



Girl with a Monkey: New and Selected Stories

Leonard Michaels

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In his introduction to this collection of sixteen short stories, the author says he has imagined his work as literary experimentation: “I fancied what I was doing, in form, not subjects, a little of what others were doing in music, especially jazz musicians.” By form he means “the shape and rhythm of sentences” as well as the transformation that takes place during the course of a story. You “get” the transformation, he says, the same way you “get” a joke.

Michaels, who lives in Italy, is a recognized master of prose. His work has appeared in the O. Henry Prize story collection, and his novel, *The Men’s Club*, was nominated for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award.

There is a jazz-like virtuosity to these stories, written during the last thirty years. “Mildred,” a macabre story about a man and a woman and two brief visitors to their apartment, is an arpeggio of discordant notes, clever and cryptic: “Sleek sat down in his coat, watching Max. Both of them glanced once at Mildred, then at each other. I said, then Max said. Sleek laughed feebly as if suppressing a cough.” The flip side of that coin is “Going Places,” which begins with a William Faulkner-esque half-page sentence, a fragment of which is this: “...for in that shake Beckman was welcomed to the end of a successful interview and a life made wretched by rattling kidneys, the stench of gasoline, of cigarettes, or perfume and alcohol and vomit, the end of surly toughs, drunken women, whoring soldiers, vagrant blacks and whites, all the streaming, fearsome, pathetic ruffraff refuse of the city’s dark going places, through places in hell, while he, Beckman, driver of the cab, went merely everywhere...”

While Michaels suggests he is less interested in subject than form, he does acknowledge a frequent theme in his stories, which is, the way “men and women seem unable to live with or without each other” and “the sadomasochistic dynamic at the erotic core...” In the title story, the girl purportedly has an actual monkey somewhere offstage, but given her strangely unsuccessful attempts to distance herself from men, the reader might conclude she has a monkey on her back—a compulsion that draws men and women together. In that story, and others, bickering and arguing, even physical violence, are followed by irrational, passionate sex.

Also, the world is a dangerous place. In “Murderers,” a young rabbi and his wife blissfully pursue conjugal relations unaware that the neighborhood kids are watching from a nearby rooftop. When one of the kids falls to his death the startled rabbi looks up and cries, “Murderers!” It’s as if violating a working and fulfilling sexual relationship is as violent an act as taking a life.

Given the author’s preoccupation with technique and his dismal view of human relations, his stories might seem detached and cold to some readers. Of course, the same thing has been said about James Joyce. To use Michaels’ simile, perhaps readers either get it or they don’t.

MARJORY RAYMER (March / April 2000)

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