

"The Forbidden Book": Sex, Death, Love, Religion, Politics, Magic, and all that

Sex, death, love, religion, politics and magic are the main ingredients in *The Forbidden Book*, the new novel by Joscelyn Godwin and Guido Mina di Sospiro. Only true adepts are capable of transforming such an explosive admixture into a pleasing and harmonious whole that still retains the white-hot energy of its separate components.

For those with little or no knowledge of or interest in such things as Alchemy, Traditionalism and Classical literature, *The Forbidden Book* can be read and thoroughly enjoyed as a finely crafted mystery novel, a romantic adventure, or even as social commentary "ripped straight from today's headlines". In other words, the novel succeeds admirably on the mundane level as a page-turner, complete with terrorist bombings, transgressive sexuality, and a voyeuristic inside look at the shockingly decadent lifestyles of the rich and famous.

But this truly Hermetic book will be most deeply appreciated by those who have cultivated a relationship with Mercurius, as the Romans called him, the Pagan God who is both the patron saint of the modern Western Mystery Tradition, and also the most liminal of the ancient Olympians (as both the God of boundaries and the God of *crossing* boundaries, not to mention the God of thieves and liars, and the reputed father of Eros).

Like all good Alchemical yarns, this story revolves around a fated couple: professor Leonardo Kavenaugh, a tall, dark and handsome classical scholar; and the young and beautiful Baronessa Orsina Riviera. Almost from the beginning we are given to know that the 50-something Leo has been madly in love with the 20-something Orsina since the time, barely two years before the story begins, when she was still one of his students at Georgetown University, but that Leo has not acted on these feelings. So, does Orsina in any way requite the politically incorrect *amore* of her former *professore*? The answer to that question will not be divulged in this review, although I will say this: the interested reader should play close attention to the various attempts by the Hero and Heroine of this Chemical Romance to communicate their True Feelings to each other in writing.

Besides the professor and the Baronessa, the other two major players are (1) the unapologetically elitist, coldly analytical, and fabulously wealthy patriarch of the Riviera clan: Baron Emanuele Riviera della Motta, and (2) Orsina's younger sister, Angela, a charmingly out-of-control underaged party-girl who manages to be simultaneously genuinely sweet-natured and flippantly self-involved, and whose favorite past-time is "villa-hopping". Importantly, these two form a very different kind of couple, and the contrast between the Baron and Angela, on the one hand, and Leo and Orsina, on the other hand, is key to unlocking the heart of this story. The central plot is certainly the Alchemical dance of the professor and the Baronessa, but the all-important sub-text is to be found in the Jungian shadow of that dance played out by Angela and the Baron.

I must address an important question regarding the true identity, so to speak, of the character Emanuele della Motta. There can be little doubt that "the Baron", as he is usually referred to throughout the book, bears at least a superficial resemblance to that towering figure of modern (and, most especially, *anti-modern*) Esotericism, Julius Evola. As a matter of fact, one of the authors (Godwin) is among the world's leading scholarly experts on all things pertaining to Julius

Evola, and Godwin also has extensive up-close-and-personal knowledge of and acquaintance with the contemporary Evolian "movement". One peer-reviewed academic journal has even published the (patently ridiculous) accusation that Godwin is a leading member of a secret international crypto-fascist conspiracy inspired by the writings of Evola!

The Baron of *The Forbidden Book* starts out as a distant, indeed haughty, enigma. Much of the plot of the novel revolves around peeling away the successive layers of the onion that is the Baron's secret, inner life. The more this unpeeling proceeds, the less, in my opinion, does the Baron della Motta resemble the Baron Evola.



I cannot claim to know with any certainty what Godwin and di Sospiro intend to say regarding the real Baron Julius Evola, although it is very likely, it seems to me, that this is one place where the authors have drawn a bright line dividing fiction and reality. In particular, the conspicuous consumption that characterizes Baron Riviera della Motta's standard of living as well as his physical vigor, both contrast starkly with the monkishly ascetic Evola who was wheelchair bound for the last three decades of his life. Also, Riviera's strong identification with his fabulously wealthy, aristocratic family lineage, another defining quality of the fictional character, has no parallel in Evola's biography, in which one finds, to be sure, passing assertions about the "nobility" of the Evola family, but nothing more.

My (necessarily tentative) conclusion on this point is that "the two Barons" are meant to be a study in superficial similarities masking profound contrasts. Indeed, the superficial similarities between the fictional della Motta and the very real Evola are perhaps intended to emphasize the pathetic superficiality of most of what passes for Evola's contemporary "following".

The Forbidden Book is a novel to be both enjoyed and pondered. When reading this story one should allow oneself to be taken up by it. "Enraptured" is not too strong of a word for the effect it had on this reader. During this process, one should hold (gently) in the mind whatever images, thoughts, questions, or other impressions may linger there. Some of these psychic visitors will stay on as inner "house guests" that one can engage with again and again, like some Zen koan, as objects of meditation and spurs to further inner inquiry.

The Forbidden Book is nothing less than a valuable aid to the process of spiritual evolution, that concept which forms the beating heart of all genuine Perennial Philosophy, *prisca theologia*, Tradition, what-have-you. The authors have drawn deeply from their vast combined stores of Esoteric knowledge to provide material for us to reflect upon and experiment with in our ongoing quests, regardless of what stage or phase we happen to be in right now. The authors are eager to lend a hand, but they are also meticulously respectful of the very personal and highly *individualized* nature of what Sri Aurobindo and others have rightly called *sva-dharma*: one's

own path. No one can walk this path for us, but *The Forbidden Book* is a very welcome reminder that there is good company along the way, and that much can be learned from our fellow travelers.

