

“Brief Reviews”

P

Andrew Lewis Conn
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by Jeff Bursey

In Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night*, the wife of a minor character describes the novel her husband is writing:

“It’s on the idea of Ulysses,” continued Mrs. McKisco. “Only instead of taking twenty-four hours my husband takes a hundred years. He takes a decayed old French aristocrat and puts him in contrast with the mechanical age—”

Her husband interrupts, afraid the idea will “get all around before the book’s published.” Since *Ulysses*, numerous novelists have adapted Joyce’s structure. Publicity touts Andrew Lewis Conn as the latest, for in *P* he provides readers with a day and a half in the life of Benjamin Seymour, a pornographic film-maker, and Stephanie (Finn) Welland, a ten-year-old runaway. Echoing *Ulysses* may sell books better than saying that Conn is obeying Aristotelian unities. The setting is New York City, the time is June 16-17, 1996, and the main characters, credible to varying degrees, are firmly placed before the reader’s eye. Finn and Benji come from very different backgrounds, but they are bound to connect.

The idea of connection is part of the novel’s structure, and is a prime concern of its characters. Conn joins Dos Passos’ newspaper headlines technique with a fantasy screenplay involving Disney figures, film techniques, stream of consciousness, and, towards the end of the novel, a subdued, effective question-and-answer chapter which, read in context, is a catechism. The questions are not along the lines of “What is God?” but “At the end of his journey did Benji receive a hoped-for sign of providence?” Occasionally depth is strained for, and identifying Benji with Christ by way of their shared age is a distraction. Conn shows respect for even the minor characters whose lives intersect with Benji and Finn, bringing to mind Joseph McElroy’s novel *Women and Men*, where people who never meet, though they live in the same building, invisibly touch other lives.

Benji has not recovered from the loss of his first love, Penelope Pigeon, with whom he co-starred in films like *Lawrence Of A Labia*, while Kate Welland has not found anyone to be with after divorcing Martin, Finn’s father. There is no reason to think the status of either will change, and the first meeting of Benji and Kate is not auspicious:

As [Kate] sat down, Benji caught a glimpse of a large mole positioned just on the underside of her left calf. Easing into her chair, she subtly but not unconsciously shifted the mole away from him toward invisibility, and Benji knew he had her. Benji loved doing this—sniffing out the hidden nexus of a

woman's sexuality... The mole bespoke of wildness, tenderness, adventure, chances taken, mistakes made, just-passed youth and encroaching middle-agedness, hidden mysteries of the body, the secret language of kisses, Arabian nights. His guess was this third nipple caused her a great deal of pleasure and shame.

Conn has paid particular attention to making Benji's mourning believable, perhaps at the expense of Finn, who is not realistically depicted. But *P* is not a realistic novel. It incorporates devices found in Modernism, Post-Modernism, pop culture and pornography, though the elements do not always cohere. Its tone is at times too jokey and jumpy, but a nervy quality is essential to be able to write the following without reducing Benji to a caricature: "He considered his ejaculate, archipelagically streaked across his belly, a sight he always found strangely reassuring. His shyly receding shaft was now coated in a thick pudding of saliva, Jergen's, and come." Perhaps these might look like strange words to read in what is, at heart, a Romance, but in Benji's world there is always this kind of flux, from self-satisfaction to selfless love.

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