

Lush and eccentric

Villa Coco's cover reminded me of Keats's "To Autumn". Much like Keats's poem, there's a sense of abundance, ripeness, and fullness suggested by the illustration on the book's front cover. The novel's Tuscan countryside setting is reflected here which features a riot of mostly autumnal colours. Add to this the figure of a small dog licking from a plate on a dining table, and it prepares readers for the charm and the excess of Andrew Sean Greer's latest offering.

Narrated in the first person, *Villa Coco* is the account of a time in the narrator's life when he was so young and different that he finds it's not easy "... to write of him in the first person". Offered a job of cataloguing the possessions of a Baronessa in the Italian countryside, he reaches Villa Coco not knowing exactly what to expect. Almost immediately, he finds himself plunged into a world like nothing he had experienced before. For this is the world of Lisabetta, or Coco as she is to her friends, the ninety-two-year-old aristocrat whose guiding forces in life seem to be her eccentricities, whims, and fancies. As the young man lives in Villa Coco, he is swept along by the schemes of the Baronessa as he

VILLA COCO
By Andrew Sean Greer,
Sceptre, ₹699

prunes roses, learns Italian, and gets caught up in her madcap adventures, including stealing the urn with the ashes of her close friend. He also falls in love despite his plans not to, and becomes an accomplice in Coco's final plan which she has already set into motion. There is some mystery about what the final plan entails, but that's not what *Villa Coco* is about.

Greer presents the Baronessa and her world in lush, beautiful prose. Through his evocative descriptions of not only the house — which is chock-full of Coco's possessions — but also the surrounding region, Greer shows a familiarity that goes beyond that of the tourist. But at the centre of *Villa Coco* is Coco herself. The Baronessa comes across as an eccentric and capricious yet spry old woman who is flexible with both her stories and the truth. As the narrator, whom she prefers to call Giovedì because he is her man Friday, becomes tangled in Coco's adventures and plans, the reader gets a ringside view of all their escapades.



Getting caught up in the whirlwind of Coco's quirky and sometimes downright bizarre plans means that the narrator has to quickly adapt to the Baronessa's shifting moods. This breathlessness is reflected in the book's structure which is divided into three parts without chapters. Despite this sense of continuity, there remains an episodic and disjointed quality to the narrative as Coco's personality and

her machinations are what hold it together.

But even her charming eccentricity can feel excessive and repetitive after a point. Readers' reaction to the book will thus depend on how willing they are to be charmed by Coco. For a reader less enchanted, ripeness soon tips into overindulgence, and abundance turns to excess.

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