



Talk: A Novel in Dialogue

Corey Mesler

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The trick for any book is to get readers so engrossed that they stop noticing the form. Anyone immersed in a truly fine read probably isn't thinking, "this story is told in flashback" or "interesting use of the unreliable narrator." The more unusual the form, the tougher it is to pull off the trick. In this sexy and entertaining first novel, it's evidence of the author's skill that he almost succeeds.

Talk consists entirely of dialogue—except for a couple of solo riffs that are really monologues—leaving the reader's imagination to construct the details of setting and character, using the scant clues provided during conversations.

Mesler, who has published poetry and short fiction in numerous journals, owns a bookstore in Memphis. He centers his debut novel on Jim, a loquacious bookstore owner in his early 40s who puts most of the talk in Talk. Jim has it all—satisfying work, a best buddy he can actually talk to about something other than sports, two great kids, a wife who's beautiful and game for watching hardcore videos with him. So of course, he's compelled to risk it all doing something stupid. Enter the other woman.

Katya is "Ally McBeal cute," but with breasts, and works for Jim's best friend. After a couple of chance meetings and some flirting at the bookstore, Jim shows up unannounced at her door. They admit their mutual attraction, but before they can do anything about it, an attack of guilt-induced nausea sends Jim sprinting for the door.

He conquers his conscience, at least enough to visit Katya without fear of vomiting. Like President Clinton taking refuge in a narrow definition of "sex," he seeks an erotic relationship with her that allows him to be—at least in his own mind—faithful to his marriage. Jim and Katya's meetings are the best part of the book, and among the few scenes that are unambiguously enhanced by the form. Given the limits Jim puts on their physical contact, sexy talk becomes a big part of their fun.

The form doesn't work as well in the rest of the book. Robbed of facial expressions and body language, the characters often seem like little more than sounding boards for Jim's chatter. Without a physical setting to anchor them, the events appear to take place in some otherworldly void.

Despite these shortcomings, the book provides an insightful look at the isolation we try to break with words, and the uncomfortable compromises we make with ourselves. Maybe Mesler's next novel—and readers should hope there is one—will offer his insights in a less distracting form.

KAREN HOLT (July / August 2002)

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