

Persecution: The Friendly Fire of Memories

Alessandro Piperno

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“Why it says to the world what the world wants to hear: that nothing goes better with depravity than vanity,” claims the narrator of *Persecution*. Like the author’s debut, *The Worst Intentions*, the vanity of the Italian bourgeoisie, this time set in the 1980s, is the subject of Alessandro Piperno’s trenchant and digressive second novel. Here, Piperno introduces Professor Leo Pontecorvo, a famous pediatric oncologist, whose idyllic life is the result of not merely hard work, but the fact that he was born into an upper middle-class family that expected no less of him than to mirror their obvious superiority. Leo successfully lives up to these expectations through loyalty to his wife, love for his two sons, the manicured appearance of his expansive villa, and the subtle arrogance to never question that he deserved it all.

That is, until Piperno dismantles Leo’s smug complacency through a series humiliating accusations that attack Leo’s most prized possession: his moral character. Accusations lodged against him for mishandling funds and loan-sharking seem like a minor obstacle after he is charged with seducing the twelve-year-old girlfriend of his son, Samuel. Unable to reconcile the profile of the embezzling, middle-aged pedophile that the nightly news presents with his own vision of himself as a distinguished and charismatic scientist, Leo imprisons himself in the dank basement of the house he once roamed as a domestic king. He surrenders to the fact that society and family have decided on his guilt before the facts are ever presented, and for this he languishes in the role of pariah, subject only to his own sense of justice.

Piperno’s dense, Proustian digressions limn the social and cultural biases Leo feels towards his wife, Rachel, and her lower-class obsession with modesty and humility. He mocks her adherence to the laws of Judaism and her sense of decorum. He painfully evaluates his shame of his other son, Filippo, an introvert who from an early age struggles with speaking and reading. Piperno brutally contrasts Leo’s undeniable feelings of condescension and disgust about his own family members with his yearning for their love. With a desperate nostalgia, Leo desires the comfort of his lifestyle that allows his vanity to assert itself through the bourgeoisie markers that he knows and accepts.

Piperno does not give us the mind of a pedophile or an amoral madman, he’s too clever for that. He delivers a man who is the product of a corrupt society that separates the haves from the have-nots based not on their morality but on their greed and ambition. Narcissism is inherent in Leo’s every assumption. Through his suffocatingly close third-person narrative, Piperno mimics the pervasive oppression of classism inherent in the ideals of the upper middle class.

Persecution is the first in a diptych for Alessandro Piperno, whose debut novel won the Campiello Prize for First Novel. It’s evident that themes of economic and social disparity are key to his voice as a writer, as is his penchant for challenging prose.

MONICA CARTER (Fall 2012)

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