

The Liar's Asylum by Jacob Appel: Book Review

The Liar's Asylum.

By Jacob M. Appel

Black Lawrence Press, USA, 2017.

168 pages.

The characters who populate Jacob Appel's stories in *The Liar's Asylum* are drawn largely from 'a flourishing sector of the beleaguered middle-class'. To wit, they are well fed, educated, statistically affluent and mostly Jewish Americans from the northeastern United States. This is 'white' literature: principal characters of colour or LGBTQ do not appear and those of ethnic minority, like Silvio in 'Bait and Switch' are consigned to supporting roles. The stories have arcs and plots (what!!!) as well as strong narrative direction, and the timelines (excluding flashback) are mostly linear. The writing is polished to a mirror shine and the handsome prose might well fall under something called 'American classical'. *The Liar's Asylum*, then, is about as far from alternative, grunge lit and metafiction as an author could go. If you're looking for edgy pyrotechnics or the stylistic equivalent of *Le Cirque de Soleil*, you won't find it here. But these are only minus's in the minds of people who count them as plus's.

Jacob Appel is a writer of consummate skill and—though we have yet to read other of his works—we think, in this collection—pretty much at the top of his form. These are pedigreed stories that stand squarely on the august shoulders of their forebears: Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Joseph Heller and the rich tradition of 20th century Jewish American literature they bring with them. There are also fleeting shades of Salinger, the early to middle period Tobias Wolff, and, in the stellar title story—surprise! —Ray Bradbury. In every case the writing is poised, confident and often funny with a mimic's ear for dialogue. Appel has a gift for the *bon mot* and a talent for adage: 'I think we may make a dishonest man out of him yet.' and 'Closeness without conflict exists only in the cemetery.' To say nothing of 'Life is so uncertain you eat your dessert first.' So, what does all this mean? It means that you *must* read these stories because they demand to be read, and you will be poorer in spirit for not doing so.

Now, down to business.

In 'Bait and Switch' 14-year-old Laurie Jean is 'farmed' out in a matchmaking ploy by her 'designing' aunt. Aunt Cindy, having been passed over by a fishmonger and a piano teacher, now has her scopes targeted on Silvio Santino who operates an artificial flower business. The most interesting character in the story is Maia, his teenage stepdaughter, who both adores and despises him. She sets about

sabotaging her 'hot' stepfather's business by secretly scratching swastikas on the underside of artificial leaves and pressures a reluctant Laurie Jean to enlist in her heinous scheme. Wisely, Appel resists the temptation to explain her puzzling duplicity.

In the tenderly comedic 'Good Enough for Guppies', a faded Norma Desmond type marries a much younger man in a pet store to the hysterical consternation of her well-meaning but insecure daughter. Their repartee crackles and Appel's assured evocations of shabby gentility surrounding the ageing in body but youthful in spirit bride draws a fine line between parody and poignancy.

In the very strong 'Picklocks in Oblivion' (the wonderfully named town that occurs in two stories and is probably Appel's Yoknapatawpha county or Lake Wobegon) a young man and his dangerously free-spirited girlfriend chauffeur a wealthy but incapacitated stroke victim to a distant family wedding with a plot twist that will have your heart in your throat.

Appel has a penchant for compounding the life of his characters by situating them in improbable, though credible, slightly askew scenarios. A young soldier by the name of Virtanen in 'The Frying Finn' ironically learns, through a vengeful and harrowing encounter with his girlfriend's American lover, the meaning of the Finnish word *sisu*, drawn from a tradition in his own culture.

In 'The Summer of Interrogatory Subversion' a teenage girl and her mother's boarder, an alternative minded young philosopher named Jonah, kindle a relationship that unexpectedly falls apart after she clandestinely discovers his secret fetish. And in the luminous title story, with its unsettling surrealism, infidelity is played out against a backdrop of mass hysteria, akin to *St. Vitas Dance*. It is a dark tale, yet as adroitly handled as any short fiction by Stephen King.

In what is arguably the outstanding offering in an outstanding collection, the complex and psychologically layered 'Prisoners of the Multiverse', (*read the story in our Fiction Section*) the suicide of a beloved high school physics teacher precipitates, with troubling lacunae, a re-examination of past lives in a number of his female students. The ending of this quietly disturbing story, which could have been easily overwritten, is a triumph of restraint possible from the pen of only the finest of writers.

Existential angst (God help us for using the phrase!), the cruelties of fate, the cold-hearted plunder of time, it's all here—along with unforgettable lines that linger in mind and heart. 'I'll never forget what it was like to watch a woman with a PhD in particle physics struggling to spell her own name with childhood blocks.'

Buy *The Lair's Asylum*. Read *The Liar's Asylum*. You owe it to yourself. Besides, do you really *not* want to read an author who comes up with 'she is capable of serving venison to Bambi.' I mean, c'mon.

The Editors—FLEAS ON THE DOG