

History of Sex

Jonathan Harnisch

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Harnisch has already found his oeuvre—this may just be the dish to serve it on.

Jonathan Harnisch's sexual frustrations take center stage in his latest work, a stage play titled *The History of Sex*. Diving deeply into personal, autobiographical waters, the play explores themes of rejection, lust, and neurosis.

Readers familiar with Harnisch's earlier works, such as his novels *The Dreamer Sleeps without Dreaming* and *Pastiche*, will find *The History of Sex* to be familiar territory. A male narrator, worn out by his own mental illness, falls back into the self-destructive patterns that he alternately embraces and rejects. This time, Ben and his alter ego Georgie unpick the tangled web of memories that made Ben the way that he is.

Starting on a surreal note, Harnisch's play holds nothing back. Ben crawls over a pile of empty pizza boxes, lights a cigarette, and summons the ghost of his past. Is this comedy, farce, tragedy? A mix of all three? It's difficult to tell, but Harnisch plugs away, comfortable as ever with the natural surrealism of life.

Once again, Harnisch's female characters work the hardest. Claudia, the "poster lady for the eroticism of homeliness; old, chubby, bespectacled, pimpled, chunky, brutal ... and a vampire," holds Ben's fascination. But why? As far as *The History of Sex* is concerned, Ben's obsession is a foregone conclusion. From his early experiences with controlling mothers, stepmothers, grandmothers, and female family friends, Ben is doomed to love a dominatrix who delights in his suffering.

He doesn't seem too unhappy to enjoy his misery, either. "So much for this suffocating morsel of love, living in his living hell, the morsel of a person I call myself," he says, simultaneously bemoaning and celebrating his fate. While Harnisch's earlier works are nearly impenetrable—juggernauts of prose—the stripped-down format of *The History of Sex* lays out scenes, characters, and concepts in a way that is comprehensible and, at times, enjoyable.

One particularly beautiful scene features Ben's ex-girlfriends in a Greek chorus, singing his praises and his faults. Ben shrugs it off as "judgment day," but the litany humanizes him, grounding the surreal plot. Even when Ben doubts himself, he's got a cast of characters to witness him, hold him accountable, and check his facts.

Harnisch has a natural flair for drama, and *The History of Sex* makes the most of his strengths. Ironically, by relinquishing some narrative control to his audience, Harnisch gains more freedom. He's already found his oeuvre—this may just be the dish to serve it on.

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