

Reviews

The Wedding and Other Stories and Oystercatcher #3

Walker Lane (Peter Werbe)

Anne R. Key

2006

1.

The Wedding and Other Stories, Cara Hoffman, Factory School Southpaw Culture, 2006, 114 pp., factoryschool.org. Available from the Barn

Cara Hoffman's seven tautly written, alternately ominous and humorous short stories are driven by her elegant use of language. She's a writer in the now unfashionable old school where words and the images they create shape story and characters rather than breathless action scenarios waiting to be transferred from page to film. There's great craft here where one can almost feel the work put into each sinuous sentence; sometimes each word.

But each of these stories has a purposeful vagueness to them, suggesting an undocumented terror lurking behind each plot line to the extent there is one. Characters are often unnamed; places not located; circumstances not explained. The reader at first longs for more explanation: "You're the author; give me more. Fill in the details. That's your job!" But Hoffman refuses, leaving it up to you, and each story contains enough uncomfortable jabs into one's psyche, that you do just that.

It's almost a cliché to identify something a little odd as "surrealism," but her writing authentically rises to that tradition where dream, fantasy, and reality merge to challenge rigid concepts of cognition and reason, and delve into the subconscious where the Surrealists thought the power of imagination dwelled. The stories in *The Wedding* can become a mental exercise in the Surrealist game of Exquisite Corpse, in which different players write sequential paragraphs without seeing what came before it. Similarly, Hoffman writes powerfully, but depends on you to make sense of it in your brain much like a Rorschach Test. The shrink shows you the ink blot, but you invest it with meaning. Same here.

For instance, in "The Mouse's Sister," anthropomorphized mice inhabit an environment where their world hovers on a thin edge of fear suggesting a war zone, an internment camp, the end of the world; one doesn't know what the author intends. In one chilling scene, "[A]nother mouse...had captured a bee and tied it on a leash. He would let the bee fly up towards the square and then jerk it back down so that it hit the floor. The thing was missing legs and its voice was hoarse from trying to reason with the mouse. It was thirsty."

The story was so successfully creepy that it was hard to keep reading, and not in the sense of horror story genre, but something deeper and more profoundly disturbing. But at an Ann Arbor, Mich. bookstore appearance earlier this year, Hoffman read this very passage and did it with humor! The difference in interpretation between writer and reader was startling.

One senses some autobiographical material here but it's impossible to be sure. The title piece is genuinely hilarious even if it does include a description of the author and her bridesmaids unearthing her husband-to-be with shovels for the ceremony.

Hoffman is a journalist so the reader wonders if she is describing herself in “Paragrapher,” who upon reporting a grisly murder vomits at the scene to her great embarrassment. Was she a child in Israel during a war as described in “The Young Guard?” She certainly wasn’t in an internment camp as in “Apartheid,” or, is all of it smidgens of experience mixed with wild metaphors to create the distinctly odd feeling of disconnectedness and sense of impending doom life in this era engenders?

Perhaps the best idea is to forget the questions and just let Hoffman take you for a ride. The writing is wonderful and if there are blanks, you can fill them in.

–Walker Lane

2.

Oystercatcher #3, Log Cabin Productions (Ron Sakolsky and Sheila Nopper) Available from The Barn

What a lovely piece of work! In this third flight of *The Oystercatcher* Ron Sakolsky takes us into a space that feels very much like a Lost Utopia. In his piece entitled “Lost Utopias” Ron quotes Oscar Wilde saying, “any map that doesn’t include utopia on it isn’t even worth looking at.” And it’s true. He goes on to say, “But what if utopia is unmappable, seen only in fleeting glimpses, emerging and submerging by chance like an island in the fog, invisible most of the time but yet always present in our imaginations like a portal to another reality.” It is unmappable. It does not exist in the tangible world.

Yet. Yet, I feel like *The Oystercatcher* is a map. And even though, under typical circumstances, the map cannot be the territory, we’re talking about utopia here, so somehow it is also the territory. Sacred space. It is the very essence of that thing we get those fleeting glimpses of, that thing emerging out of our subconscious and into our understanding and quietly submerging back into the place deep inside each of us that is perfect. It is hard to pin down. Like fog. Ron writes about the Orkney fog that “held utopian possibilities within its misty clouds. Disoriented within its hazy outlines, one could leave reality behind and enter the marvelous realm of the surreal.”

This is exactly what this ‘tine is, an all too brief expedition into the marvelous realm of the surreal. Reading one piece after the next is like being up among the clouds, experiencing different altitudes, formations and densities of utopia. And it feels good. The poetry feels good, the prose feels good, the collages and block prints feel good.

The only thing that doesn’t feel good is the novel excerpt at the end. It explores the wonderfully unifying possibility of people on opposite sides not being enemies, but of their each being a different kind of victim of Industrialism. Which is great. But it’s a rough draft of a collaborative experiment, written in an undeveloped voice that is jarring after all the previous powerful pages. Still. This is a marvelous publication that, undoubtedly will only get better over time.

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Fifth Estate #373, Fall 2006

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