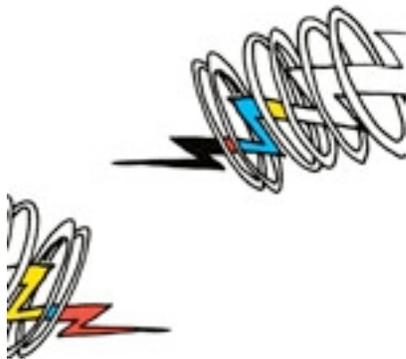


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Review: Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *Camera*



Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *Camera* defies so many sacrosanct laws of fiction that the critic hardly knows where to start, but among its most disturbing propositions is the notion that narrative itself is a kind of overstatement, that turning points in life don't actually exist, that life is nothing more than one bloody thing after another.

Toussaint is hailed in France as a comic genius, and there's a lot to laugh about in *Camera*, which at first seems like a fresco of triviality. A man, let's call him the narrator, goes to renew his driver's license, and soon returns to the driver's ed office to seduce the woman who works there, whose life he seems to quickly, if obliquely, commandeer, somewhat in the manner of Harpo Marx, "... slightly moving objects on her desk, opening random drawers," and sending her to buy him coffee. At this point in the book, all is lightness and irreverence; she yawns, he also yawns, and he travels to Milan for no reason, where he soon develops corns. Later, he is thrilled when she spills a box of parking cones. We don't learn her name—Pascale Polougaievsky—until page forty-eight.

In its immunity to plot, the book is practically autistic, but it—and, by extension, the narrator—stays in happy ignorance as long as its routine is unspoiled.

But the book's banal idyll is disturbed when the couple is joined by Pascale's father, a bossy man of overwhelming teleological nullity. Mr. Polougaievsky insists on being busy, and his man-of-action attitude turns a trip to buy some propane into a doomed and circuitous search for purpose. The trio fail on their mundane quest, lose their way, and seem to drift around for days, in awful weather. The narrator bristles at Mr. Polougaievsky's need to act, and is massive on the virtues of his own passivity—he's a kind of monk of indolence—but it's part of *Camera's* critique that assertiveness and meekness add up, in the end, to same damn nothing. As long as no one battles this futility, no one fails, but the moment that the world is engaged, paradise is lost. As Mr. Polougaievsky carries groceries, the narrator sulks behind, "...indifferent and aloof, with my collar raised, and Pascale still further off, nonchalantly dragging a dead branch that she had picked up along the way."

Not everything is bleak to Toussaint. He has an ear for the preposterousness of names, as when the characters change trains in towns like Reuilly-Diderot, Daumensil, and La Motte-Piquet. And yet, London can never have seemed as gloomy as it does when the narrator and Pascale go there for vacation, and lay in bed watching unexciting sports on TV, while an announcer "...whispered with an obsolete seriousness." When the narrator initiates sex, Pascale says she has a headache; later, he plays a slot machine, where "...two eternal mauve prunes, ambivalent and testicle-shaped, recurrently appeared before me as an image of my personal fate."

Because this book is overstuffed with meaningless vacations—from what, you may ask, since the narrator doesn't work—the end of *Camera* finds the narrator on a boat that's going nowhere. As invisible as death, *Camera* does more than ventilate the novel, it subjects it to a sheepish, languid sandblast.

Adam Novy's first novel, The Avian Gospel, is forthcoming from Hobart.

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