

From G to PG to R to X

Stephen C. Bird

Hysterical Dementia

(178pp)

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The satirical novel From G to PG to R to X delights in following the world's cocksure zooming in the wrong direction.

Stephen C. Bird's satirical novel *From G to PG to R to X* follows the devolution of national politics, sexual politics, and political correctness in the polarized nation of Amourrica Profunda.

Loaded with caricatures, including a talking octopus, who disappear and reappear, the story shatters literary conventions. In it, unpopular capitalist and former chancellor Tumerico Inflammatorio, who won his election by running against an even more unpopular candidate, has an oddball family whose sole goal is to make money and remain in power. Inflammatorio's exploitation of a nation too delusional or distracted to stop him is blatant.

Despite Inflammatorio's national prominence, it is ordinary Sunnie, who just lost his mother, who is centered for the first half of the book. He lives in a rich environment replete with secret tunnels and lights that auto-dim to leave him in the dark; his world reflects his anxieties, and he enters the twilight dimension on repeat. He loses himself in a surrealistic relationship with a dominatrix who hurls hilarious insults and taunts to debase him.

Most of the cast is shallow, including Tumerico's daughter and her skinny husband. There are a bevy of untalented, unapologetic, soulless capitalists. The more lines that are devoted to a character, the more cartoonish they appear. With adults like this steering the ship, the inevitable ending is cataclysm.

There are long, madcap passages in a stream-of-consciousness style; they include some humorous commentary about newly named orientations like asexuality and other terms among the latest parlance. Still, they are prone to rambling, with Sunnie wondering aloud what would happen to him if he used the wrong term within earshot of a wrathful crowd. The book suggests that ridiculousness reigns across the political spectrum; Sunnie is also mocked for distracting himself with such issues while his rudderless country loses its gains.

More of a montage of story fragments than a cohesive novel, the book is prone to losing its thread to disruptions, dead ends, and sharp turns. Often, scenes seem present more for their entertainment value than they are to service the plot. For example, a shaman investigates a local cult ceremony featuring colorful, informal banter between the two women who chat about being smitten with Inflammatorio: "I love the way he mats down that dirty orange combover of his with Vaseline!" But before the event is in full swing, the shaman runs away and the plot takes another unexpected turn. Surprises ensue, as with a violent scene written in an indecisive voice unequal to the action and whose ending upends expectations.

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LAURA MORENO (December 9, 2022)

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