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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ GENERAL FICTION

Rue de la Pompe: A Satiric Urban Fantasy

James Earle McCracken
iUiniverse (May 2008)
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A systematically designed absurdism rolls over modern Paris in James Earle McCracken's eminently readable debut novel. At the surreal center is a thirty-year-old American named Michael Whyte who is way out of his element. The first people he meets besides coworkers are a bizarre pair of couples: Yvon & Danielle and Daniel & Yvonne host dinner parties bloated with symbolism. During these meals the passage of time becomes inexplicably irregular and Michael is the object of increasingly threatening demands. Yvon and associates charge Michael with locating a literal king's ransom—they and a British hunchback named Alistair Woods are competing to secure the very first French franc. Their lives seem to depend on Michael's success.

At Alistair's residence the protagonist is cautioned to "Evitez les bois" French for "stay out of the woods." Although this key warning with multiple meanings is later repeated Michael doesn't heed it. The least hazardous "woods" around is "…a huge park empty at night except for transvestites drug dealers muggers gay men looking for anonymous hook-ups and really dumb joggers." Other thickets physical and mental hold greater peril. Neighborhood fixtures include a jeweler who speaks in Zen koans and a pub-owning logician who has brought reason to the wrong place. The only marginally trustworthy person around is an inscrutable beauty whose caginess leaves the besotted hero lost in the high weeds. Here's a typical exchange: "'Have you ever met a person and instantly felt as if you had known them your entire life?' Chione asked. 'No I haven't' Michael said. 'Me either' said Chione."

The protagonist's interior dialogue a huge portion of the story is brilliantly executed. Michael's thoughts are variously voiced by differentiated aspects called Smart Ass Dumb Ass Jackass Mr. Whyte (an advisor of prudent responsible action) and Mikey the inner child; Michael himself negotiates the most fitting response to exterior characters. The lovably slow "Dumb Ass" sub-persona speaks suspiciously like Jesus's best friend Biff from Christopher Moore's gospel send-up *Lamb*.

Coincidences abound gears of perception slip without warning and persistently unexplained changes appear rooted in temporal manipulation. *Rue de la Pompe* benefits enormously from a rolling mechanics' chest full of literary devices and game theory scenarios. The author has been picking the brains of *A Beautiful Mind*'s subject John Nash and other mathematicians; he's obviously read Paul Auster.

Not to spoil the ending but it must be noted that the critically despised Deus ex machina steps in not just once (look for an object falling from the sky a la *One Night at McCool's*) but twice (charging rhino in an urban setting). A single occurrence is a literary felony but dual offenses must be attributed to gutsy defiance so it's somehow easier to accept. Folks this is satire. There isn't enough review space to detail everything the intellectually mischievous McCracken does right or to cite more than a sampling of the gut-busting lines the hilarious puns and delicious ironies. He's a fiction writer of tremendous imagination who has managed to jump out of the debut gate fully formed. Do yourself a favor and track down a copy of this fanciful treasure.

TODD MERCER (August 14, 2008)

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