

Valencia

Michelle Tea

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by Jeff Bursey

Memoir or fiction? The back of *Valencia* opts for the second, the publicity material for the first. In her new introduction for this reprint of a book first published in 2000, Michelle Tea says: “What’s more narcissistic than writing your own memoir? Writing an introduction to your own memoir. Welcome to it, people. Right before I began writing the stories that would become *Valencia*...” (6). However one chooses to regard it, one emerges enlightened, if not encumbered, from this tour of the 1990s San Francisco lesbian scene. Despite the muck of the characters’ worlds (private and shared), and the many scenes of casual and deliberate agony, heartbreak, alcoholism, and self-debasement, scenes among the cliterati, the anesthetizing drinking and drug-taking along with the casual thievery, and the episodic nature of events, the narrative tone keeps the reader distant from the fraying lives.

There is a morality in the novel that’s perfectly comprehensible to insiders of the lesbian world; to those who are just visiting that world, it will seem different. “I would sit and listen and regret being so normal and well-adjusted” (36), the narrator says early on, after hearing what she considers is more than enough from another girl, Gwynn, about her love life. Referring to Gwynn’s non-drinking, the narrator says that “[s]obriety seemed a real stick-in-the-mud stance to take...” (34); Gwynn further irritates her by singing in a church choir, “which I thought was inexcusably weird” (35). Employed by a courier company, the narrator deletes “calls from companies I disagreed with politically” (44), which is funny, and also one of the few times when the book has an actual edge, making one wish Tea would have ventured further into anarchic territory, like Robert Newman does in *The Fountain at the Center of the World*. However, one ought not to wish a peach to be a lemon. The narrator pretends traveller’s cheques are stolen, a “scam” (46) that gets her reimbursed, providing money when she doesn’t want to work. Over the course of her adventures the narrator is a prostitute, takes part in a porn movie, and goes to a “play party” (189) where

you could walk around and watch women in various states of undress having painful things done to them. This one was more of a fetish-themed dance party, though there were people being tortured. A girl was rigged up to this wooden structure, her hands stretched up with chains, and another girl was doing something like sticking pins in her, or pulling them out or maybe burning her. Quick, jabby motions that made the bound girl shriek milk-curdling shrieks (189).

Perhaps incongruously, *Valencia* calls to mind Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*, where the narrator, “Henry Miller,” tells the reader:

As far as history goes I am dead. If there is something beyond I shall have to bounce back. I have found God, but he is insufficient. I am only spiritually dead. Physically, I am alive. Morally, I am free. The world which I have departed is a menagerie. The dawn is breaking on a new world, a jungle world in which the lean spirits roam with sharp claws. If I am a hyena I am a lean and hungry one: I go forth to fatten myself (*Tropic of Cancer*, 90).

Certainly, Tea's narrator has freedom from morality, though this state comes off not so much as a position won through hard work as through taking care not to do well, which is less purposeful. She only wants to spend time with this or that girlfriend, or write, and no one wants her in the former position sufficiently or for long, while the second she must do on her own. Because the narrator is named Michelle--just as Miller created a "Henry Miller" we'd all take to be sort of like him--we legitimately ask if this is close to the truth, or a version of it. Is she "*most likely to sleep with a serial killer*" (208; italics in original), as one of her friends says? The narrator finds San Francisco an exciting new world, well away from the Tucson she's escaped, but she can't avoid heartbreak; indeed, she engineers it. When she is in a relationship with Celia, with its "really perverted sex" (238), she complains: "I was looking for someone who got into more trouble than I did, or who at least was open to getting into whatever trouble I could come up with. No trouble for Celia. Those days were over.... Now she was in the Twelve Step program and being good" (238). This love may not last, but that's okay. Heartbreak is the glue holding this picaresque together.

Past or present girlfriends are like figures in a video game. They are sketched in without much individuality amidst what's presented as regular life: Gay Pride Day, open mic events, tattooing, bed-hopping, little food, lots of attitude, and a liking for children's t-shirts. The narrator's prostitute gig doesn't last as long as it did before she moved to San Francisco, though the money is good. In case this job choice seems unusual, the narrator offers this: "Everything's cool, don't get '70s feminism on me, ok? At least I'm not paying taxes, yeah fuck you uncle sam" (49; lowercase in original). One bad john changes her mind, but not her attitude. "It's not rape if I knew I was going to end up fucked when I walked in the room" (56).

There's potential heaviness residing in the topics Tea brings in, but not much is allowed to weigh down on the reader. On the inside jacket *Valencia* receives praise for being "charged with reflection" (*The Village Voice*), being "edgy, supercharged, supersurreal reality" (*Booklist*), and for being "transcendental" (*Girlfriends*). There's no diplomatic way to put this, but readers who've not read much fiction (modern, contemporary, gay, whatever kind) will think that way; and those looking for a gender stance as opposed to literature will appreciate much of what's here. Contrary to what the blurbs proclaim, Tea offers little that reflects more than what her stand-in thinks. Only her dialogue is rendered in initial capital letters ("I'll Never Go Out With A Pisces Again, I proclaimed. You're Worse Than Geminis" [172]), and right from the first sentence, with the phrase "little tsunamis of beer" (11) soaking the narrator's sleeves, you see imprecision and the problem of scale that appear in the words of the self-absorbed.

Picaresque novel don't often immerse you in a place or social milieu, preferring instead to show the surface in rapid, light strokes. One can skim this book like a summer read--the prevalent liquid imagery aids the illusion--and are helped in remaining aloof from torture, where the next bottle or bag of crystal meth can be purchased, or that someone has overdosed, by a sensibil-

ity and voice that says these thing with no differentiation of seriousness, making everything indistinguishable, and therefore equally valueless. And, ultimately, of little interesting. In the end, all that matters is the girl. *Valencia* is a mash note from the narrator to her wonderful self.

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