

*Double-Blind*

Michelle Butler Hallett

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by Jeff Bursey

“Of the many kinds of literary-fiction writers,” Ben Marcus wrote in a 2005 *Harper’s* article, “it’s the group called the realists who have, by far, both the most desirable and the least accurate name.... Other kinds of writers either are not interested in reality (experimentalists, postmodernists, antirealists!) or must wait in line to graze the scraps of less matterful life left behind, the details deemed unworthy of literary report by their more world-concerned peers.” Writing on *Shalimar the Clown* in the *New York Review of Books* in October 2005, Pankaj Mishra drags Salman Rushdie, definitely not a realist, off to a realist camp. “Rushdie seems as aware as any writer of fiction that much of his task is to create and sustain an illusion of reality through well-chosen details.” It’s not known whether Rushdie ascribes to this. What is clear is that Mishra thinks he should, and that every writer of fiction should be in his or her study choosing details carefully, because that’s the only kind of fiction writing that matters.

Michelle Butler Hallett’s first novel might place her in the realist camp, with its medical, psychological, and pharmacological details, its grasp of medical history and its characters’ unhappiness. *Double-Blind* takes place in the United States and Canada over some decades, and traces the murky path of several individuals who abuse the helpless when they think it’s necessary.

The novel shows a skill and confidence that appears only intermittently in Hallett’s first book, *The shadow side of grace*, a collection of short stories and a novella. Here she has created a character whose voice is compelling, distinctive, and ugly. Dr. Josh Bozeman recalls his life’s work from a hospital bed. Initially he cared about his mentally disturbed patients and had some success with them, by using a combination of drugs, hypnosis, and his own peculiar gifts. Bozeman’s work and papers attracted the attention of a shadowy organization called SHIP (Society for Human Improvement and Potential) which is devoted to fighting the Cold War with every means possible. Bozeman joined out of misguided patriotism, and gradually the “moderate” doctor turned to experimenting on the minds of young people, fracturing their identity suppressing their will, and trying to turn them into instruments of SHIP. Justifying his actions to others and himself, arguing that he was working within limits and without doing harm, he had in effect become another Eichmann in a lab coat. Over the course of the narrative, which weaves in and out of time frames, various palces, and altered states, Hallett dissects Bozeman’s conscious and unconscious evasions with precision, and situates him in medical research institutes that are devoted to covert, illegal and unethical testing. Much of what occurs has a blurry feel, thanks to the character of the prose, which at times mirrors how memory works. Still, Hallett could have taken a little more time with certain sections and been less elliptical, while in some passages she could have been less tidy.

Hallett delivers engaging internal monologues. In the following instance, Boseman reveals a more admirable side of himself:

“I don’t know much about classical music, only that what came to us after bouncing off the atmosphere, the signal unsteady but undeniable, was beautiful... Johann Sebastian Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 2. The first part had this earnest mathematical reach, and out of that came a brief melody, a scrap of grace repeated once just as you asked it to be, coming again a third time, but by then already changed, matured maybe. Then it fled.”

The word grace in the passage is meaningful. We are reminded of the title of Hallett’s first book and its particular preoccupation with grace. Then we turn to Bozeman, who perceives beauty in the music, momentarily, yet long enough to realise that he wants to hear it again. He gets this chance precisely at the time he is presented with the opportunity to turn his back on SHIP and redeem himself by becoming the doctor he had hoped to be. Yet that longed-for state of grace is to remain beyond Bozeman’s reach. Used to breaking the wills of others, Bozeman is unable, by his own act of will, to alter his ways.

At its best, *Double-Blind* forces us to confront unpleasant scenes, which are written with economy and power. There could be a bit of Bozeman in all of us. We often engage in self-deception, and in these particular times we may be too complacent to protest against state-sanctioned brutality. Yet Hallett’s particular kind of realism—good things rarely happen, few people are kind, the lives of people are invariably sordid, and corruption is normal—is objectionable because it clearly overlooks the more tender aspects of life, and relegates much of the world’s artwork to the ashbin. On occasion, Hallett’s characters are allowed to feel that the world is not so firmly underfoot or wrapped around them like a restraint jacket. I hope that in her next book, Hallett will indulge her poetic inclinations and will allow her characters more freedom to revel in that side of life and art that literary realism is disinclined to show.

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