caught up in. The novel dazzles with its cleverness but doesn't seem much concerned with articulating a deeper message, and the result, as entertaining as it is, can feel slightly brittle.

Vasari, just before he fires his crossbow, has the surreal sensation that the world has become flat, that he's in fact situated in "a perfectly composed painting." One eventually gets the sneaking suspicion that the book is itself a kind of Mannerist work of art. The novel's letters — each reflecting a different "perspective" — give the events of the book the illusion of depth, recounted as they are from several points of view. The book even features, in another formal pun, a frame narrative: a 19th-century speaker who explains in the novel's preface that he found the letters in a Tuscan antiques shop.

What's moving, in the end, is the novel's sheer enthusiasm for the act of making art, which seems to be the only thing spoken about with unironic passion. (Devotion to art, not coincidentally, is also the key to understanding the murder.) But this passion is set against the rising orthodoxy of the times. Painted nudes have become a symbol of sinful depravity, and the threat of censorship looms: The new pope, Paul IV, even considers destroying the Sistine Chapel, or at least hiring someone to paint clothes on all that exposed flesh. "These are hard times for art," Michelangelo wrote in a letter to his father, a quote Binet selects as an epigraph for "Perspective(s)." His artists sound this despairing note throughout the book with such intensity that it's difficult, by the end, not to read it as commentary on the present.

It's striking that Binet sets his story not during the High Renaissance — when perspective was used to create astonishing works of realism — but in the period just afterward, when artists responded to their predecessors' harmonious perfection by intentionally warping perspective. The Mannerists endeavored, as one painter writes in the novel, not just to imitate nature but to improve on it, "by

rendering it more richly and with more variety.” In other words, they wanted to transform reality into something livelier and more perfectly composed. Is it any wonder that Binet, with his impossibly colorful alternate histories, is a fan?

PERSPECTIVE(S) | By Laurent Binet | Translated by Sam Taylor | Farrar, Straus & Giroux | 264 pp. | \$28