

“Brief Reviews”

*A*hole*

Hilton Obenzinger

Soft Skull Press

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by Jeff Bursey

Milton Obenzinger’s latest novel is a short and often amusing stylistic cul-de-sac. Spread out over ten numbered sections of unequal length, the short excursions into different genres are given titles like “Satan’s Asshole”, “Masturbation Journal”, “Detective”, and “Officer’s Diary”. Though labelled a novel, one could take the many pieces headed by “Mars Virus” as loosely connected short fiction, but this would not result in what may be termed a satisfactory story arc.

Obenzinger offers a possible way through his material in “Instructions for Reading”: “A sketchy affair. Sly humour peeps out occasionally, though buried under quite too many words, and you read on and on, expecting something more than you ever find, to be choked off at the end of the book like the audience of a Turkish story teller, without getting to the end of the story.” There aren’t too many words, but the amount of excrement and excremental imagery in this compacted novel floods the reader.

*A*hole* opens with the story of a boy who has trouble staying on terra firma. “When I walked outside that day and took my very first walk out of the door of our building I sank into the sidewalk.” Later he remarks, with a wisdom granted by authorial intrusion, that “I knew that once you start to sink through the earth you never stop.” His story, like the boy himself, pops up throughout, traversing distance, time, and modes of story telling, closing off the novel as it opened. In between much is told, with a quirky sense of humour, about Patty Hearst, and Danny DeVito and his would-be assassin, with riffs on worn-down words and catchphrases—“Fail Safe/ Systems Failure/ Fortunate Fall”—interspersed throughout.

Obenzinger’s many narrators are drawn from tired-out genre fiction that is generally only mocked or turned inside-out in 21st century literature: e.g., the detective story, science fiction, fables and the self-confessional. The fundamental unifying vision begins with the title, which is referred to directly and indirectly throughout, as in “Our Lady of Shit”, a series of short pieces about a madwoman who cleans toilets, to the repeated references to evacuations: “While Constipation results from jolts of Fear,/ Abject Terror ends in diarrhea” and “Through rectums all Emotions are expressed/ Thus Souls with farts through sphincters must eject.” The ground the boy sinks in is merely another form of shit. That life, quite simply, is filled with shit and voiding is the theme, which extends to the novel’s brown cover and the graphic design. It is most explicitly stated in “Instructions for Living”, where an unnamed narrator contemplates what people see when they visit the Grand Canyon. “Do you really see the canyon?... No, what you encounter is a series of postcards, of snapshots, of checklists to which you apply your latest mark... so you live in contact not with the thing itself but with its representation, its image, it’s what-everyone-says-it-is...”

In short, no one has sensations themselves; they are filled with the cast-off sensations generations removed from firsthand experience. Everything in one's life is a crud so relentlessly processed that there are few nutrients left, and these can, and would, only be gathered by vermin, i.e., loners (the detective, the madwoman, the masturbator), outcasts (Patty Hearst), the lost and the self-exiled (a father writing advice-filled letters to his son). *A*hole* is filled with the end product of literary digestion. It's a locus for literary and story-telling dreck and discarded noxious material, a pop culture sewer, a place where the husks of genres wait to be evacuated.

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