

Sensation Machines

Adam Wilson

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Adam Wilson's near-future *Sensation Machines* is a delayed *bildungsroman* for a whole generation.

Wendy and Michael met as college students in New York while navigating the detritus of September 11, 2001. He was a Marshall Mathers acolyte who rapped under the moniker WebMD; she came from privilege, but hankered to be seen.

Twenty years later, they're married. They are both superstars and villains for their millennial generation: he's a Wall Street trader on the brink of financial disaster; she's tasked with developing an ad campaign to impede Congress's passage of a universal minimum wage, organized under the Holocaust-throwback phrase "Work Will Set You Free."

Into this disconcerting mix is thrown a murder: on the night of an activists' funeral for capitalism, the couple's rich, charismatic friend Ricky is shot dead in his bed. Officers zone in on his doorman as the primary suspect, resting their conviction on the color of his skin. Michael and Wendy, the distance between them widening by the moment, experience disillusionment, sadness, and ballooning nostalgia for what once was, including their dreams of children and the comforts of friendships that have since accumulated dangerous rust.

The text's gestures to contemporary developments and discontents are evocative. It draws upon Occupy Wall Street, criticisms of neoliberalism, the affronts represented by the presidency of Donald Trump, and New York cultural mainstays, including *Sex and the City*. It pushes concerns about social media and data sourcing to their logical conclusions, but tempers its inventive technological advancements with the relics that even those thirsty for the future refuse to release—racism and classism prominent among them.

Wilson's novel is incisive in its deconstructions of generational contradictions. As its earnest leads laud fairness but establish themselves as the greatest impediments to progress, *Sensation Machines* nods to the adage that, the more circumstances change, the more they stay the same.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (July / August 2020)

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