

Andrew Lewis Conn. *P*. Soft Skull Press, 2003. 365 pp. Paper: \$15.00.

Often, first-time novelists are encumbered by extravagant praise that doesn't allow room for them to grow or to make errors. Similarly, readers' expectations are dictated by selective blurbs. So ignore the gush on the jacket and simply enjoy *P*, a romance novel set in the pornography industry. Conn's adaptation of Aristotelian unities allows a stream-of-consciousness identifiable with *Ulysses*, the headlines of *U.S.A.*, a cartoon screenplay, a semispiritual catechism, and the type of realism founded on pop culture to /154/ nuzzle each other, if at times uneasily. *P* is not as profound in its content or as adventurous in its use of elements as its billing proclaims, and the writing is at times too jokey and uneven, but Conn presents a good show which is not pornographic (fair warning to those who buy it with the aim of self-arousal). Like a porn film, *P* offers an unreal setting, but one that is more appropriate to the search for romance than to sexual satisfaction. Benjamin Seymour, the lead character, is a filmmaker and a quirky individual who, at a fundamental level, is out of place in his chosen profession. While it is a tired device to have him the same age as Christ, with everything that follows from that, his sadness and history are rendered believably, and the tact and sympathy shown toward him indicate Conn's potential. Finn, the other major character, is not a credible portrayal of a regular ten-year-old runaway girl, but again, this is a romance, a seemingly improbable one, not a naturalistic novel. *P* is a diverting read that is cautiously experimental, and it nostalgically depicts New York in 1996. This first novel shows talent that deserves to be encouraged, not smothered under the hype of copywriting.