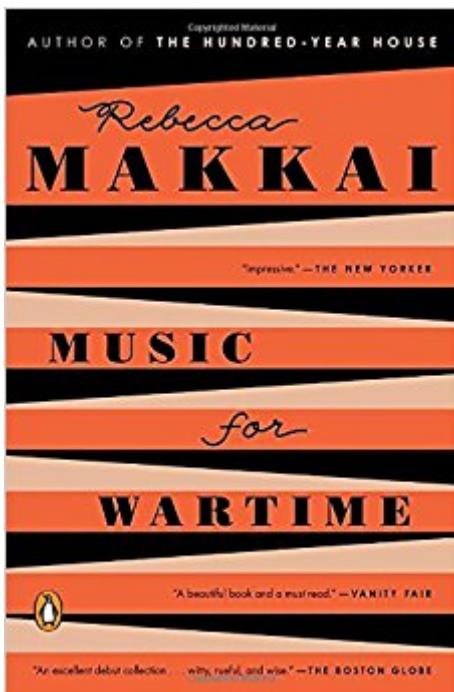


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# Music For Wartime: Stories



## Synopsis

Named a must-read by the Chicago Tribune, O Magazine, BuzzFeed, The Huffington Post, Minneapolis Star-Tribune, and The L Magazine. Named one of the best short story collections of 2015 by Bookpage and Kansas City Star. Rebecca Makkai's first two novels, *The Borrower* and *The Hundred-Year House*, have established her as one of the freshest and most imaginative voices in fiction. Now, the award-winning writer, whose stories have appeared in four consecutive editions of *The Best American Short Stories*, returns with a highly anticipated collection bearing her signature mix of intelligence, wit, and heart. A reality show producer manipulates two contestants into falling in love, even as her own relationship falls apart. Just after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a young boy has a revelation about his father's past when a renowned Romanian violinist plays a concert in their home. When the prized elephant of a traveling circus keels over dead, the small-town minister tasked with burying its remains comes to question his own faith. In an unnamed country, a composer records the folk songs of two women from a village on the brink of destruction. These transporting, deeply moving stories—some inspired by her own family history—amply demonstrate Makkai's extraordinary range as a storyteller, and confirm her as a master of the short story form.

—Chicago Tribune —“Impressive.”

—O, The Oprah Magazine —“Engrossing.”

—Minneapolis Star-Tribune —“Inventive.”

—W Magazine —From the Hardcover edition.

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## Customer Reviews

Recocheting from the war-torn twentieth century to the reality-show-rich present day, the stories in this impressive collection feature characters buffeted by fate—or is it mere happenstance? . . . Our sense of history is probed, too, not without humor. The New Yorker’s “It’s impossible to resist the spell this collection’s 17 stories weave. Wide in range and deep in feeling,” *Music for Wartime* further confirms what *The Hundred-Year House* made clear: Rebecca Makkai is a writer of the first order, a writer whose name deserves to become well known among all discerning readers of fiction. The Philadelphia Inquirer’s “[Makkai’s] stories were anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories* for four years in a row, and *Music for Wartime* proves these honors were well-deserved, highlighting her poised voice, willingness to experiment, deft hand at structure, and capacity to surprise.” Makkai brilliantly demonstrates that art can never be merely tangential to the lives of people who care about it. Dallas Morning News’ “[An] excellent debut collection of stories . . . characterized by a striking blend of whimsy and poignancy, elegy and ebullience . . . [that] demonstrate an impressive range. . . . While some stories are straightforwardly realistic and others wildly fantastical, all are witty, rueful and wise. . . . I look forward with great anticipation . . . to anything else this immensely gifted writer produces.” Priscilla Gilman, *The Boston Globe*, “A beautiful book and a must-read . . . Rebecca Makkai is a rising literary star, whose short stories appeared just about everywhere, before she turned to writing novels. So this is an exciting and exceptional return to the short story for Makkai, and for all of us.”  
Vanity Fair’s “[Makkai’s] writing about music is informed and inquisitive. . . . Playful and crisp and strangely elfin” are words I would use to describe my favorite story in this book . . . [which] is about a reality television producer. . . . Ms. Makkai is shrewd about the unpretty manner in which reality TV is made . . . [and] the heartbreak in this story feels particular, grainy: real. . . . It’s a gut-punch that lands.  
Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*, “Richly imagined.”  
Chicago Tribune, “Summer’s Best New Releases.” Engrossing.”  
Minneapolis Star-Tribune, “Summer books: 10 novels not to miss . . . and so much more.”  
The Oprah Magazine, “The Season’s Best Literary Fiction.”  
“Exceptional . . . [Makkai] writes with economic precision, excising extraneous details or extra commas; she designs a catalog of unique structures to convey her

meanings; and she narrates with unflagging confidence, secure in her experimentations and digressions. . . . Provocative, compelling reading. *—Cleveland Plain-Dealer* “The Briefcase’ . . . is a story that displays remarkable compression, force and agility, and is also one of the very few I’ve read that would fit just as snugly into Kafka’s oeuvre as it would into Amy Hempel’s or Joy Williams’. *—Kevin Brockmeier in The Arkansas Times* “The short story is the ideal venue for Makkai’s considerable talent, not only for drawing nuanced characterizations, but for contriving strange and fascinating premises. . . . With *Music for Wartime*, Makkai takes her place as one she deserves to be among the artists with aplomb. *—The Guardian* “[Makkai’s] stories are united by . . . a penetrating streak of psychological acuity and insight. . . . the 17 stories in the volume—a remarkably heterodox group, varied in terms of subject and approach—were written over the course of 13 years, and it shows: Evident patience and care have been taken with these stories to tease out their meaning and emotion while retaining an admirable subtlety and suggestiveness. . . . Makkai is unafraid to inject uncanny or curious elements into her narratives. . . . [She] finds her power in uniqueness and individuality. *—Globe and Mail (Canada)* “Inventive. *—W Magazine* “This varied collection of short stories focuses on finding beauty in the darkest times. . . . These tales will delight and haunt you long after you have closed the book. *—Woman’s Day* “The stories are haunting and enchanting, wonderfully strange, and unforgettably gorgeous. *—Book Riot* “(The Best Books of 2015 So Far) “Makkai’s Lorrie Moore-esque genius for floating bizarre and often very funny ideas land[s] with gravitas. . . . The lines between fiction and non-fiction feel inconsequential when the subject is the human condition, and when the stories are told so well. *—The Winnipeg Free Press* “Quintessential Makkai—witty, intelligent, a little irreverent, but not afraid to venture into emotional territory. *—Bookpage* “An eclectic collection of short stories—each perfect for a quick literary break. *—Martha Stewart Living* “If any short story writer can be considered a rock star of the genre, it’s Rebecca Makkai. Her greatest strength may be never forgetting that she is a storyteller first. *—Kansas City Star* “Nearly perfect . . . [Makkai] has penned a collection filled with beauty and heartbreak, surprise and wonder, guilt and innocence. . . . The stories complement one another perfectly, linked not by characters or plot, but by theme and craft. . . . An exceptional book. *—The Gazette* “(Iowa City) “Music for Wartime” shows off Rebecca Makkai’s surprising range of short-story writing: Stories of

war and destruction appear next to those about love and reality television. Yet the collection still manages to feel like a cohesive, stunning whole, tied together with the wit and heart that courses through each and every story. *Buzzfeed*, 17 Awesome New Books You Need To Read This Summer *Makkai* proved in her most recent novel, *The Hundred-Year House*, that she's capable of crafting alluring, interwoven character studies. In *Music for Wartime*, she's penned a series of short stories three of which are based on legends from Hungary, where her family hails from. Spanning Berlin, Romania and present-day America, where true love can be found in front of a live audience, her short stories are as moving as they are varied." *The Huffington Post*, 18 Brilliant Books You Won't Want To Miss This Summer *Haunting . . .* Seventeen stories with the impact of a quiver of arrows aimed at the heart. *BBC.com*, Ten Books to Read in July *Stories that stay with you, all of which are good, and some of which are magnificent*. The writing is clever and rich with the perceptiveness and human insight that earned Makkai a place (or four) in the Best American Short Stories series. *Los Angeles Magazine*, 7 Books You Need to Read This

July *Makkai*'s first short story collection demonstrates why the already-acclaimed novelist is also a master of this more succinct form. Each of the stories in the collection is vividly wrought and individually compelling, and features a precision and beauty that leaves the reader full of wonder. *The L Magazine*, 50 Books You'll Want to Read This Spring and Summer *After two celebrated novels . . . Makkai returns to the genre that first got her noticed. The stories' settings vary . . . [with the] author's sharp, compassionate writing uniting them all.* *Chicago Magazine*, Grab These 10 Great Summer Reads *Sets the author's pure talent front and center.* *Chicago Reader*, 28 Books We Can't Wait to Read in 2015 *Showcases the author's talent for the short form.* *The Millions*, Most Anticipated: The Great First-Half 2015 Book Preview *Rife with sentences that will stop you in your tracks with their strangeness and profundity*. *Makkai is a musical writer with a strong voice.* *Library Journal*, (Starred Review) *[An] outstanding debut story collection . . . Though these stories alternate in time between WWII and the present day, they all are set . . . within the borders of the human heart*, *a terrain that their author maps uncommonly well.* *Publishers Weekly* (Starred Review) *A collection of 17 nuanced short stories which examine conflicts internal and external involving the touchstones of family, artistry,*

and identity. . . . Makkai’s tales offer rich explorations of the key questions and struggles that are part and parcel of the human experience. •Booklist •Funny, haunting short stories . . . More than worth picking up. •Witty and precise, brilliant and compassionate •and every one of these stories contains all the depth and heartache of a doorstop-sized novel. I’ve been waiting for years for this book. Music for Wartime isn’t simply wonderful •it’s essential. •Molly Antopol, author of *The Un-Americans*, longlisted for the National Book Award •I have been waiting for this collection since 2008, when I read “The Worst You Ever Feel” and it basically took the top of my head off. Deeply intelligent, stylistically playful, full of razor wit and grave historical accounting, what is most enthralling about these stories is their insistence that the political and the personal are never separate categories, that art attempt to make sense of the senseless is at least as noble as it is doomed, and that atrocities large and small begin, as love does, in the human heart. •Pam Houston, author of *Contents May Have Shifted* •It’s not often you read a story collection with the range and depth of Rebecca Makkai’s *Music for Wartime*. •The stories are about war and guilt and secrets, but also about romance and art and reality TV, and they come together, as the best collections do, as an assured and satisfying whole. It’s a wonderful book, haunting, funny, and wise. •Maile Meloy, author of *Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want* •Rebecca Makkai’s *Music for Wartime* is a collection of the first order. The stories diverge and coalesce, practically in conversation with one another, always hewing to the varied consolations of beauty in the midst of conflict. To read one is to crave the next, each story feeding a pang you didn’t quite know you had. *Music for Wartime* isn’t a song, it’s a sublime double-LP. •Smith Henderson, author of *Fourth of July Creek* From the Hardcover edition.

Rebecca Makkai’s work has appeared in *The Best American Short Stories*, *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*, *Harper’s*, *Tin House*, *McSweeney’s*, and *Ploughshares*, and has been read on *NPR’s Selected Shorts* and *This American Life*. She is the author of two novels: *The Borrower*, a Booklist Top Ten Debut, an Indie Next pick, an *O, The Oprah Magazine* selection; and *The Hundred-Year House*, which won the Chicago Writers Association’s Book of the Year Award and was named a Best Book of 2014 by *Bookpage*,

PopSugar, A Chicago Reader, and more. The recipient of a 2014 NEA Fellowship, Makkai lives in Chicago and Vermont. From the Hardcover edition.

I grabbed this book at a bookstore after reading the first few pages, which was actually a complete story. In just a few minutes, it took me through a rich journey of the senses: women singing, the smell of grass, tyranny, life and death. Short stories appeal to me right now when my down time seems to be counted in minutes, not in hours. Every story here is a gem, quick reads that one can squeeze in during a busy day which will transport the reader into another world, but with a closure so that one can put the book down a few minutes later without consequences. Then, at the end of the book, one realizes that the stories form a unifying tapestry, that the book actually is not just a compilation of short stories but a story of generations of a family with some very interesting stories to tell. Especially recommended for musicians who work in the field of creative music.

As soon as I finished this collection of short stories, I wanted to start it all over again. Each story is compellingly reflective and thoughtful, with vivid characters and interesting situations. A woman realizes her fiance is seeing his ex-wife whom she thought was dead, after he dies in a freak accident. A man who flees Poland during WWII tells his American-born son, each time he is hurt or sick: "May this be the worst pain you ever feel." An artist makes his name by photographing famous people as he punches them, eventually falling in love with one of the people he punches, even though that man is dying. A woman's life seems to spiral apart after accidentally shooting an Albatross, and she wonders if it is fate or her own doing. A myriad of stories which reflect the very different, yet intertwining, themes of music and wartime. Highly recommended

short stories of the best degree. Loved the entire tome.

seventy years ago to the day of April 22, 2015, that I first saw images of her artwork, Kathe Kollwitz died. Her name is mentioned in the short story, *GOOD SAINT ANTHONY COME AROUND*, by Rebecca Makkai. The events of the story take place in the art world of Lower Manhattan during the late 1980s, when the exorbitant prices works of art commanded were drying up, the same time when AIDS entered our collective consciousness. The sculptor, Francisco Ling, afflicted with the virus, is being cared for by Chapman, a photographer who builds a show around punching famous artists in the face while catching their expression on film. Another story has Celine, a fairly successful cellist, returning to her rural home and finding on her lawn a kitschy memorial of plastic flowers and cross,

commemorating a young woman killed in a motorcycle accident on the cellist's lawn. in a discussion about the cross, gregory, one of the violinists in their quartet who believes himself celine's starcrossed lover, says to her that the way events in her life are going that she must believe in signs, to which celine responds that she does not. gregory counters that she must believe in signs if she believes in music. add to celine's observations of signs, the four members of the quartet playing the fourth movement of bartok's fourth quartet, and the four points of the cross on her lawn. signs, suffering, music and innocence are part of makkai's stories, the belief that anyone can know the suffering of another simply by being in tune with the moment as historical. is that empathy? in THE WORSE YOU'LL EVER FEEL, the young son of classical musicians, believes that by listening to music he can see and know, almost to the detail, the experience of a visiting violinist to his parents' house, and what happened to him back in romania during the last days of nazism and then under soviet rule. lessons for the young son are scattered throughout the stay of the visit of his father's west european friend, lessons he will only learn in time as he matures. perhaps, the boy will even become some day, what the men refer to him as, the Œrabi. a variation of the theme of the meaning of empathy occurs in the THE MUSEUM OF THE DEARLY DEPARTED when a young couple is privileged to hear the story of an older couple from nazi germany. the young couple are placed in a similar situation to the boy in THE WORSE YOU'LL EVER FEEL. in the couples' story, judgment replaces imagination, and the essence of empathy is defined in a conversation by the young couple that the story they heard was not their story, that the events did not happen to them, that they were not there and therefore cannot say or know what they would have done or what the older couple should have done. makkai's stories aren't as dark as I might have suggested, but darkness is visible in them, and the collection is comprised of stories profound as well as humorous, equally intelligent, equally entertaining.

As a musician myself, I am generally leery of authors who use music in their fiction, as it is so often only half understood. But by the same token, writers who get it right are a sheer joy; I am thinking especially of Vikram Seth (AN EQUAL MUSIC), Richard Powers (THE TIME OF OUR SINGING AND ORFEO), and now Rebecca Makkai. There is not music in every one of these seventeen stories, but those that do use it are memorable. "The Worst You Ever Feel" has a twelve-year-old prodigy playing the violin with his father's old teacher, a Romanian who escaped the holocaust only to be imprisoned by the communists. The Soviet era comes back in several other

tales, such as "Exposition," a chilling partially-redacted report of the execution of a dissident pianist during her concert. But not all are shaded by war; one of my favorites, "Cross," features a female Asian cellist and some younger musicians from the Marlboro Festival playing a Bartok string quartet; any violence in the piece has to do with the tacky shrine that some neighbors have erected in her front yard to remember a girl killed in a motorcycle crash, and the cellist's own defensive withdrawal from normal social or sexual life. And others are even funny, such as "Couple of Lovers on a Red Background," in which J. S. Bach comes to stay with a modern woman, where he plays Chopin as though Romanticism had never been heard of, gets scared by passing cars, but grooves to Louis Armstrong. In all, five of the stories use music in a significant way, but eight others revolve around one or more of the other arts: painting, poetry, sculpture, even cooking. Similarly, though only five take place in or refer back to times of war, the majority contain some kind of encompassing tension: a totalitarian regime, terrorism, the AIDS crisis, the tenure battle, even the manufactured tensions in a reality TV show. This last, "The November Story," is one of the lighter examples, blowing the lid off an industry where rivalries, victories, and even love-affairs in this Project Runway for artists are manipulated by the producers and video editors. The tenure story begins light-heartedly too, with an assistant professor of English who accidentally footnotes her lectures on "The Ancient Mariner" by actually shooting an albatross in Australia, but it soon takes a much more sinister turn with overtones of Mamet's play *OLEANNA*. And the AIDS story, "Good Saint Anthony Come Around," set in the 1980s, does for the visual arts of the time what the best of the others do for music. In among the longer stories of around twenty pages, there are five that occupy only two or three. Several of them have the subtitle "Legend." Only anecdotes really, they are windows into a distant past. But by the time you come to the last and longest of them, "Suspension: April 20, 1984," which links several generations of the Makkai family through snaps in a photo album, you realize that all of these have been autobiographical family vignettes, and that the theme of the Holocaust which occurs in many of the stories has a very particular and rather horrifying meaning when applied to the author's grandparents. The last story of all, "The Museum of the Dearly Departed," begins with a gas leak that kills all the inhabitants of a Chicago apartment building in their sleep -- all except the old Hungarian couple in the basement, who were away for the night, and whom you suddenly recognize as a fictional version of those same grandparents. There is no other word for it: it is a masterpiece, tying together past and present, the destruction of war and the restorative power of art, making the perfect conclusion to this amazing collection.

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