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General

Labor Day: A Corporate Nightmare
Catbird Press
978-0-945774-48-8
(August 31, 2000)

Carving out a niche in the world of fiction with what has been referred to as a corporate nightmare or management novel, Kemske has written his fifth novel and fourth of this new genre—Labor Day. A union headquarters is the backdrop for an intriguing and undulating power struggle between a young union organizer and a reluctantly retired anti-labor consultant. The unionization of a union is at stake. Therein lies the premise that makes this novel tick. By presenting the idea that a union's headquarters, administrative structure, or management mechanism is not governed by the structure that governs its members, Kemske taps into a paradoxical concept that is difficult to reconcile in either direction. "They want their union to provide the services it is suppose to provide, not get mired in contract negotiations, formal work procedures, and excessive pay scales." This is a concept that anti-labor consultant Stillman Colby repeats throughout the novel as if it were his mantra. On one level this is a story of conflicting principles and this, then, is Colby's primary principle and essential method of influencing those who can turn the union headquarters away from unionization.

Several provocative characters inhabit the narrative of Kemske's novel and are essential to its paradoxical dissonance. Prime examples are both union organizer Greg Harsh and his foil Colby, who present narcissistic characteristics in pursuit of contrasting objectives. At times the conflict in Labor Day approaches the artfulness of a fencing match with the grit of an Old West showdown. The narrative is propelled by this conflict between Harsh and Colby with eddies that encircle and pull in the lives of the other characters on personal and professional planes.

Labor Day can be read on philosophical, social, and historical levels by virtue of the paradoxical, yet polarized and diverse issues that are inherent in unionization issues. From historical moments in the American labor movement like the auto industry or the failed air-traffic controllers strike in 1981, to the ludicrousness of some contemporary labor issues and the caricaturized image of some unions today (where even a "chalupa" becomes a bargaining tool), Kemske attempts to cover a lot of ground thematically in a relatively short novel. Similarly,

Kemske also reveals the Orwellian possibilities of the corporate world, unionization aside. Thus, Labor Day is the kind of novel whose digestion continues long after the reading of it is finished.

Other than one very clumsy, trite, and situationally sloppy chapter late in the novel, Kemske writes a thoroughly thought-provoking novel. Labor Day is an entertaining and strong literary achievement for the author, however, its blemishes are worthy of note as well. First, Kemske presents a paradoxical and philosophical question or premise that begs further development and introspection. The plot, characters, issues, and conflicts all are burgeoning when Kemske pulls the plug on Labor Day. Second, if Labor Day was intended as anything close to treatise on unionism (recent and not so recent) in America, it fails, in that, Kemske briefly touches on the history of the labor movement in a cursory way. In both cases more would be better.

Jim Filkins