



Second Alibi: The Banality of Life

Jonathan Harnisch

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Jonathan Harnisch doesn't so much showcase literary genius as he grapples with it in his experimental autobiography, *Second Alibi: The Banality of Life*. Genius is a creative spirit he chases. When he gets his hands on it, when genius possesses him, the results are stunning. Parts of *Second Alibi* radiate with originality.

With a self-referential postmodern style reminiscent of William Burroughs, Harnisch chronicles his hell-bent search for personal truth. Diagnosed with schizophrenia and other mental disorders, he explores all aspects of his personality: his alter ego, Ben; his alter ego's alter ego, Georgie; and their mutual love interest, Claudia. Harnisch wrangles to the page episodes of madness and lucidity, hospitalizations, hallucinations, love affairs. He searches every experience for meaning, sometimes exhaustively, and offers up whatever truth he can.

If there's fault in Harnisch's methodology, it's that he overanalyzes and micromanages his own creative process. For example, the book's third act flounders in a sea of platitudinous journal entries about living with mental illness, the writing process, the progress of his manuscript, and his ultimate aspirations as a writer. Although well-intentioned, the entries become preening and laborious. At one point, the author admits, "I feel like I am forcing this writing."

The book's first and second acts are much stronger—the first relayed in stream-of-consciousness passages, and the second in the form of a screenplay. In the first act, Harnisch produces the stuff of poetry. His words and images dance vividly and repeat themselves in strange succession: "The living, colorful sound of the mysterious telephone still haunts us, even me. It rings and rings, again and again." In these passages, even his most self-conscious writing has rhythmic energy and flair: "The sensation of sensational sex and blue movies, the characters and chaos, onslaughts of sketches, prototypes ... of expanding pounding putty and pus, some sex and violence. I'm built for it."

The second act, the screenplay, offers the book's most absorbing and sharply written drama. Harnisch appears to be a natural in the medium, exploring past trauma through scene and dialogue. The screenplay ends with amazing profundity. "And sometimes you just have to listen to the sounds of your life," Ben says. "That kind of silence. That deep remarkable hollow stuff."

Second Alibi provides an honest window into the "hollow stuff." Harnisch is at his best, though, when he leaves his inner critic behind and allows his creativity to color the world around him.

SCOTT NEUFFER (November 20, 2015)

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