

“Brief Reviews: Short Fiction”

*A Strange Commonplace*

Gilbert Sorrentino

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by Jeff Bursey

Gilbert Sorrentino’s last book, *Lunar Follies*, skewered the aesthetic pretensions of the art world. In his latest, the emphasis is on domestic and marital strife. Sorrow and bitterness are pervasive, the humour is dark, infidelity rife, drunkenness common, and the rape of women is almost inevitable. *A Strange Commonplace* is a work of short fictions, without a novel’s arc or the haphazardness occasionally found in a collection of stories. In the two books that make up this work, the exact same twenty-six titles—possibly an abecedarian, Oulipian-inspired device—from the first book introduce different material, and are shuffled into a different order for the second. Such repositioning of titles may encourage us to stop viewing them as sacred artefacts.

Operating on the same level as the recycling of titles is the disposal and substitution of character creations with the names Ray or Janet affixed to them. A narrator refers to Ralph and Inez as “somewhat fragmentary people—perhaps sketchy is a better descriptive,” and in another piece a different narrator asks, “Is she really Claire? Or is she Inez? Or Cora, or Anna? Who is she?” Though the same names pop up, many pages separate their individual—that may be too lofty a word—stories. It’s also possible that other characters with the same names are in very similar situations. Depersonalization precludes the empathy many readers like to experience for characters they are reading about, yet no one could say that the types Sorrentino deploys aren’t recognizable from life and other fictional works.

The urban, male-driven world that’s presented extends an unspecified number of years, but common to all the tales is that a male character will screw all women, while a woman will do the same with almost every man. If the figures depicted in this book could ask themselves one question, a reader could imagine that it would be: How can I get away with what I’m about to do?

Both men and women in this book know certain things quite well: class distinctions, especially when underscored by a pearl gray Homburg or the right dress; where to get a drink; the best way to be insensitive; and how to carry grudges. It might be said that grudges are their most faithful companions.

Through his exquisite command of language, Sorrentino shows how the figures, with their often ugly thoughts and desires, function in their sordid, deceitful world. An old man plays cards by himself, waiting for a certain combination to appear so he can kill himself. Nothing he does will cause this mystical flush to materialize. “So he did not torment himself with the anguish suffered by those who believe that luck and chance are incremental and progressive and fair, that is, that luck must, of necessity, change.” In another piece, everything that’s wrong in a marriage is expressed with economy. A husband arriving home late says to his wife:

Is that my delicious supper? he said, and she looked up from her book as if suddenly aware of him, and then at her watch. Oh, I get it, he said. Let's see, a cardboard pork chop sitting in fat, Ann Page carrots and peas, mmm, and what's this? plaster? oh, mashed potatoes *à la* skins and lumps, a gravy boat full of, uh-huh, grease! And, of course, a luscious salad with a bright orange gourmet dressing. I can't wait. The kid's in bed, I suppose, God forbid you should keep him up a few minutes so he can see his father.

The predicaments of women in lowly positions are rendered equally well:

In the diner, the three young men eat—stuff their faces, is an apt phrase—and patronize the waitress with happily disingenuous compliments on her pink polyester uniform, her hairdo and the net that covers it, her white crepe-soled shoes. They ask her opinions on pop stars, hip-hop artists and grunge bands, her thought on music and clubs of which this exhausted fifty-three-year-old woman has never heard. And so she stands dumb before them, smiling the smile of the impotent insulted everywhere.

Thinking of her ex-husband, Claudia has this opinion about herself: “She had never thought, never, that she'd hate anyone as much as she hated Warren, and she often smiled sourly to herself when she acknowledged /10/ the fact that she had permitted her hatred to ruin, utterly, what was left of her life.”

These are grim urban tales. A father who is not close to his children hopes that his friends are in the same lousy position, “otherwise, the touch of normalcy that would inform their lives, were the opposite true, would destroy him completely. They had to be as strangers to the strange and thankless adults who were their children and who, *it had to be*, hated them, or, more exactly, held them in disinterested contempt. He sat, smoking, as the sun faded, clouds slowly covered the dimming sky, and it began to rain on the cold Saturday streets.” What can take another novelist many pages to get across, Sorrentino, a true master, sets down in a few sentences. His books, with their ferocity, attention to detail and imagination, are inspirational.

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