



Devils in the Sugar Shop

Timothy Schaffert

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“You go through life...’ ‘thinking you’ve pretty much seen it all.’ *You think that maybe you’re even a little bit on the edge of things, she thought, a little daring. Then you get a peek of true underbelly, and you realize just how innocent you are,*” the author writes

This multi-protagonist story overlays the uncelebrated cornhusker spirit of Omaha, Nebraska, “...probably the most land-locked place on earth.” Surprise can still be generated there by a misaddressed e-mail reading, “anyway I can’t come tonight. I’ve got that orgy, remember?” Less high-stakes but chock full of revelation is a playfully burlesque schtupperware party which DeeDee throws at Ashley’s house. Laughing over a cornucopia of cartoonish marital aids are their artist friend Viv, who keeps her involvement with DeeDee’s ex hush hush, and Peach, an unsettling erotic writing student of Ashley’s. Peach owns a bookstore with her more literate twin sister, Plum. In her free hours she is having a torrid affair with Ashley’s husband, he of the notorious note.

Schaffert’s previous novels are *The Phantom Limbs of the Rollow Sisters* and *The Singing and Dancing Daughters of God*, a Spring 2006 selection of Barnes and Noble’s Discover Great New Writers program. He is an editorial contributor to *The Reader*, Omaha’s alternative paper and also serves as director of the Downtown Omaha Litfest.

Devils in the Sugar Shop includes a substantial element of humor. Some bits are jubilantly absurd, others show wry restraint. When Viv asks Zeke whether there’s anything in a visit to the gynecologist which people may consider erotic, Zeke answers with a journalist’s factual deadpan: “Everything’s a kind of porn.” The reflex to steer fiction toward semi-autobiography is lampooned as Peach, Ashley, and her son Lee all write about themselves and friends, or a doppelgänger variation of the same. The tiredest fallback in literature is mocked with facility, as one character’s roman à clef is a literary novel about writing a literary novel. The mutual antagonist’s threat isn’t sufficient to cause behavioral alteration in the multiple protagonists. However, this is a day-in-the-life piece featuring characters with an almost genetic resistance to serious change. An opposing force isn’t necessary to the success of the novel.

Outrage at the discovery of adultery is minimal, despite anxiety during the suspicion phase. The racy prurience of kink lacks zest in the heartland; the cross-dressing divas are campy fun, but overall Omaha is awash in a breadbasket malaise which even sex can’t clear. Schaffert, with his flair for truth-as-wisecrack, is personally and professionally enmeshed in a place which he describes as “...most magical when it most resembles some other city.” (August 18, 2009)

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