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This is the author’s radio script of this article.
Virginia Duigan’s second novel, *The Biographer*, is set in a tiny hilltop community in Tuscany. It’s about the smallest group of dwellings you could call a community, actually: two couples, each consisting of a painter and a winemaker, in an ancient deserted village. Their apparently idyllic life is – you guessed it – about to be changed forever by the arrival of an attractive stranger.

The eighty-ish painter Rollo lives with his younger lover, Guy in one house. His winemaking partner, Gigi, or Greer, lives in another house with her lover Mischa, a Czech painter. There is a third house, for guests. And that’s the little settlement. Greer is an Australian, who left her husband of two months abruptly twenty-five years ago, to run away with Mischa, abandoning not only the distraught ex, but her sister and mother, and her employer Verity, owner of the gallery where Mischa has just burst onto the scene with a sellout exhibition.

The young stranger is Tony, who has been given permission by Mischa, now world famous, to write his biography. Greer is terrified: there is a secret in her past which she is not ready to share with anyone, or even to face herself: clearly there was a little more to it than the world well lost for love. Tony, a breezy Californian who immediately falls into an easy, flirtatious relationship with the gay couple, is dauntingly good at his job. He has already found out just about all the facts, though like a good detective he’s in no hurry to disclose what he knows. As Greer prepares herself to face Tony’s questions, she reads again the diary she kept when she first met Mischa.
So we have a dual narrative: Greer in the present tense, and it is a very tense present! – worrying about a secret the reader is not privy to, and her diary entries from the most turbulent time of her life quarter of a century earlier. Once Tony arrives we also cut to his point of view from time to time, so we get the effect of a game of hide and seek.

*The Biographer* is a meditation on the inevitable intrusions involved in biography, the mysteries of the creative process, and the impossibility of escaping the past. There are thrilling and fast-paced passages: early in the novel these are the parts concerned with the past events, slowly rationed out between stretches of local colour, long conversations leaden with camp jokes, and the development of peripheral stereotypes like the hyperactive Polish housekeeper Agnieszka and her husband ‘Angelo who is no angel-o’. One begins to feel that Greer’s big secret, which is known to both Greer and Tony, is being withheld from the reader only for the purposes of stringing out the narrative tension: you keep reading not so much because you are engrossed by what’s happening in the present-day narrative, but because you need to know what the secret is. Fifty or so pages from the end things speed up and the novel becomes hard to put down, and the ending is a satisfying though perhaps slightly soft landing. And looking back, there is a narrative justification for the delayed denouement: Greer’s process of bracing to face her past drives the novel, so it is not until she brings herself to read her diary, adding in parts of the story she missed out originally, that we can know what’s on her mind. So despite a few slow passages, in the end *The Biographer* is a thoughtful and thought-provoking book, well worth persisting with.