Clarion Review

LGBT

Strano
Eamon Mathews
Trafford
978-1-4120-7930-3
Three Stars (out of Five)

Well written, unsympathetic characters are one of the great literary treats adding the delicious thrill of schadenfreude to the reading experience. Sure, most readers want the protagonist to overcome the dilemmas faced in the story, but not too easily. They want to see just how much pain David will feel as the inevitable death of Giovanni approaches in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*. They want to watch Tom sweat in Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. And nobody would give a damn about Scarlet if Rhett stuck around to see another day. But the challenge is writing such a character that doesn't alienate the reader altogether.

Opening in Ireland in the late '60s, *Strano*, Éamon Mathews's debut novel, is the story of Damien's life, interrupted by the journal entries of the protective and caring abbot, Dom Ferdia. The story follows Damien from catering college, to monastery, and then out into the world?London, Amsterdam, even the island of Bermuda?as he attempts to not only find love, but to square his homosexuality with his sense of self and his Christian faith.

As a narrator, Damien is completely unlikable. But Mathews is quick to bring the reader in on the joke when Damien enrolls in a psychology class. "Gay love […] *is the doomed confrontation of two narcissistic personalities*. Bollix to that, I imploded."

Like all hypocrites, Damian personifies the very concepts he rails against. Due to his narcissism, major events that contributed to the death of thousands—like the Northern Ireland Troubles and the rise of AIDS— are reduced to mere footnotes: an episode of mild irritation at a checkpoint and a transvestite's admonishment that "viruses don't distinguish between rape and fornication" following his introduction to anal sex. Even the portrayals of characters with whom Damian forms relationships are detailed only as far as Damian can find his own wants, needs, and desires fulfilled within them.

Mathews makes a valiant effort to bring the reader so deeply into Damian's mind that

this reduction of the world within which Damian operates feels natural. However, inconsistencies in both voice and chronology make it difficult for readers to lose themselves in the story.

Chronologically, the most glaring disruption occurs when Damian recounts how he was "at twelve…moved out of home to live with Gran." He follows that up with "for seventeen years I was raised in a Catholic, nationalistic ghetto, in the secure and lightsome world of Gran's old-fashioned home." And then at seventeen (not twenty-nine) he begins the process of joining a monastery.

Inconsistencies in the narrator's voice occur early in the narrative. For example, shortly after the sixteen-year-old Damian discovers masturbation, he visits a priest who inquires if the youth has been engaging in self-abuse. "N-n-no, Father, once I found out 'twas sex, I stopped," Damian replies like any nervous sixteen-year-old. And the narrative maintains this teenage voice and perspective until Damian suddenly begins speaking with the vocabulary of a queer studies graduate student. "I had begun to note that my social appetites did not quite fit the gender divided pattern of my peers."

Fortunately, as Damian experiences more of the world, moments such as this grow rarer and the story more engrossing.

Joseph Thompson