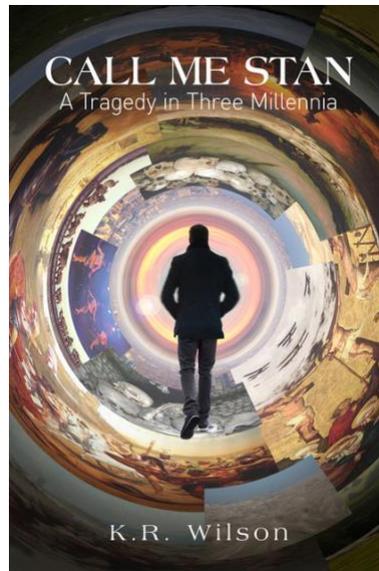


HOW STAN GOT HIS GROOVE

BY

K.R. Wilson



Words and music have always had a special relationship. People have sung songs since before recorded history. To lighten their labours. To worship their gods. To stir the blood of their soldiers. And songs aren't the only places where words and music meet. From the time of music's origins, we've used words to instruct others how to play, and how to build the instruments they play on. Eventually we started using them to develop and pass along our evolving understanding of how music works, and how to make it work. Harmony. Counterpoint. Acoustics. Electronics. And to describe music to others. To evaluate it. To criticize it. And to work it into our stories.

Literature is filled with a love of music, from the songs of Demodocus the bard in Homer's *Odyssey* to Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* to Jerzy Kosinsky's *Pinball* to Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* to Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* to Sean Michaels' *Us Conductors* (cherry-picking just a handful of Western examples that I happen to like). And music runs through my novel *Call Me Stan: A Tragedy in Three Millennia*.

The narrator of *Call Me Stan*, a self-described immortal (which is the element that squeaks the book into the Speculative Fiction category) first develops

his taste for music through the rowing-songs of a crew of Thracian soldiers he falls in with in the aftermath of the Trojan war. As his story takes us through the subsequent 3200 years of Western history, we see him as the cantor of the first Benedictine monastery, an instructor in the Vatican choir school (this bit isn't actually in the novel but appeared as a piece of flash fiction in *Syncopation Literary Journal*, Volume 1, Issue 2), an opera chorister in the Zurich of the 1850s, and a cabaret singer in post-war Berlin.

Music is a natural fit for my fiction: I have a Bachelor of Music degree in composition and—when the pandemic permits—I sing in a very fine 100-voice choir, Pax Christi Chorale. Music is also central to my previous novel *An Idea About My Dead Uncle*, the protagonist of which is a young composer wrestling with family issues. And music—or at least a musician—was the initial idea that grew into *Call Me Stan*.

The composer Richard Wagner—a notorious anti-Semite who published a truly vile essay called *Das Judentum in der Musik*, which, and I cannot stress this enough, you should definitely avoid—was so fascinated by the Buddha that he wanted to write an opera about him, though he never did. The cognitive dissonance between Wagner's long interest in one of history's greatest exponents of compassion and his own vile racist beliefs has intrigued and baffled me for years. (Despite myself, really. I'm not a particular fan of Wagner's music. I'm on board with Rossini's possibly apocryphal comment that Wagner has some lovely moments but awful quarter-hours). At a certain point I felt I wanted to write something about that dissonance, but I didn't know what.

Enter science fiction novelist Stephen R. Donaldson. A long time ago I came across an observation of his that has stayed with me ever since: that sometimes an idea “stubbornly refuses to grow” until it is “intersected by [a] second. And then: Step back, boys and girls. She's a gusher.”¹

The second idea in my case was the legend of the cursed immortal commonly referred to as the Wandering Jew. This figure turns up in a variety of guises throughout European culture, especially in the nineteenth century, and including as the title character in Wagner's opera *The Flying Dutchman*. And hey, lookie here: not long before Wagner was seized by the Buddha story, he conducted a production of *Dutchman* in Zurich.

Step back, boys and girls.

The idea of an immortal narrator opened up a gigantic historical playground for me to goof around in. And goof around I did. By having Stan describe, from a present-day perspective, his life across a wide range of historical periods, I could

¹ *The Gap into Conflict: The Real Story*, Stephen R. Donaldson, Bantam Books, 1991.

be as cheekily anachronistic as I liked, and just maybe make those periods feel more real to a modern reader than they might've if I'd treated them more conventionally. As in, for example, this extract from the chapter set in fourteenth-century England:

Did I mention we were at war with France? Yeah, well. We were always at war with France. It was kind of a thing. Joan of Arc. That Shakespeare movie with Kenneth Branagh. The usual story. Your king wakes up one morning, showers and shaves, pops a bagel in the toaster, and, while he's waiting on it, says to himself, "Maybe I should be King of France." Next thing you know, historians are totting up the decades and crossing their fingers that they'll get to call it The Hundred Years' War, because wouldn't that be just, like, an awesome name?²

They say you should write what you know. Well, I haven't experienced Hittite warfare or Benedictine monastic life or the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. But I have had some experience with music. So, it made sense—especially given the premise I started with—that music would turn up in *Call Me Stan* and would keep turning up. Hence the rowing songs and the monastic chants and the operatic choruses and the German cabaret music. Together they create a musical thread that I think helps unify what might otherwise have been a less connected narrative, and which gives that narrative some added flavour along the way.

Especially for readers with musical experience themselves.

K. R. Wilson's novel Call Me Stan: A Tragedy in Three Millennia (Guernica Editions)—in which a self-described immortal takes a police interrogator on a wry, anachronistic tour of 3200 years of Western history—was longlisted for the 2022 Leacock Medal for Literary Humour.

² *Call Me Stan*, K.R. Wilson, Guernica Editions, 2021. Pp. 253-254.