

Books in Canada-The Canadian Review of Books : : : online review posted at Amazon.ca in June 2008. Reprinted by permission.

The Last Novel

David Markson

Shoemaker and Hoard

190 pages, \$14.40 paper

ISBN: 1593761430

by Jeff Bursey

In his latest novel, David Markson once again tests his readers as he exercises his ingenuity. The only character, "Novelist", follows the literary course of protagonists Reader, Writer, and Author from *Reader's Block* (1996), *This Is Not a Novel* (2001), and *Vanishing Point* (2004) respectively. Markson considers this his eighth novel (not counting three "entertainments" written in earlier years). The apartment building where the action (such as it is) takes place has eight floors or levels (if one counts the roof). We are invited, then, to view this book as a culmination, or summation, of a life's work.

Like its predecessors, *The Last Novel* is constituted from sweepings from the library floor-notes, dates, quotations and commentaries-that come to reveal more as they are aggregated. Certain threads are of interest on an aesthetic plane to Novelist: celluloid ("Picasso's admiration for Charlie Chaplin. Diego Rivera's. Stalin's."), music ("Advice from Arthur Schnabel to the younger Vladimir Horowitz: When a piece gets difficult, make faces."), and art ("People who actually believe that Christo's tangerine-colored bedsheets fluttering about in New York's Central Park had something even remotely to do with art."). There's room for the ludicrous too: "The presumably apocryphal tale about a production of *Othello* by touring actors in the nineteenth-century American West-near the last lines of which a cowboy in the audience shot Iago dead on the spot."

The threads that are most gloomy deal with Novelist's loneliness ("Nobody comes. Nobody calls."); his mental and physical health ("Moments in which Novelist does something like leaving his desk to retrieve a book from across the room-and finding himself staring vacantly into the refrigerator." And "Multiple surgical chain staples are evident in the right lung, consistent with prior resections. Reads a recurrent notation in reports on Novelist's chest x-rays."). Death is never far: historical figures are pinned to their final spots ("Karl Marx died sitting at his desk. Antonin Artaud, sitting up at the foot of his bed."); and Novelist's personal remarks about friends are mournful: "Dialing the deceased, in the likelihood that no one would have yet disconnected their answering machines-and contemplating their voices one eerie final time."

After four books, the structuring of these scattered thoughts has become "Novelist's personal genre. In which part of the experiment is to continue keeping him offstage to the greatest extent possible-while compelling the attentive reader to perhaps catch his breath when things achieve an ending nonetheless." Aware of how extravagant that may sound, and how difficult the task is, Markson immediately follows with: "Conclusions are the weak point of most authors. George Eliot said." Like *Reader's Block*, *This Is Not a Novel*, and *Vanishing Point*, *The Last Novel* aims for a conclusion that is filled with mortality, yet never tries to cinch things off, in the sense of reaching the very end. There can always be more, which may explain why, in this

novel and in *Vanishing Point*, several blank pages follow the last line-pages that may, in our minds, be filled with what happens next.

Each of these books fulfils the wish behind an Ivy Compton-Burnett remark that Markson quotes: "I do not see why exposition and description are a necessary part of a novel." What little is provided about the Novelist is enough; and the disparate reading he presents gives us the necessary context. Novelist is "Old. Tired. Sick. Alone. Broke. All of which obviously means that this is the last book Novelist is going to write." He has spent, one gathers, a life in pursuit of writing well, without receiving the recognition he would have liked. "He who today writes artistically dies without recognition or reward. Complained Lopé de Vega-in 1609." This is the complaint voiced here. "Reviewers who protest that Novelist has lately appeared to be writing the same book over and over. Like their grandly perspicacious uncles-who grouched that Monet had done those damnable water lilies nine dozen times already also." Institutions that are meant to provide support for artists are no better:

Nathanael West once applied for a Guggenheim fellowship with recommendations from Scott Fitzgerald, Edmund Wilson, and Malcolm Cowley. Guess.

Novelist's own Guggenheim applications, plural, with references equally as impressive. Guess-six or seven times.

Catherine Texier in the New York Times declared *The Last Act* a "tour de force" that "manages to keep us enthralled . . . and even moved to tears at the end." By the close, the significance of certain themes is apparent, and so are the emotional resonance of the work and the Novelist's predicament. We are brought, with elegance and style, with dry wit and orneriness, to the Novelist saying, like van Eyck, Als ick kan ("As best I can"), and O lente lente currite noctis equi ("O, run slowly, slowly, horses of the night!"-Ovid). With *The Last Novel*, Markson has produced a natural and personal elegy.

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