Author Q&A for *Vivian in Red*

Q: What inspired your turn to historical fiction, and specifically *Vivian in Red*?

Riggle: My agent challenged me to pan the camera back, so to speak, from my usual intimate stories to something that had a more sweeping scope. One way to do that would be to tell a story that crosses generations. I decided to write about a family with a clouded legacy that stretched across the decades, and when I hit upon "Broadway songwriting" as that legacy, I got a chill up my spine and knew that was my next story.

Q: What experience do you have with the world of musical theater?

Riggle: I have always been fascinated by the stage, but as an awkward kid I was way too shy to get involved. I did play the violin, and was in the pit orchestra for my high school's production of *The Music Man*. Because the violins sat toward the edge of the pit, I could watch the whole show from down there, and I did. "Seventy-Six Trombones" haunted my dreams for weeks.

Playing in orchestras also exposed me to some of the greatest hits of 1980s Broadway, for instance Andrew Lloyd Webber and *Les Miserables* medleys. Pops concerts would often include those glorious jazz standards like "Someone to Watch Over Me" and "Rhapsody in Blue", so I learned to love those songs, too.

My journalism career didn't allow for much in the way of hobbies, but when I quit my full-time job I auditioned for a local production of *How to Succeed in Business (Without Really Trying)* , and I ended up in the chorus as a singing and dancing secretary. Those few months were some of the most fun, intense, and exhilarating of my life. To this day, I can't hear someone accidentally use a line from the show (like "No coffee" or "Been a long day") without wanting to burst into song.

All those experiences stoked my fascination with musicals, and played into my portrayal in *Vivian*.

Q: How did you find the experience of writing Jewish characters when you are not?

Riggle: I was intimidated to take this on. I thought about dodging the whole issue, because after all Cole Porter wasn't Jewish, and neither was Jimmy McHugh ("I Can't Give You Anything But Love"). But so many of the leading lights in songwriting at the time were Russian or Eastern European Jews, either immigrants or first-generation Americans. It would have felt cowardly to make Milo the exception to the rule, just to make it easier on myself.

Luckily, I have very kind and patient Jewish friends who answered my naïve questions without making fun of me. (Not much fun, at any rate.) I also learned some excellent Yiddish, like farkakte, which is my favorite new word.

I named characters in the book after all of them, in tribute.

Q: How did you come up with Milo's songs in the book?

Riggle: Writing those songs in character as Milo was some of the most fun I've ever had as a novelist. I wrote the lyrics longhand, and along with my scratch-offs and edits there is usually a facing page of rhyming words. I didn't use a rhyming dictionary, though some lyricists do and I could have. In order to know what I was doing, I studied the work of Philip Furia, a professor and expert on the lyrics and lyricists of Tin Pan Alley. He has written whole books picking apart the structure of these songs.

I worried a little that in the plot of the story I was essentially elevating my own work to that of legendary lyricists like Ira Gershwin and Irving Berlin, because Milo's most famous song lasts through the ages. But then I decided, well it's my novel and my invented world, so if I say this song was a hit? It was a hit. So there.

Q: What is your favorite song from Milo and Vivian's time?

Riggle: I can hardly pick one! I actually have a playlist up on Spotify (search my name) of beloved songs that Milo would have enjoyed. I have two, actually. One is of timeless recordings by artists from several decades, one is of authentic big band style recordings that Vivian might have played on her phonograph.

If pressed, I would say "Someone to Watch Over Me", "You're the Top", and "It Had to Be You" are three of my favorites.

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