



Living Colorful Beauty

Jonathan Harnisch

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Living Colorful Beauty is a twisted, intensely character-driven ride.

In *Living Colorful Beauty*, author Jonathan Harnisch tells the story of Ben, a man diagnosed with Tourette's syndrome, schizoaffective disorder, and several other issues. Ever since his youth, Ben has been both plagued by mental illness and obsessed with venality. As he navigates through an unstable, directionless life and leaves a string of shattered romances in his wake, he generates a fictional character, Georgie Gust, to deal with his many paraphilias and neuroses. But with the introduction of a new psychotherapist, Ben may have a chance to let go of his doppelgänger as well as his overwhelming insecurity.

Though the book is saturated with Ben's sexuality, its prevailing theme is actually his struggle to come to terms with his mental health. The entire book reads like a Freudian therapy session, so the ultimate resolution of Ben's problems is appropriate. Ben's internal creative process is integral to the book's effectiveness, since much of the psychoanalysis Ben receives seems to come from himself through the lens of his fictional creation, Georgie. The book features an almost claustrophobic amount of navel-gazing, which may be intentional. At times, the reading experience leaves no doubt as to how the book's main character could drive himself crazy with his recursive, obsessive self-examination.

Ben and Georgie have an interesting and nuanced relationship. At times Ben seems completely unable to control his double while simultaneously being one with him. He often reassures himself that his creation is the inferior man, citing Georgie's pumpkin-like body as the reason that nobody will ever want him. On the other hand, of the two of them, Georgie seems to have the more active love life. Ben reaches for emotional intimacy through relationship after relationship, but his illness, issues with women, and physical demands—the Georgie in him—constantly hamper his progress.

As the narrator, Ben's point of view colors all of the other characters. Several of these, in addition to Georgie, are or may be fictional, mere expressions of Ben's illness. This is especially true of the women in Ben's life. There are comparatively very few men in this story, but the women are usually of a seductive and even predatory type. Ben aggressively sizes up the ladies he knows, from his girlfriends to his therapist, in terms of their attractiveness, perhaps in an attempt to balance the scales, since in his own perception, women are domineering copies of his own terrifying mother. Part of Ben's evolution is to move toward a valuing of women beyond his mother issues, a satisfying direction for this character to travel.

Living Colorful Beauty is a twisted, intensely character-driven ride that ends on a hopeful note. It may interest fans of Charles Bukowski and Tom Robbins.

ANNA CALL (November 19, 2015)

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