

Pastiche

Jonathan Harnisch

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Intense and artfully self-centered, this novel wraps around itself in search of release, after which the pleasure is over all too soon.

Jonathan Harnisch's *Pastiche* is an exhaustive and frequently painful catalog of the struggles of the weirdly shy and chronically frustrated character Benny, who struggles to find a way to connect to the outer world.

Benny likes latex. He likes to be encased, totally enclosed, and separated from reality by a thin, impermeable layer of rubber. His anxiety is that his membrane of choice, whether it's a prophylactic or a jumpsuit, will suddenly break.

Author Jonathan Harnisch, in mega-fictional, maximalist style, spares no detail when it comes to Benny's life. From fellatio to family therapy, every humiliating detail is chronicled in this over-eight-hundred-page novel, which almost seems to take pleasure in its narrator's embarrassment. If there's an envelope to push, the novel pushes it—hard.

The book's first sex scene takes place in the living room of Benny's neighbor, Vivienne: "She was a ball of chaos. She was a marriage counselor who'd never been married, a parenting educator who'd never had kids, a rehab counselor who'd never been rehabbed herself." The combination of these two personalities is predictably disastrous. Delightful, though, is the narrative's fine attention to small details: Vivienne's Lucky Charms temporary tattoos, the glow-in-the-dark stars on her bedroom ceiling.

Benny is hyper-aware of his condition—his fetish isn't normal, and he knows it—and he has several theories about its origin. He vacillates between blaming others for his difficulty in finding satisfaction and desperately trying to understand what's the matter with him. His personality splits, then re-enjoins itself. Vivienne, grotesquely faithful to the last, is with him for the whole ride. She's "his personal trainer in pain. She has to ensure she gives him that high he craves and satisfy her own perverse longings; all the while she must be certain it's not too much for him right now."

Themes of false confidence and amateurs playing at professionalism run through *Pastiche*, which seems intent on exposing its characters as frauds. Vivienne, so childish in some ways, is forty. Benny's other lovers also exhibit narcissism in the extreme, and are quick to assert their power. Yet it takes mere paragraphs for Benny to suss out their weaknesses, and he is equally quick to exploit them back. After all, what's a sadist without a masochist to torment? As the lowest of the low, the crummiest of the crummy, Benny holds all the cards in every one of these transactional relationships.

With *Pastiche*, Jonathan Harnisch tests the limits of his subject. How far he can push Benny, how long he can draw out each painful scene, is sadomasochistic in the extreme. *Pastiche* succeeds as an example of art imitating life. Its self-centered intensity keeps it wrapped up in itself, like Benny. When it finds release, the pleasure's over all too soon.

CLAIRE FOSTER (June 6, 2016)

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