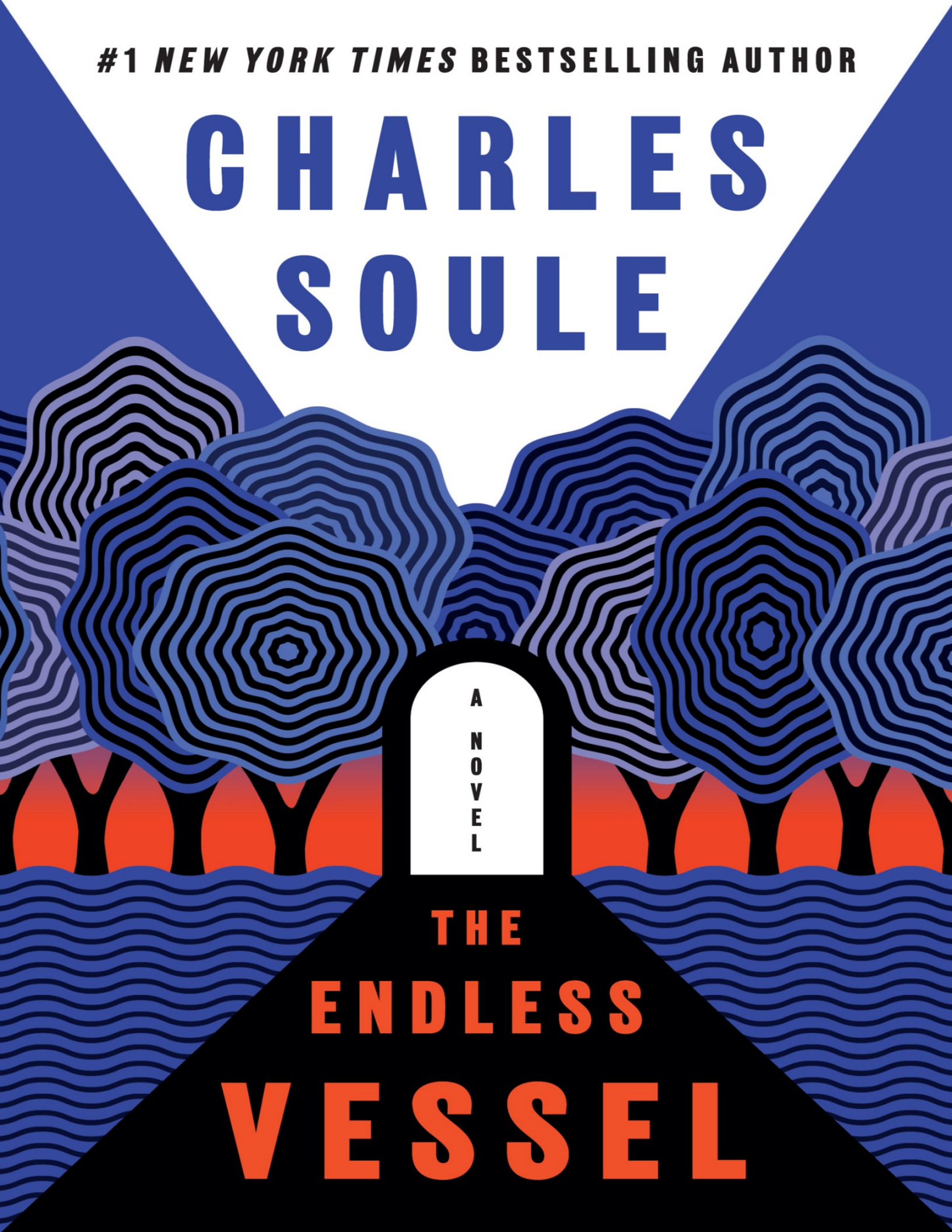


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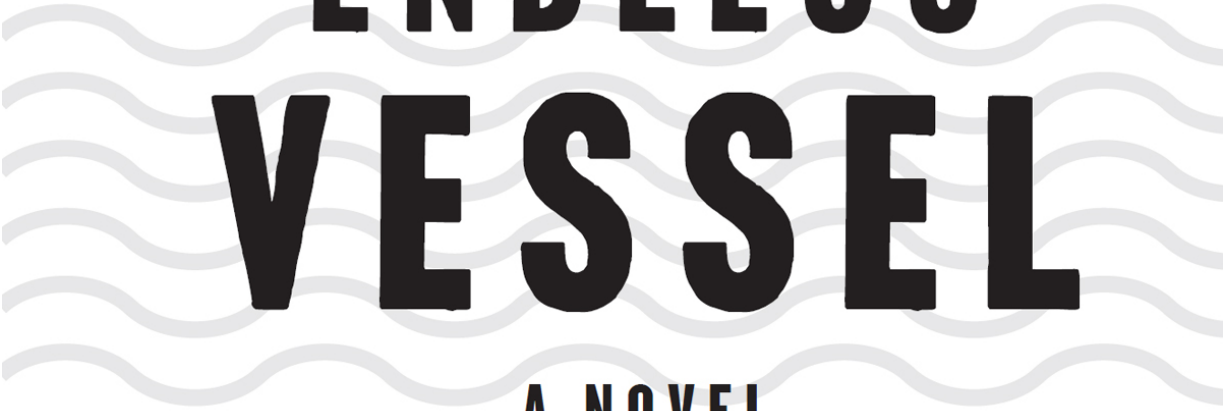
CHARLES SOULE

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THE ENDLESS VESSEL



**THE
ENDLESS
VESSEL**



A NOVEL

CHARLES SOULE

HARPER  PERENNIAL

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Dedication

For Amy.

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Book I: The Journey

I. One: Paris.

48°51'36.9"N, 2°20'07.2"E

FRANÇOIS LEDUC WAS SO HAPPY.

He was an old man, and soaking wet. His joints ached as he ran, especially his bad hip. His wingtips squelched with every step. His drenched suitcoat slapped at his sides, heavy like raw meat. But as he sprinted through the Louvre, he felt nothing but joy. He had a job to do, a purpose.

All around him were masterworks. This was the ground floor of the museum's Denon Wing, home to many works of Renaissance genius. Just then, François was rushing through Salle 403, the Michelangelo Gallery. He ran between two famous, superb marbles by the gallery's namesake, his *Rebellious Slave* and *Dying Slave*, each originally intended for the tomb of Pope Julius II. But the room was not only a shrine to Michelangelo. It was packed with sculptures by other great masters, all nearly as exquisite—Giambologna's lovely bronze *Flying Mercury*, a number of Bernini marbles. Monsieur LeDuc had spent his career amid these pieces, ensuring the world could view and enjoy them.

Now water streamed over the sculptures, showering down from high above like they were caught in a summer storm. François could do nothing about that. The museum's sprinkler systems were automated, activating whenever the temperature rose to a sufficiently high level. Rivulets washed across ancient, priceless carvings, dripping off the stone and metal into puddles on the floor. A surreal sight, but water was no threat to these works, or even the hundreds of paintings being similarly saturated in other galleries. The museum's restoration department could handle the damage. In the centuries since these pieces were created, most had survived worse than a soaking.

Fire, though . . . fire was another story. Flame would be the end of even these long-enduring works. It would swallow the paintings whole, blacken and shatter the marbles, melt the bronzes into puddles. The Louvre was burning, and if the blaze was not suppressed, François LeDuc would be one of the last people alive to set eyes on its treasures.

The inferno had surged up from the museum's lower levels, appearing everywhere all at once. François suspected the blaze began in one of the basement workshops, where craftsmen worked with volatile substances used to preserve and restore great works of art. Resin and liniments and a long list of chemicals and compounds, inflammable one and all.

Whatever the fire's cause, it ate through the museum's galleries like a starving beast, racing from one to the next, gleefully gulping down the genius contained within.

One small blessing: it was Tuesday, and on Tuesdays by long tradition the museum closed its doors. On any other day LeDuc would be fighting his way through a crush of fleeing patrons. But this evening he had the halls to himself, as far as he could tell.

François raced through Daru Gallery, Salle 406, his feet loud against the stone floor even against the roar of the approaching flames. At the end of the gallery lay a broad set of marble stairs, now become a series of ten-centimeter-high waterfalls. The old man hauled himself up, passing the lady from Samothrace in all her glory at the first landing. The iconic sculpture—*Winged Victory*, most called it—was wreathed in smoke, firelight flickering on its polished surface.

It almost improves it, he thought. *Gives the piece an apocalyptic air that's really quite—*

François LeDuc slipped, flailing wildly, certain he was about to fall backward and break his neck with his task unfulfilled.

His palm found the brass banister and he grasped it tightly, wrenching his wrist but finding his balance. François took a moment, his heart pounding. It would not do to avoid a fall only to succumb to a cardiac episode.

His equilibrium returning, Monsieur LeDuc looked back down the steps at the sculpture gallery. Flames and smoke obscured the worst of what was happening . . . but his imagination supplied the details. Centuries-old stonework heating beyond tolerance, the clean white marble turning black, cracks obliterating the delicate carvings.

A disaster. And somehow, not even a single member of the museum's fire brigade was in evidence. The Louvre kept forty-eight firefighters on permanent staff. None of those were to be seen, nor any from the city itself. Perhaps the firemen of Paris were busy elsewhere. These days, after all, there were so many fires.

Then again, LeDuc thought, surveying the ongoing immolation of his beloved museum, perhaps it is not that there are so many fires, but that there are so few firemen.

The Louvre was dying, but the gigantic old palace was strong. François thought it would survive long enough for him to do what he needed to do. He continued up the stairs, choosing his steps carefully.

LeDuc emerged into the upper level, the section he considered his own personal kingdom. He was the *directeur des peintures* of the Louvre Museum. He had personally selected many of the paintings on display in these halls, anointing works he believed should be moved from the limbo of the storage vaults into the light and air and attention of the galleries. François LeDuc knew every painting here as well as he knew his own face, from the famous to the obscure—Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque* to Raphael's *Balthazar Castiglione* (a personal favorite).

Smoke thickened the air. François took short, quick breaths, tasting a horrible chemical residue on his tongue—burned paint. He swallowed, feeling pain in his raw throat, wishing he had thought to wet a scarf to breathe through. The curator crouched as much as his elderly back would allow, trying to get underneath the choking haze, and kept moving. Not far now.

The second floor boasted enormous floor-to-ceiling windows more than four meters tall. François glanced through one as he hurried past, then froze. He had a good view of the Louvre's northern half, the Richelieu Wing, utterly engulfed in flames. The huge structure wasn't just ablaze; it was gone, transformed into a seething, twisting block of fire.

LeDuc's curatorial mind began cataloguing everything being consumed within that inferno, but he yanked himself back to the moment. He could not dwell. Perhaps later.

Movement in the corner of his eye shifted his gaze to the left, to the large lawns of the Jardin des Tuileries, a massive stretch of parkland running from the Louvre west along the Seine, thirty hectares in all.

Arrayed in the park was a massive crowd, watching, standing vigil—but not all bore witness in stoic silence. A not-insignificant portion seemed consumed by a bacchanal. They danced around smaller fires of their own; drummers pounded out rhythms as they swirled and spun, waving brightly colored flags. The dancers were tiny from this distance, but their energy, their motion—the very *insistence* of their celebration—hotter than the flames devouring the Richelieu.

LeDuc knew who they were. The beautiful fanatics of Team Joy Joy, L'Équipe de Joie, dancing to the beat of their own extinction. He wondered if they'd started the fire. Seemed like the sort of thing they would do.

François LeDuc moved on from the window. He was the *directeur des peintures*. He had responsibilities.

He passed through a final archway into room 711, Salle des États, stumbling through the intensifying smoke and heat.

François slowed. He'd made it, and just in time. There she was.

He looked at the great lady, his mind flooding with facts about the work despite the smoke and the stench of melting paint and the sprinklers still raining down water from above. Painted by Leonardo da Vinci around 1513. A jewel in the collection of many French sovereigns from Louis XIV to Napoleon. And once French sovereigns were no longer *en vogue* due to the Revolution, it ended up in the Louvre. It had remained here ever since, barring a brief sojourn in 1911 to Florence after the painting was stolen by an Italian ne'er-do-well named Vincenzo Peruggia, and a United States tour in the 1960s due to the particular request of a president's wife.

Of all the many works in the Louvre, François thought this one might survive the fire. Attempts to destroy this particular piece were not uncommon; someone had even once attacked her with acid. She attracted venom from lunatics, anarchists, even self-appointed critics who felt her importance to the cultural landscape was overstated. But despite their efforts, she remained, growing more precious with time. More than ten million people visited the Louvre each year, and many bought their tickets solely to see this one piece.

The lady was strongly protected, befitting her status as the museum's greatest treasure. A clear enclosure of reinforced glass surrounded the painting, bulletproof and climate-controlled. Its systems maintained a constant internal humidity and temperature and were specifically designed to survive a fire. François knew it was strong enough that firemen should be

able to sift through the Louvre's ashes, wipe the soot from the still-intact enclosure, and see that famous smile, preserved for future generations.

"Ha," François said.

Future generations, he thought.

The smile.

Everyone was so focused on the damn smirk, and yet he'd always thought it was the least interesting thing about the piece. Why didn't people talk about the sfumato technique Da Vinci had invented when he created it, an utterly unique method of layering paint to bring in light and depth? Or the perspective tricks employed to depict the landscape behind the figure, the unusual chemical blends in the paints, and more besides? The work was a cavalcade of technical advances for its era, all of which (in Monsieur LeDuc's opinion, a weighty opinion indeed) vastly outweighed a single woman's smile. An *ugly* woman's smile. La Gioconda was no great beauty.

François pulled a key ring from his pocket, selecting one, then flipped up a recessed panel in the wall next to the case, revealing a keyhole and numerical keypad. He inserted the key, turned it, tapped in a nine-digit code, and the sealed box opened with a soft whoosh of perfectly temperate air.

He looked back the way he had come and saw that the fire had already swallowed the corridor he had just passed through. He was running out of time.

François lifted the painting off the wall. For all its momentous reputation, it was light. Easily carried.

He brought the work to the next gallery, number 701, the Salle Denon. This was on the building's exterior and so included more of the tall windows overlooking the central courtyard, bordered by tall, heavy curtains of red velvet. François set the painting on the floor next to one of these. Another quick fumble through his key ring and he unlocked the window. François could have smashed it, but he found himself reluctant to damage the museum. Perverse, considering the circumstances.

The curtains blew inward with a huge sucking rush of air once he threw open the window, the flames sneaking up behind him and greedily gulping at their new source of oxygen. It wouldn't be long now.

With some effort, François shoved the long curtains out into the night, letting them ripple up to either side. He thought they might serve as flags, drawing attention to his location, and sure enough, when he looked at the

park, he saw faces turning to look. He wanted the attention of the revelers, with their drums and symbols and chants, and they complied, staring at him expectantly, all those Joy Boys and Joy Girls.

François LeDuc stepped up into the window and held the painting above his head. A cheer arose from the dancers as they recognized what he was holding. Of course they did. It was the most famous painting in the world. Not the *greatest* painting—he would give that title to Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, though the old curator was willing to accept that taste was subjective, and ultimately Friedrich didn’t sell tickets like Da Vinci.

Everyone had to see the *Mona Lisa* before they died.

François could feel the flames at his back. He didn’t look. He didn’t want to lose his nerve.

The heat built, leaping quickly from uncomfortable to the edge of pain to something nearing agony. He wondered if he was already aflame.

François did not lower the painting. He held it high, displaying it to the sea of faces. He would hold it up as long as he could. He wondered if Aunt Jane was out there somewhere, if she was watching what he was doing. He thought she probably was. She led Team Joy Joy; she was its guiding light and inspiration. This was not an event she would miss. He wondered if she was proud of him. He hoped so.

François felt searing pain in his fingers. He glanced up, and saw the *Mona Lisa* was burning. A spark must have landed on it, instantly setting the ancient frame and the even older paints and varnishes ablaze.

He smiled, a true, unambiguous ear-to-ear grin.

Good, he thought. *No miraculous escape for La Joconde this time.*

She had survived acid and war and time itself, but François LeDuc had ensured her reign was done. One less distraction for humanity, one less thing to prevent people from accepting the truth of the end to come. For this *was* the end, the last generation. It was, and he knew it, and everyone outside and across the world needed to know it. That was why he was doing this. He was making his final moments matter. There was joy in that, if you just allowed yourself to see it.

The joy. The joy. The joy.

The fire kissed François LeDuc and he lifted the painting up, the great masterpiece, letting it burn before the eyes of the world.

He smiled.