

The Song Before It Is Sung by Justin Cartwright.
Bloomsbury 2007.

There are many books published every year that are enjoyable to read; there are some that are profound, or shocking, or educational, or even life-changing: then there are others whose literary quality is so high as to make them outstanding.

The Song Before It Is Sung is the first of Justin Cartwright's novels that I have read but it will not be the last, because writing of such excellence is very rare indeed. Cartwright's fine writing is combined here with a powerful and moving story, set in two time periods and with three main protagonists.

Elya Mendel, an Oxford don, and the aristocratic German Axel von Gottberg, have an intense personal and academic relationship that starts when the latter is a Rhodes scholar at Oxford and continues through the rise of Nazism, faltering only when Mendel, a Jew, becomes convinced that, in spite of his protestations to the contrary, von Gottberg has become a Nazi. Conrad Senior, a former student of Mendel's, and another Rhodes scholar, is bequeathed his teacher's papers and correspondence with and concerning von Gottberg after Mendel's death.

Senior sets out, against the background of his failing marriage, to discover the true story of the relationship between Mendel and von Gottberg, and especially the nature of the latter's activities during the war, culminating in his participation in the von Stauffenberg plot to assassinate Hitler in 1944. At first the complexity and volume of the correspondence overwhelms Senior, but eventually he finds a way through to reveal the emotional complexity of both men, as well as the role in their lives of the women they loved before the war began.

The conclusion is deeply moving, and redemptive, and the novel as a whole is hard to leave once finished.

This is beyond question the best book of any genre that I have read this year – and I will be surprised if it is bettered.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh