

Sex, Death, and the End of the World: Stories

Timothy Perper

Martha Cornog

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These stories are a wild and ingenious farce that take on sexual mores with intelligence and humor.

Imagine a scenario in which Lucifer has lost all power to make people feel guilty about sex, and you'll begin to grasp the conceptual feats of Timothy Perper and his partner in crime, Martha Cornog. Their short story collection, *Sex, Death, and the End of the World*, takes readers on a riotous ride through fantastical plots that eerily reflect our own world. Be prepared: this is wild and ingenious farce.

According to the book's afterword, Perper wrote the thirteen stories in the collection before passing away in 2014. Cornog, his wife, edited and published them. The couple are quite a team, both professional writers and book reviewers specializing in human sexuality. Perper was book review editor for the *Journal of Sex Research*. Not surprisingly, these stories explore sexual mores and all modes of conventional morality, but the authors eschew research formats in favor of fresh, nonacademic fiction.

Supernatural elements abound—gods, vampires, aliens. Perper seems to relish subverting and humanizing our mythologies. In “And to All a Good Night,” Santa Claus joins other mythical figures in an empty bar on Christmas Eve. Ready to quit his job, Santa laments the toxic, mass-produced “garbage” replacing his skillfully crafted elf-made toys.

Similarly, in “Job Search,” Lucifer, planted in the middle of a bustling modern-day city, realizes the world has become so open and honest sexually that he can no longer cause humans to feel shame: “But they haven't listened. They've outwitted me. These people are *happy*.”

The authors jubilantly tie high-concept plots to lowbrow repartee. “Always had a mind of its own,” mutters Lord Ptu in “The Tale of the Lady Ptish and the Marvelous Organ.” Perper and Cornog have fun with the organ in question. The stories are consistently funny, compensating for a few forgettable plotlines, like the faux magical realism on display in “Midnight of the Cavalier.” In this piece, more vignette than fully formed story, the wittiness adds up to a cheap and predictable joke.

In contrast, standouts like “The Ghost of Sula Turog” and “Twilight of the Gods” show the work of zany and brilliant minds. Even the epilogue's “existential” treatment of a “green whistling herring” offers laugh-inducing profundity: “It nonetheless stands in eternal opposition to the void. So our poor little herring *refutes* infinite emptiness.”

In more ways than one, *Sex, Death, and the End of the World* makes for provocative, hilarious, and, above all, enjoyable reading material.

SCOTT NEUFFER (January 18, 2016)

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