

I LOOKED ALIVE by Gary Lutz
Black Square Editions/Brooklyn Rail, 2010
Reviewed by Greg Gerke

Gary Lutz chronicles the ever-so-common disjunctive American household with alliterative, vibrant sentences. The opening sentence of “People Shouldn’t Have to be the Ones to Tell You” serves as the perfect introduction to this unwonderful world: “He had a couple of grown daughters, disappointers, with regretted curiosities and the heavy venture of having once looked alive” (29). This sonorous wave of consonance (first h’s, then d’s, then h’s again) tells the reader that there is a man and that’s all—what he has produced is negligible; his failed daughters are a long way from happiness.

Indeed, the description “looked alive,” which becomes the name of the book, (*I Looked Alive*), serves to introduce the wildly putrid sense of self and of things sapping the characters in the book again and again. They may have little or nothing, but whatever it is they have, they nestle it and try to pull it inside themselves, plugging their bodies with something that might make everything a little better.

Though the book was originally published in 2004, this edition by *Black Square Editions/Brooklyn Rail* adds three more stories, including edits to the previous stories. In one of the stories, “Coca-cola” is replaced with “soda”—further placing Lutz’s characters in alternative America with no place or brand names and indeed few character names—“he” and “she” serving to define these beaten down, bewailing narrators.

Lutz’s stories are micro histories that sometimes outline the micro-bacterial particles of the characters. Often the male, female, or hermaphroditic narrator’s surge of regrets centers on the accumulated grime on their or other people’s skin—a bodily focal point to examine what went wrong:

There was a bar of soap he had used a couple of times, a woman’s soap, with womanly incurvature . . . I would draw it unwetted along my cheek, the distance of my arm. I would try to bring a little back, however much of him might still be sticking to the thing, because I understood the molecules of soap to be especially grasping and retentive, and the skin of a man to be not all that loyal to the body. (157)

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Unlike most people's stories, which appear clean and remedial in their telling, Lutz's stories have already been lived in, occupied for a long time, and they have a stifling air similar to the curmudgeon's den in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, where no one dusts or keeps house—the whole enterprise stinking with the ancient odor of paper and page. Their minds ragged and rugged from overburn, Lutz's unloved, unloved, destitute narrators squawk their findings: "It is said, isn't it, that you 'make' love because it's otherwise not really there?" (45).

There are no mysteries or manners (impressing others is the last thing on these characters' minds); people are wracked, retched, and live under heavy blankets of ruination. Plot in Lutz is episodic, but the language is of the highest order. Lutz's sweet music is an English language of vertiginous combinations and recombinations—his linguistic tool belt fitted with Shakespearean inversions and antiquated words. When aiming to verbally fit a triangular peg into a square hole, Lutz succeeds every time.

In "I Was in Kilter with Him a Little," it is a woman recounts her past loves:

When you are no good at what you do, it does you no good to triumph at whatever you might come home to, either. My husband was in fact my second one. I should be making a case for the first, for the avenues of feeling I must have taken with him, though he mostly just roved from room to room between charley horses, was studious in his insults, twidged a slowpoke finger into where I still trickled against my will. (70)

In these three sentences, Lutz uses repetition of sounds (the rhyming "twidged" and "trickled," "roved" and "room") and words (using "you," "good," and "room" each twice) to create a blustery showcase. This invective against the "first" husband is the only mention of him in the story, but one sentence is enough to cast him as an appalling thing, a mean groaner, mostly concerned with sexual satisfaction. With her despair at life's futility, at the seeming impossible of true connection, the narrator's bankrupt philosophy of life echoes Edgar's words in *King Lear*: ". . . the worst is not, so long as we can say, This is the worst."

Lutz is tremendously concerned with how one moves through life, indeed how one moves through the world with everyone around, and how they come across to people, how they seem to appear, if and when they do: "Tall for a girl, but she managed to stay out of much of her height and put herself across as someone backward, or behind,"

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(169) and “. . . people shaded into each other pretty easily” (119). Like Beckett, Lutz’s main interest is how one deals, what one does to survive, how one keeps on when so cripplingly crippled. Sometimes they look for help: “Prescription oblivials gave her an assist with her moods, veered her toward a slow-spoken sociability sometimes, sometimes made her meaner” (72). But help often backfires—medical breakthroughs cannot be counted on to correct, and the gap gets uglier.

One masterpiece among many (and one of the new stories added) is “I Have to Feel Halved,” first published in the literary journal *NOON*, where many of these stories first appeared. Inside this tale two men—one young, one old—dance around each other sexually, selecting and spinning out whatever they might have left for the other. The older man, a crotchety toad in a long line of Lutzian fustian narrators, relates how the nubile Adonis comes into his life, rocks him, and finally falls away—too tortured to be tethered. Here, after a brief portrait of the younger’s toiletries, the elder describes the fundament of the lusted-after:

The frontiers of this sink held toners and tinters vasselled pricily, effervesces by the jugful, cologne in a bullet-shaped bottle that I feared, had I brought the thing to my nose, would stink bitterly and forgivably of his ass, because his ass could hold its own among the presented openings of the world. (43)

In Lutz’s work, people do really live inside each other until they have to leave, drifting and dripping in and out of any openings—the “halving” sensation of the title. Emotional wounds rear and flare and the story stumbles, the narrator knowing what he had already known despite protests: “. . . you could enter into people only so far and then had to come out the same way. There was never a way clear through. You were always back to where you started” (52).

Yet this story, the most recent in the book, progresses by degrees, building more traditionally. It is a glimmering of something new for Lutz—the loss is more real, but the ending is no less painful and symptomatic of the pervading human disconnection as the elder sees the younger off at the airport, gone for life: “We kissed quickly and shrinkingly, in the manner of foreigners. He left me leaving him” (52).

Lutz’s stories are frightening and fraught with a putrid sense of humor, as a cologne bottle stinking “forgivably” of a beloved’s ass. The ne’er-do-wells in the book

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create their own circus of futility and despair but these people don't want to be in the circus, they can't. They don't have the belly for society, and stay away, estranged in their quiet homes. At the same time Lutz's sentences, his word choice and deployment of parts of speech therein surprise and stun. The rhymes, repetitions and alliteration—these work on the reader like a carefully wrought music, dynamic and challenging. The reader gets halved by the experience of reading, but so much the better.

LACONIA: 1,200 TWEETS ON FILM by Masha Tupitsyn

Zero Books, 2011

Reviewed by Lara Mimosa Montes Flores

Of the haiku, Roland Barthes said, “don't underestimate what the *layout* of speech on the page can do.” Barthes was encouraging us to never forget *form as space* (rather than form as merely genre convention) when he asked us to direct our attention to the *layout* of a work. When we consider form as space and cultivate *a respect for space*, only then are we ready to speculate upon the visual, philosophical, and architectural modes in which a work of writing emerges and subsequently comes to matter. And so too, upon opening the book that is Masha Tupitsyn's *LACONIA: 1,200 Tweets on Film*, I found myself struck by its layout as an interrogation of space, one which contains and spells out an inventory of nuance in the form of 1,200 time-stamped tweets.

So rarely does one encounter “the official” time of writing, or, the ticker, as it were, of criticism. And yet, Tupitsyn's *LACONIA* is both intriguing and alluring in that it is timed and timed right: it is a kind of culture bomb which implodes the space between forms, between the haiku and the tweet, between the book that you hold and the text that you scroll. Furthermore, the fall-out of Tupitsyn's bomb is carefully curated and concise. For example, Tupitsyn writes,

103. I just can't bring myself to watch *Changeling* or *Wanted* because looking at Angelina Jolie's already-dead face is like looking at
2:19 PM July 27th

104. Damien Hirst's diamond encrusted skull.
2:20 PM July 27th

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LACONIA's willingness to both mark (by way of the line break) and mar (by way of the simile) the difference between "Angelina Jolie's already dead face" and "Damien Hirst's diamond encrusted skull" is as charming as it is thought-provoking. Between the high and the low, *LACONIA* drifts constantly asking us to reevaluate where culture lives, or where as contemporary critics we should locate it. Is it in the screen star's face or the £50m art object? *LACONIA* would seem to answer: *in, around, and between* the two.

It is also difficult not to appreciate Tupitsyn's simultaneous respect for form as space and disdain of form as genre convention. As the logic of *LACONIA* is based in Tupitsyn's ability to think and play under the 140 character line law of Twitter, some other strange meta-commentary is set into motion. In other words, certain tweets allow for a kind of reflexivity that borders on the uncanny, particularly when Tupitsyn tweets about the filmmaker David Cronenberg. She observes,

- 1087. the body ceases to be hermetic and is pierced, penetrated, pushed through, opened, dissolved; entered and exited in every way. Its
5:10 PM Apr 1st
- 1088. social seal is ripped right off. All of David Cronenberg's films are about this.
5:11 PM Apr 1st

It is as if we the reader were in Cronenberg's *Videodrome*, but we the viewer cannot help but fear the anticipated transformation of the feminist film critic as she finally becomes embedded in, integrated with, and subsumed by the screen which we suspect she had been intending to slash through all along. Ironically, the hybrid text that Tupitsyn brings into being engenders her transformation, for as the critic exposes the order from which she writes, as the social seal is ripped off, out slips the poet who reveals the insight of the instant through a perverse kind of prosody—one that is digitally inflected and hyperconscious of the atmospheres and mediums in which one must read and write in the 21st century.

But where one might claim the instant as favored by Tupitsyn is not a palpable or rich site of theoretical and cultural inquiry, *LACONIA* invites the skeptic to imag-

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ine otherwise and to take seriously the nano-caesuras between times, thoughts, and insights as an urgent, dynamic, and desperately needed critical space. In this way, *LACONIA*'s logic functions as a proposition: one which accepts the challenge as described by filmmaker Su Frederich where "the challenge comes in trying to push film beyond it's usual narrative capacities—so that the form takes as many risks as the content." Tupitsyn accepts the challenge and makes a mosaic out of risky critique being well aware, as she acknowledges in the preface to *LACONIA*, "writing a book on Twitter, in the 21st Century, means that certain narrative traditions—the way narrative texts are constructed and consumed, as well as where they are constructed and consumed—have to be challenged and redefined." So consider *LACONIA* an intervention as well as an invention—one well worth the time.

HORSE, FLOWER, BIRD by Kate Bernheimer

Coffee House Press, 2010

Reviewed by Kara Dorris

Within *Horse, Flower, Bird*, you will find delicately and viscerally portrayed misfits, loners, heroines disguised as exotic dancers, tulip bulbs, imaginary friends, sisters, and Star Wars reenactors. You will find characters tuned profoundly into their emotions and fears, bringing you swiftly and resolutely into their realm of suffering. Without pomp or glitter, Kate Bernheimer brings us into an alternate universe, but not one as strange as we may think at first; after all, heroes are born of tragedy, of abuse, of isolation. Yes, this is a book of modern fairy tales and anything can happen. This is a collection of grim tales, like the Grimm originals, but also new and genuine, because we are brought into the points of view of the sufferers, of the abnormal, and we are rarely—and never easily—given a pretty or absolute moral. These stories allow us to disappear from ourselves, our afflictions, and to find kinship with the afflictions of others. As Bernheimer intended, this book is not mutually exclusive to adults or children; through white space, sparse language, and haunting reinvention, it blurs the line, and possesses a little something for every psyche.

Bernheimer creates tales that take hold of our subconscious and question preconceived ideas. In "A Cuckoo Tale," through an almost childlike innocence that is

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often comic, atonement is simply feeling guilty while dressed in your nicest clothes, confession is a game little girls play, and sin is a vague but thrilling concept. The author exposes us to women who find peace within unspoken containment, who do not understand their worlds, and (as is often the case with the differently abled) whose worlds do not understand them.

We see neglected and isolated woman who try to find peace within secrets and secret outlets for their love and passion, such as in “A Cageling Tale,” a story wherein a woman feels indebted to her bird, Pretty Eyes, for “having to so passively bend to her will.” Such characters lose their minds in sadness and disappear into themselves as if “suspended” in cages from a “red room’s ceiling.”

In “A Doll’s Tale” a doll become a sister, a doll’s loss becomes an imaginary friend, and a girl become doll-like, only hearing an internal conversation of “Bye-bye,” “bye-bye.” In “A Tulip’s Tale,” a “bulbette” is symbolic of childhood and inevitable loss. Both stories reinvent what it means to be human and explore what it feels like to be abandoned or taken away, physically or emotionally, and left “forever sad” because of it. Bernheimer investigates complex emotions, such as the value of belonging, of accepting individuality and confronting adversity, as well as the tormenting consequences of intolerance.

Throughout, Bernheimer brilliantly creates isolation and white space on the page that reminds us of our own loneliness, and creates a space that embodies a character’s desolation simply by writing:

“Come back.”

(Page break)

“Come back.”

(Page break)

“Come back to me.”

(Page break)

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By using sparse but haunting language, we see the reality of selling the self and not knowing one's self-worth, of being sold and witnessing one's unrecognized worth in the eyes of others. Of suicide. Of women and children attempting to define themselves and the world and find meaning. Of the clandestine lives of wives or women who never marry. Of the creativity, risk, and isolation of living only inside one's head. Basically, *Horse, Flower, Bird* possesses everything you want to find in remarkable, enchanting, and lasting fairy tales—the delightful, imaginative kind of stories you want to tell in front of fires, or on the phone late at night under the covers, the stories you know you will never tell as well as the original author, the ones about phobias and cages and learning to love cages, but you know you have to try and retell them anyway.

THE BOOK OF FRANK by CAConrad

Wave Books, 2010

Reviewed by Jeanine Deibel

Herein lies the landscape of dysfunction, CAConrad pulling the curtains back, the material and the imaginary colliding in an uproar of visceral desire and transcendence. *The Book of Frank* is delightful in its monstrosity, reveling in surrealist imagery while tracking the life of an everyman, Frank, through his various exploits. The first poem in this collection sets the stage for a hostile, fantastic world to unfold:

“why doesn't my son have a cunt!?
what has happened!?
what a WICKED world!
DARK!
and spinning
on its one
good leg!”

The swift-paced urgency in this stanza is characteristic of the collection in its entirety, making use of dialogue, action and personification as propelling forces. One hundred and thirty-two untitled poems serve as well-crafted anecdotes, each with a shifting

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lens, capturing the humorous to the grotesque. Social criticism is evident throughout, addressing issues of identity, displacement, religion and domesticity. Yet, the transgressive nature of this narrative is not confining. *The Book of Frank* expands its appeal to a wider audience, encapsulating queer in the universal sense: the state of society in disarray and the individual's struggle to remain upright on unsteady ground.

Frank, in all of his manifestations, presents readers with perspectives from both sides of conventional binaries. He plays the roles of both victim and violator, voyeur and exhibitionist, heterosexual and homosexual, challenging systems of order as well as ideologies predicated upon diametrical opposition. While this is no small feat, CAConrad's ability to evoke beauty and vulnerability through these candid accounts, merely by putting scenes and moments on display, is even more impressive:

at dinner during prayer
his crows flapped
excited in the name of the Lord
"FRANK! KEEP STILL!" Mother hollered
"did you wash your crows!?"
did you wash your FILTHY STINKING CROWS!?"

The disturbing scene portrayed in this stanza brims with domestic turmoil through the symbolic use of objects and animals to the extent of absurdity. The bizarre is handled as if quaint, enacting life on the page. The reader's imagination is pushed beyond its range, subverting expectations and surpassing boundaries.

Although unique in its overall execution, aspects of this surreal collection could be likened to Charles Simic's stark imagery, John Berryman's emotive grit and Hart Crane's rapturous view of the ordinary. Sex and violence are pervasive, yet so too is the prominent theme of transformation, pitting the temporal world against, and in constant flux with, enduring imagination and eternal possibility. The trials and tribulations of Frank compound to form something expansive and profound: the intrinsic state of ourselves and the crooked society we inhabit; the queerness, joy and folly of everyday life; the conflation of conscious with subconscious and of self with other, all through a discerning and, at times, cruel eye that will not allow us to look away.

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SKY BURIAL by Dana Levin
Copper Canyon Press, 2011
Reviewed by Megan Wong

When we lose what we love, everything changes. Dana Levin's *Sky Burial* weaves language from Buddhist burial rites and Aztec human sacrifice into an examination of how the self negotiates the external world after the known world is undeniably altered, specifically after the deaths of her parents and sister.

Recognizing that narrating these deaths will not get at their meaning, Levin instead uses the conceit of myth and everyday experience to show that the self is always becoming, and that "emergence from concealment" is necessary. One cannot remain the same when the world changes. Subjects in this book are always coming, "fighter jets / from number charts" ("This from That"), are always acting on one another in unfamiliar ways, asking each other for influence, seeking change, wanting some meaning. Death is the same as "*Xipe Totec, Aztec god of Spring*," the "god of transitions, oppositions" and Levin's speaker asks

...why should I oppose it? Or put down
my proper

—

terror of the earth—

The poems search for an earthy, causal perspective: "I study ziggurats / from cigarettes" the speaker in "This from That" brags. In "School of Flesh," "you" are given agency:

You've got the razor. You can make each suture
snap.

And watch the mouth
bloom up with foam.

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Levin's poems seek, at the very least, a way to "keep the dead from becoming vapor" ("Corpse Pose"). But the vividness of the imagery and the variety of locations where Levin's inquiries take place affirm that the dead do not disappear—they pop up everywhere, especially in our sense of self and humanity. In fact, it is just when protocol breaks in *Among the Living* that "you know she means you are a person, a fact as blinding as the sun."

Levin's generous use of white space secures the fluid and blinding nature of her insights. Small moments of curiosity have room to survive—they don't get lost in the beauty of her mixed diction:

You have installed a voice that can soothe you: *agents*
of the eaten flesh, every body

a cocoon of change—

Puparium. . .

Such lines flow with language-driven lyric, yet Levin gives the reader time both to linger in the soothing sounds of "cocoon" and "Puparium" and to meditate on the implications of installing a voice against eaten flesh.

While at first the dash-broken sentences and single word stanzas are unnerving—Levin's persistence and consistency soon pays off. The reader finds herself both pushing forward and struggling to stay behind. And this only further supports the book's struggle to express loss, hold onto the dead, and redefine the relationship between living and dead. Thus, Levin's poems problematize grief. In order to grieve, you must go beyond the dead, must let something come out of them that is in you, must "shake my dream / of I-am-I" and also "settle / with your deck of flesh" and "slit your wrist" to get

A honey, an ichor.
From those who waited long

in your veins.

The ends of her poems are active: they make statements, they tell of places to go, they are full of prepositions that desperately try to link. And by the end, by the time

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“You crouch to the hum with a bag and a blade. You / the god it sways,” Levin has convinced us that we are the creator of meaning in a world where we are constantly influenced by everything else.

THE COMPLETE WORKS OF MARVIN K. MOONEY by Christopher Higgs

Sator Press, 2010

Reviewed by Sessily Watt

The Complete Works of Marvin K. Mooney is a designed jumble, a fabulation that moves in and out of meaning and plot. Throughout, Christopher Higgs dances just inside self-aware's border with self-conscious, worrying at his role as author, the reader's participation, and the work the text does on the page. And it is a dance, filled with the kind of joy called childlike simply because it is evoked by play. In these pages are pirates, ghosts, movie executives, living sentences, and circuses. There are sentences that baffle and marvel at the same time. There is a pushing and pulling at the simple fact that this work of fiction written by Christopher Higgs is formed as a collection of works, fictional and otherwise, of one Marvin K. Mooney.

This self-aware play has created an intricate structure. Fragmenting narratives give way to snapshots of reality which break off into meaningless sentences that hint at meaning, followed by stories, essays, lectures, chapters that begin once or twice or more, and all of this dotted with editorial notes. Woven throughout is Mooney, a writer fired from universities, a screenwriter for a time, a questionable mentor to young writers, a man with a childhood, a man who has disappeared. Or perhaps none of these things are exactly true, but does it matter? This isn't a book where resonance is built through a series of scenes revealing the life story and personality attributes of a character. Mooney is the thread that ties the novel together, or perhaps the frame holding it all in, but he isn't the meaning.

Rather, Higgs' uses thematic and structural repetition to affect the reader. What appears to be a random and meaningless ordering of five words on one page reappears many pages later in the mouth of a linguist. Hypotheses about Mooney's disappearance spring up at odd intervals. An early entry ON BEING A MAN is echoed in a series of entries later in the book having to do with being honest, a spectator, a

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father, and more. The references to patchwork, bricolage, corporate rebranding, and multiplicity all provide a guideline to the structure: there is an order here, but it's neither linear nor circular.

In fact, these efforts to describe the book return over and over to a list of the contents, because it can't be reduced from the whole. Perhaps what makes this more difficult is that one of Higgs' themes is a questioning of literature as communication:

If I desired communication I would call you on the phone; I would write a newspaper article; I would become a journalist; I would become a public speaker; I would become your mother. I am not your mother. This is not that. That is something other than this entirely. (190)

It's tempting to turn in the other direction, and look at the theme of communication as an argument Higgs wants to communicate. But this is a work of fiction, and though the 'I' here is not definitely Mooney, neither is it Higgs. Not that arguments and meaning can't be found, but they rightfully belong to the interplay between text, author, and reader, and not to any single member of that trio alone, which is to say, the meaning here isn't buried by the author and dug up by the reader. The mystery here is not one to be solved, but one to be enjoyed.

AYITI by Roxane Gay

Artistically Declined Press, 2011

Reviewed by Sessily Watt

Ayiti, Roxane Gay's first collection, is a slim book, fitting its fifteen stories into a little over 100 pages. But though many of these stories are short, they are not prim. They display their hearts and their struggles on every page as they and their characters circle around the Caribbean country (Haiti) that gives the collection its name.

In "Things I Know About Fairy Tales," the fifth story, the narrator describes a dinner party at which Haiti comes up in conversation:

One of my colleagues mentioned a magazine article he read about how Haiti had surpassed Colombia as the kidnapping capital of the world. Another colleague told us about a recent feature in a national magazine.

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Soon everyone was offering up their own desperate information, conjuring a place that does not exist.

As at that dinner, the ideas about Haiti—those media images and commonplace understandings that belong to those of us who live elsewhere—threaten to overwhelm any description of *Ayiti*. To talk about the book, just as to talk about the country, is to reduce it to a collection of concepts. It's a necessary reduction, perhaps, to get us through our dinner conversation, but nothing close to the experience of reading a list of items sold and bought that includes a Yamaha keyboard sold to a friend named Innocent for \$40 (in "You Never Knew How the Waters Ran So Cruel So Deep"), or a correspondence about *griot* and French fries so covered in salt that "for hours you can suck the grains from your fingers" (in "The Dirt We Do Not Eat"), or the story a woman, kidnapped and returned, tells to the reader as if we are her inner self and therefore the only one who will fully know what happened ("Things I Know About Fairy Tales").

Gay writes stories of a few pages in which characters are caught in the misunderstandings of the Americans around them or in the new awareness of immigrant children ("Motherfuckers" and "About My Father's Accent") and stories of many pages in which the characters squirm to comprehend a family history impacted by absence and violence ("In the Manner of Water or Light"). First person and third person narrators, reflections on past events, chronological scenes, letters, and lists all have their place within these pages—each limited in their own right and yet each opening up another perspective. They are tied together through theme and content, through the reappearance of minor characters, and through the constant presence of Haiti as the land under the characters' feet or as the land to which they look back.

But that's just another collection of concepts. Simply put: this is a book of stories about a place, Haiti or Ayiti or "one of *those* Third World countries." Which is to say, this is a collection of short fictions that whisper or yell or cry out from that borderland between the stories told about a place by those who live with it and the stories told about that place from afar. After all, we get the news most everywhere these days.

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SLEIGHT by Kirsten Kaschock
Coffee House Press, 2011
Reviewed by Kelsie Hahn

Sleight is a novel about tragedy, art, and distance that actively engages with struggles in the artistic world to respond to trauma. The book, and its characters, actively seek to draw the line between respect and spectacle, remembrance and exploitation, and commitment and obsession.

Sleight tells the story of Lark, Clef, West, and Byrne, four characters deeply connected to sleight, a fictional art-form that combines a kind of spoken-word poetry, dance, and interactive shapes called architectures. The art form develops under the requirements of a generous history of rules, traditions, and philosophical underpinnings. The four characters, loosely associated with north, south, east, and west, struggle to position themselves within the art form and question how sleight can, and should, respond to the traumas of creation and destruction.

The novel itself works with artistic genius characters and touches of the magical or the unexplainable, such as the tendency of supremely talented sleightists to “wick” during a performance, where they literally cease to exist for a few moments. Kaschock also mirrors the intense structure of sleight in drawing attention to structure in the novel through the periodic use of cells, lists, transcripts, stage directions, letters, and the inclusion of articles, reviews, and interviews.

Kaschock has richly imagined the world of sleight and its impact on devoted practitioners, particularly the four characters the novel follows most closely. The novel actively takes on the role of teaching the reader about this art form, and this distance, particularly in the use of regular footnotes, creates a counterpoint to the characters who are so deeply invested in sleight and in the struggles of the relationships sleight creates and destroys. With a highly focused attention to visual detail, Kaschock keeps the reader watching from just outside the formation of lithe bodies and moving shapes, a careful witness to the unfolding traumas that overtake them.

The novel feels something like a mystery, as the reader must first discover sleight and then gradually follow the development of a new, tragedy-inspired performance that threatens to consume the sleightists. Kaschock deftly controls pacing and builds tension through the novel, both through the careful release of information about the

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art form and the characters and through the rising stakes for the artists and those close to them.

One does wonder if the novel has perhaps spread itself too thin narratively in the attention to four main characters, as Byrne in particular sometimes feels superfluous to the story and to the three other players. While the addition of the fourth makes for a symmetrical feel to the structure, the novel's attention to Byrne seems the most distant and the least necessary as a close third-person point of view in the novel beyond his function as the symbol of the man with the rock.

All told, however, the novel is by turns intriguing, mysterious, and lovely, much like the art of sleight. And as sleight gradually consumes and reveals the characters, the novel offers a literal, compelling articulation of the question—what is to be done at the site of an atrocity?

TREASURE ISLAND!!! by Sara Levine
Europa Editions / Tonga Books, 2012
Reviewed by Mike Meginnis

Several people I know and respect were talking about Sara Levine's novel *Treasure Island!!!* for months before it was officially published. I found that there was an excerpt available online; I read the excerpt; I wanted the book. I went on wanting it for months. I could tell that it was going to be such great fun.

This is really most of what needs to be said about *Treasure Island!!!*: that it is such great fun. That it will make you laugh more frequently and with more pleasure than any other book you read this year. That you will remember it fondly.

Levine's premise suggests a keen sense of the absurd and pathetic. When the novel's protagonist and narrator—an impressively self-absorbed young woman doing nothing of value with her twenties—discovers Robert Louis Stevenson's classic adventure (that is, *Treasure Island*), her life is transformed. She devotes herself to the study of Stevenson's novel and its heroic protagonist Jim Hawkins, whose best qualities she adapts as her four Core Values: BOLDNESS, RESOLUTION, INDEPENDENCE, and HORN-BLOWING. Emboldened by *Treasure Island*, our heroine becomes intolerable to those around her, first purchasing a parrot with her employer's money (osten-

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sibly in order to help said employer's business, though more likely because Long John Silver had one), then, when she's fired, moving in with her easygoing boyfriend Lars, who shows himself to be maybe a little too understanding as she proceeds to take increasingly egregious advantage of his kindness. Finally, she is forced to move in with her family, who are distressed to have her back, but who try very hard to understand, to accept, and to love, even as her narcissism reaches lofty new heights.

It would have been easy to write this book as a spoof of the self-help genre generally (and Levine does touch on this theme implicitly throughout, gently suggesting that books designed to improve us as people usually encourage monstrous behavior), *Treasure Island!!!* is more about what is strange and frightening and worthy of love among self-helpers than it is about the flaws of their shallow quasi-religious ideologies. The fact that BOLDNESS, RESOLUTION, and INEPENDENCE can coexist so easily with HORN-BLOWING is an effective indictment of those who see the former qualities as ends to themselves—but the more interesting questions are what sort of person needs to resort to books like *The Secret* in the first place, and why. *Treasure Island!!!* devotes itself to those questions.

Levine's protagonist, and her carefully tuned narration, pulsate with need and anxiety, the stink of sweat and desperation growing stronger the more she (the protagonist-narrator) tries to obscure them with clever turns of phrase and displays of gumption. In the novel's first act, her goal is to teach Richard, her ill-gotten parrot, to speak. She wants him—she *needs him*—to say, "Steer the boat, girlfriend!" However,

Richard had proved a fine mimic, but he favored the voices he heard on the television, which I kept on to overcome the tedium of his lessons.

"Steer the boat, girlfriend!" I said.

"It's big, it's hot, it's back!"

"Steer the boat, girlfriend."

"Fall blowout carpet sale!"

"Steer the boat girlfriend. I'm speaking loud enough, aren't I?"

"You always do," Lars said.

She just can't make it come together. She cannot steer the boat. At times, this helplessness strains credibility, simply because of the narrator's extreme facility with language. She is so accurate in her descriptions, and she writes such excellent analogies,

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that it's hard to imagine she could really be so incapable in life. But of course her best words come when she describes her own disarray:

I avoided my parents, knowing they would fail to understand my devotion to *Treasure Island* and worry instead about my outward appearance of inertia. Sometimes my mother would telephone and say, "What are you doing?" "What are you doing?" I'd answer, but she never registered the sharpness of my reply. Instead she gave me the record of her accomplishments since rising at six in the morning and outlined, with cheerful precision, the rest of the day. "You know me, I like to keep my ducks in a row." I knew what she thought my ducks looked like—scattered round the pond, wings drooping, heads listing; one call to Animal Patrol would confirm they had West Nile virus.

These are the key mechanisms of the book, and the source of its pleasures. We watch a weird, shallow, pompous, weirdly charming ass ruin her life in the name of reclaiming control. The more she tries to steer the ship, the more it drifts out of control. This might be hard to watch (and it is, at times, deeply embarrassing) were it not for all the laughs, and for Levine's masterful creation of an extreme, self-contradictory voice even more engaging than it is off-putting, even more musical than it is false. *Treasure Island!!!* would make a poor guide to life, but a better one than Robert Louis Stevenson's original. In any case, it's much more funny.