



Rake

Scott Phillips

Counterpoint (Jun 11, 2013)

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Noir novel of an actor navigating Paris rekindles the humor and intellect of the genre.

This curiously dry, reasonably entertaining novel is clearly an attempt to replicate or comment on noir-ish hardboiled fiction. It is narrated by an unnamed actor, more successful in Paris than the US, for his role in a high-end soap opera. While visiting the Louvre, he seizes upon the idea to make a film beginning with an archaeologist discovering the missing arms of the Venus de Milo. Not long after that, he discovers a brilliant, if fringe, author named Frederic working in a small bookstore. They've just met, but our hero senses he's the perfect guy to write the screenplay. He then begins an affair with Esmee, the beautiful young wife to an international arms dealer, who is interested in funding the film project. Thus, the wheels are set in motion.

None of the chapters are very long. They're effective, clever, pointed, and accessible, keeping the plot moving at a brisk tempo; and while Phillips keeps several balls in the air, they're crafted to help readers keep up.

As the title suggests, *Rake* is the story of a man obsessed with recreational sex. He's not an addict, nor does his promiscuity with numerous partners indicate a dark side to his identity. Early on he confides gratitude for the plentiful intimacy his celebrity affords him. He makes no pretensions of altruism, but neither is he exploitative.

Though he's not a detective, or called to detective work, the hero's story is not without intrigue. His most likable feature is his frankness. He doesn't kid us about himself or others and doesn't come across as hostile, alienated, or yearning for perfection, though it's amusing that he's disappointed when fans fail to recognize him. Phillips hints at a deeper pathology when describing the actor's early propensity for intense violence, but this is quickly resolved. At the risk of sounding contentious, the narrator isn't tainted enough to prompt our disgust or admirable enough to warrant our sympathy. His charm is meant to spring from his detachment, and the glamorous Parisian name-dropping is intended to give him cachet.

Phillips takes great care to delineate the boundaries of his hero's character: he's a skilled warrior but not a sociopath; he's intelligent but not freakishly so, like his scriptwriter, Frederic; he cares enough about Frederic to find him a lady friend, but not enough to free him from his squalor.

Most of the humor in *Rake* is sparked by the extreme behavior of those around him. It's a witty, fast-moving diversion with insinuations of a more sinister subtext, but not much comes of those. It's a roller coaster of sexploits, action, and banter, with a cosmopolitan feel.

CHRISTOPHER SODEN (Summer 2013)

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