

“Brief Reviews”

Over the Rainbow? Hardly: Collected Short Seizures

Chandler Brossard

Edited, with introduction, by Steven Moore

Sun Dog Press

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by Jeff Bursey

Steven Moore admits that the object of his literary affection will not appeal to everyone. “Even if one does evaluate Brossard’s work in a positive light, as I’ve obviously done here, it is nearly impossible to convince others of its worth: there are certain writers, like Mark Leyner... or Ronald Firbank, who are so idiosyncratic that one instinctively likes or dislikes them, and no amount of critical persuasion one way or another is going to change anyone’s mind. Brossard is that kind of writer.” A reader is forewarned, while the work is held just beyond the fingertips of critic or reviewer when Moore also states that “...it is difficult to evaluate [Brossard’s] work by the usual standards because it deliberately violates so many of the norms used to evaluate literature.” But a man’s reach should exceed his grasp.

Brossard started as a Beat writer with his first novel *Who Walk in Darkness* (1952), but he felt uneasy about conventional forms. A 1955 review shows Brossard urging another writer, in he-man style, to express himself in a way that “is truly fictional and not literary.” All the Beats were heavily influenced by Henry Miller, who wrote in 1936: “What is not in the open street is false, derived, that is to say, literature.” One can see that same attitude in Brossard.

Readers are presented with a much rougher kind of whimsy than Firbank, for one, ever thought to write. *A Chimney Sweep Comes Clean* narrates the sexual antics of male sociologists exploring England’s class system. There a mother can say, “...as I see it, you saw yourself getting some tickles from sniffing about the highly compressed and whistle-clean English family. These tickles specifically to be produced by the contrast, or contradiction, of its straight with your kinky. Am I correct?” Meanwhile, the man she’s addressing has his face pressed into her breasts. Everyone’s ashes get raked, which seems to be the point of the title.

Revisited fairy tales in *Dirty Books for Little Folks* include variations on Little Red Riding Hood, one of which consists of a report by a policeman called to the scene after the traditional grisly ending. The tale of Jack and the Beanstalk now features golden showers, and the murderous sister of the giant is a beautiful woman of regular height and pronounced sexual voracity who wants Jack as her own plaything.

Raging Joys, Sublime Variations is an anti-Vietnam War piece, the most focused and energetic story in the collection, and it deserves the most attention. The events riffed on are now mostly found in history books, but Brossard’s anger comes through clearly. Dean Acheson, “to whom we all are eternally indebted for the blood-drenched mountains of shit and nightly terror we are currently up to our eyeballs in,” the narrator observes, touches “his mustache points like they were his sister’s pussy hairs.” This is mild compared to the following: “[Nixon] whipped out his cock, grinning wildly, and started fucking a big bowl of mashed potatoes” during a strategy session.

Anger like that doesn't find many eager publishers—not then, and not now: *Raging Joys*, finished in 1973, didn't come out until 1981.

Postcards: Don't You Just Wish You Were Here! is a sequence of brief fictions about made-up towns called, for example, In a Pig's Eye, Wyoming. There's little variation here, no surprise in the setup, and it might be more amusing if read once or twice a month instead of consecutively. *Closing the Gap* contains neither sex nor politics, which removes what most animates Brossard, and it's here that his weaknesses are starkly displayed. His jokes aren't funny, but it's the mind-numbing, endless wordplay that undercuts everything. That stylistic preference was present in *Chimney* in the early 1970s, and by the mid-1980s it is a straitjacket Brossard has no interest in escaping. "Be that as it may, we must bestir ourselves. Before things get beyond our reach. They are already out of hand. Public officials must be called onto the carpet. Many must be floored. Tabling is too good for them." Patter like that comes off as material Robert Benchley never used, or which H. Allen Smith discarded from an anthology of humour. It's reflex writing instead of invention. Similarly, the poems of *Traditionally a Place of Banishment* are comprised of wordplay set in verse.

Completed in 1991, two years before Brossard died, *Shifty Sacred Songs* is at times heartfelt, written with an eye on some sort of God, for lack of a better word, but the impulse to joke wrecks what could have been meaningful. It's not the intention to pull a Coetzee here and rewrite what's under review, but if Brossard had been willing to cut back on the comic element during revision, then this would have been a more moving last document.

Despite such reservations, Sun Dog Press has done a literary service by preserving these seven otherwise hard to find short works—a novella, poetry, short fictions and twisted tales—written between 1970 and 1991, which have a place alongside the novels that span Brossard's career, *Who Walk in Darkness* and *As the Wolf Howls at My Door* (1992). Moore may be right: the reader will likely end up in one camp or the other, unless he or she is willing to be very discriminating.

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