

Breakneck

Nelly Arcan

Jacob Homel, Translator

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This sexually charged cautionary tale deftly uses interior monologue and psychological tension.

Nelly Arcan writes with keen insight into the lives of young adults in contemporary Montreal. *Breakneck* chronicles the jaded lives of two beautiful women who coldly compete to possess the same man.

The story begins on the rooftop of an apartment building in August as Julie O'Brien toasts her pale Irish skin in the piercing sun. Rose Dubois, a fashion stylist wearing a similarly brief bikini, and Julie's across-the-hall neighbor, shows up. The two women converse with surface affability while assessing each other's artificially enhanced bodies. Rose suggests that Julie, a script writer, discuss her documentary film concept with Charles Nadeau, a photographer and Rose's live-in boyfriend. The plot moves ineluctably forward through the ensuing year, concluding the following August, on the same rooftop, as their selfish game comes to fruition.

Arcan excels at capturing telling detail. For instance, Julie and Charles meet at a patio bar, without Rose. Drawn to him sexually, Julie glances at the children's playground next door, the scene of many of her late-night drunken orgies. Arcan writes, "Children played behind the cedar hedge, their presence like a reminder to the customers not to go too far, like so many little judges reminding Julie of her past degeneration."

A deft understanding of the characters' psychological sparring is clearly evident when Julie and Rose meet again on the rooftop. Julie struggles to control her addictions but accepts Rose's offer to share a bottle of chardonnay, then searches unsuccessfully for cigarettes in her purse. Rose pulls from her own purse an unopened pack that just happens to be Julie's brand. "With that, Rose destabilized Julie, who suddenly understood that Rose had begun to know her in her tastes and habits," writes Arcan.

Although written primarily as interior monologue, the narrative vividly describes characters and events. Focus shifts smoothly among the three primary characters as they reveal their insecurities, sexual proclivities, and grandiose desires.

This promising French Canadian writer committed suicide in 2009. Jacob Homel co-translated *Hysteric*, one of her previous novels.

Sexually explicit, *Breakneck* is a masterfully written, but disturbing, cautionary tale.

MARGARET CULLISON (Fall 2015)

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