Sadness


Donald Barthelme's Sadness is a great book to read while you're worried. His fourth collection of short stories continues to combine his simple, concise style with wry, outrageous imagination. Barthelme's technical skill never interferes with his craft.

Each story is a subtly-knit characterization of a particular human psychology; plot, style, action and setting are all cohered to further this end. The volume begins with an almost-too-subtle parody of the screwball comedies, "Antiquite de la Vie Quotidienne." An examination of the abstracted artist follows in "Traumerei." The third story, one of several gems in the volume, touches a point dear to every Tech Tool: "The General." And finally, a thoroughgoing existence through to "A City of Churches," wherein a car-rental girl's non-denominational discomfort suffers a lack of competition. King Kong is a cocktail guest at "The Party," while "Engineers from a Place in Maine" proclaims that the aircraft between Milburnth and Cambrai, March 1916, the participants of "The Flight" are 100,000 feet high.

The unifying factor, throughout, is the topic dear to every Tech Tool: "Every Tech Tool knows that the ends of psychodynamics are not always readable to his patient's scholarly but skeptical fiancé. A mini-collection of "Departures" proceeds a "Sahpozen" which requires its recipient to dismantle his best friend. "The Tachist" dogmatizes through an inefinitely repeated conversation, preparing the reader for the literary-graphic spectacle of "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace." The "Unannotated Rise of Capitalism" is followed by "The Temptation of (a suburban) St. Anthony." "Disaster" concludes the collection by achieving complete literary surrogation, without a mucketeer's tedium.

The significance of the book's title remains obscure, perhaps it is intentionally. What is certain is the breadth of each of Barthelme's conceits, matched only by the seriousness of his insight. Barthelme provides the situations and the characters, but only the exact elaboration that they desire. He does his literary analysis after he writes; the reader can only decipher a finely distilled liquor whose inebriative quality can scarcely be avoided.

So much for the formal review. You will read this book. If you are unaccompanied with Barthelme, this is a signal of two things: its worth to you if you have followed his earlier ramblings, read no further. Get bombed, get stoned, stay simple, for a change and the reader in us in order, backwards, forwards or sideways (no Chinese translation available yet), be read!

James E. Smith

Crime

Roskolnikov had a date. How it happened was nothing of a mystery to Woody and MTA, but he acknowledged it was true.

"I don't understand," said Woody.

"All he ever does all day is lie on the filthy couch he uses for a bed and stare at the ceiling."

The ceiling was an overpowering obsession to Roskolnikov. He would lie for hours, sipping tea from a glass, pondering the cracks and waterstains that seemed to stare back at him. But his roommate, MTA, didn't seem to mind.

"What she look like?" MTA asked Roskolnikov.

"She looks like a horse," he said.

"Huh?" said Woody.

"Horse," explained MTA. "She has a long, sad face and big brown eyes. He zoomed to his roommate, 'Where's the from?'

"Wellesley.

"Oh," said Roskolnikov. "Well, that explains it," said Woody. "Now I know what she looks like. Woody's third corollary -- all chics look like bowls of fruit." He left his profundity at that, certain that everyone knew exactly what room Roskolnikov lay still on his couch.

"So you got a date," said Woody. "How did you ever do it?"

Rosalyn didn't answer.

"I figures," said Woody, "Woodo and Roskolnikov go second class - girls only go out with guys who are dorks. Certains, Gourmand."

MTA mentioned towards Roskolnikov, who lay motionless, his mottled and unshaven face fixed facing the ceiling.

James E. Smith