ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

The Double Life of Alfred Buber
David Schmahmann
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Poor Alfred Buber! The homely, chubby child immigrant from Rhodesia worked his way up from practically nothing to the top of a Boston law firm but lives as a visitor in America, in his own home, and in his own skin. He is gifted, however, with an elegant voice that carries us confidently through this account of his obsession. In style and subject, this novel pays homage to *Lolita* and Buber sounds like a cross between that novel's Humbert Humbert and T.S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock—lines from whose love song are mimicked and quoted by a narrator who has the same inclination for self-flagellation.

Buber's tone, however, is all his own. After being told he's being made a partner at Henshaw & Potter, Buber remembers "experiencing the overwhelming sensation that I had almost completed the task of cementing myself like a corpse into a wall. I had done everything I believed I ought to do, had been industrious, careful, diligent, and yet all of it, the gentility, the formal manners, had become stifling…I was not a sterile hermit content to putter about his days, there in a frigid law office, here in my solitary cell." Telling people at his firm that he is going to Paris, he instead goes on a sex tourism escapade in Asia. In the Star of Love Bar, where men are publicly fellated by young girls, he falls in love with Nok. It's a mark of Schmahmann's skill that we remain engaged in scenes that less carefully rendered would be simple accounts of tawdriness. Our willingness to become voyeurs following Buber's misadventures is made possible by Schmahmann's humor, facility with language, compassion for Nok, sympathy for Buber, and repudiation of his behavior. Discovering that Nok is trying to learn English, Buber runs out to buy her a better language book. "Mercy. Buber the educator scurries from the bar on his mission to spread Christianity to those who have recently orally serviced him." As in this scene, Buber's narration shifts frequently and deftly between first and third person. His shifts between past, future, and progressive tenses are almost as seamless, but their occasional bumpiness and the author's habit of mixing metaphors sometimes distract.

After a second trip abroad, during which Buber meets Nok's parents, who live in rural poverty in a hut on stilts, Buber decides to try to bring Nok to the States to live with him in his

palatial home, “a fortress of marble and glass,” outside Boston. As things turn sour at his law firm, and we see the vindictiveness to which he is subjected, we almost root for Buber to achieve this goal. In the last quarter of the novel, people from his past show up who shed new light on the subjective world Buber has painted, and in the end he gets his comeuppance. But the satisfactions of this novel are sentence-by-sentence—the linguistically rich descriptions of Buber’s mental states and (as viewed from there) the less important world outside.

Justin Courter