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“Brief Reviews”

Going Down

David Markson

Shoemaker & Hoard

278 pages, \$20.50 paper

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by Jeff Bursey

An updated version of Malcolm Lowry’s Mexico is the setting for this reprint of David Markson’s fifth novel (originally published in 1970), and in *Going Down* readers will hear echoes also of Joyce, T.S. Eliot and William Gaddis. As Lowry readers know, Markson was a friend of his, and wrote an early critical appreciation of *Under the Volcano*. He also championed Gaddis’s *The Recognitions* so successfully that he was responsible, to a large extent, for having that seminal novel republished in the 1960s. It’s clear Markson absorbed some of Gaddis’s interest in religion and art, as well as technical lessons from Joyce, but in *Going Down* Markson’s own voice comes through clearly, and he is not weighted down by the influences of other writers.

The main characters are two women and one man, and, as in Markson’s recent works. As in Markson’s recent works, though not as thoroughly, their motivations are left out. Steve Chance, Fern Winter and Lee Suffridge appear in a Mexican village, leading what some regard as a scandalous life in a house with one bed, and have their lives determined by a violent act in the dark.

Harry Mathews once remarked that stories can be as simple as “solving a riddle, seeking revenge, finding a treasure—and it gets utterly obliterated by interruptions and digressions.” The same is true of *Going Down*. “Accept the illusion,” commands the narrator in the first sentence, and once that is obeyed, it is a short trip to a rundown chapel at some dark hour where a barely dressed woman holds a bloody machete. Markson wants the reader to sink into the nocturnal, feverish, lubricious, and claustrophobic atmosphere the characters inhabit. From the opening, where clear answers are demanded of, but can’t be articulated by, the shocked and traumatized woman, the reader is taken back to the past lives of Fern, Chance, and others. Extended flashbacks lead to other flashbacks, with the narrative thread moving slowly forward in between the recapitulation of events, until the past does catch up with the present—and, by implication, with the characters—like a Fury, causing all that follows to unspool. It would be disrespectful to give away any of this simple, elegant plot, which is structured like /28/ a literary thriller, with the emphasis on literary.

What characterization there is belongs primarily to Fern, whose history is the most believable. Her speech has a tic some may find annoying: “And disappearing again, gone, into shadow. The love of Chance is very far from the. And under that I would write: Winters.” There is no word after “the”, and such ellipses recur, indicating that for unknown reasons Fern, to paraphrase Plato, cannot complete her thoughts, which are cousins to her deeds. Her paintings are never completed, and her life stalls at an early age. Yet it is Fern who utters the most

poignant line in the novel: “And it was eight hundred days, the night was eight hundred days long.” When it comes, it sums up part of her life in beautifully, poetically.

Going Down may make some readers want to strangle the characters—to stop them from talking, or to force them to cough out a word or a sentence that’s not a cryptic allusion, just so everything can be cleared up and people can get out of the mess they’re in. Yet the characters’ idiolects also manifest their singular flaws and neuroses. In this context, misunderstanding and confusion are the norm, and the occasionally successful attempts at plain speech look like happy accidents.

There is a danger that any writer who can be praised by David Foster Wallace, Ann Beattie, Kurt Vonnegut, and William Kennedy will look like a writer’s writer. On the other hand, Peter Dempsey, writing in the October issue of *The Hollins Critic*, states, “David Markson is one of the most adventurous and readable of contemporary writers, but is little discussed by critics.” His novels are worth investigating, and *Going Down* is a good place to start.

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