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Literary

3/03
Chuck Wachtel
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In March 2003, the government of the United States unleashes a "wave of steel" on Iraq—operation "shock and awe" at full throttle. Missiles whistle across cloudy landscapes on television screens and Tom, a writer and professor in New York City, moves noiselessly through the minutiae of everyday life, notebook in hand. Serving as a logbook of the people and places he encounters each day, Tom's notebook becomes a means of connection, a way to record, critique, and make sense of a world where reality is edited into convenient segments on the nightly news.

Identified as "a novel and commonplace book," this indicates the dual nature of the narrative. At once a fully realized story of one man's struggle to understand rapidly unfolding events, as well as a compendium of observations noted during the month of March 2003, *3/*03* brings the world of fact and fiction together in a refreshing new way. As a writer, Tom expands his observations into fictive imaginings—the reader observes his creative process and witnesses the transformation of each sketch into something whole. A woman passing on the street carrying several bags of chips becomes a vessel of meaning, an opportunity to see more. Reviewing notes from Chekhov's notebooks, Tom observes that "each is a thumbnail sketch, a moment reduced to the simplest particle of itself…each of these small handfuls of words began expanding into a story the size of a universe…" Tom's own notes show how seemingly simple sketches of life balloon into fictive realities—people and places with full-bodied stories and motivations. Through Tom's process, Wachtel exemplifies how fiction morphs reality into something that we can grasp and understand.

An accomplished author and poet, Wachtel's writing is pristine. His prose sparkles, meaning reflecting off every facet of every clear-cut phrase, extraneous detail buffed away with an expert editorial eye. This clean style complements the patchwork structure and subject matter of the book, where poems, embedded photographs, and fragment phrases are digested through

seamless, fluid prose.

In *3/*03*, Chuck Wachtel has drawn a sensitive yet evocative portrait of modern life. At its root, this is a study of the way stories are told, the way fragments of other lives strike a chord within us and intersect with our own understanding of the world. This is an important piece of work that will be welcomed by any reader of contemporary fiction.

Shoilee Khan