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Literary

Candide the Tenth and Other Agitations: Prose and Poetry
Mike Sharpe
North Castle Books
978-0-7656-3677-5
(September 1, 2012)

In the novella that begins this collection of various genres, Voltaire's Candide has spawned a tenth generation who, like his forebear, journeys to discover the nature of man and does so under the guidance of a mentor, here named Presto. The novella sets the stage for the style imitations, poems, essays, and stories that follow. Sharpe invokes Dickinson, Kafka, Hemingway, and more. The references to such literary giants may have misfired; their presence highlights some of the writer's incapacities.

Founder of M.E. Sharpe books (an imprint of which published this work), the author has two previous collections of poems, a collection of articles, and an academic book, *John Kenneth Galbraith and the Lower Economics*. A learned man, he brings that education to this volume, writing from the premise of the tenth Candide. This Candide is rich and under the guidance of his CIA agent mentor, Presto, accesses catastrophes from Hurricane Katrina to the Congo. Candide observes man's inhumanity to man, and while his tutor rationalizes it away as impossible to change, Candide is alarmed and eager to help suffering people. Twenty-four vignettes serve as a litany of horror; and while Candide's moral dilemma grows, the novella disappoints at the end. Suddenly the point of view shifts from first person to third; Candide committs a crime off-stage about which the audience knows nothing; his fiancée appears, and they marry. With confusing abruptness, the story wraps up but without any real climax or epiphany.

The novella's first twenty-four vignettes are the book's strongest, but the rushed ending and break in the narrative contract almost entirely ruins all that came before. The ending should have offered a lens, a revelation, and it doesn't. The essays that follow also lament the state of the world and feature familiar tropes—God talking to someone, a riff on the Titanic and classism, politicians wearing masks. Sharpe is clear about his more progressive take on the world, but the message- driven essays would benefit from more attention to the way in which

something is said as opposed to simply what is being said. The medium in creative writing is at least as important as the message.

A section of poetry ends the volume. It too features political rhetoric, but it also attempts to mimic the style of a number of great writers. Using excessive dashes does not recreate Dickinson. Still, he manages some creative ideas. Retelling Jack and Jill in a number of different voices is fun. He writes a poem about disembodied body parts that is both political and unexpected in “The Eyeball.” Unfortunately, these are mixed in with poems like “Lessons from New Orleans,” which appears below in its entirety.

Don’t be poor.
Don’t be old.
Don’t be sick.
Don’t be black.
Don’t live in New Orleans.

While the poem is certainly clear, it does little to illuminate what readers haven’t already heard. This agenda-driven volume has moments of creativity, but it is largely about setting forth a political message.

Camille-Yvette Welsch