

## The Fata Morgana Books

**Jonathan Littell**

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*The dry, expository style accentuates the sexual frankness in these elegant novellas and stories.*

Adventurous readers of contemporary European literature may appreciate *The Fata Morgana Books*, by Jonathan Littell, translated from French by award-winning translator Charlotte Mandel. The book combines two potentially challenging features—explicitly sexual content and long-winded prose. Seeing either of these characteristics as positive or negative is a question of taste.

Littell is a Jewish author raised in America and France, now living in Spain. He's best known for his controversial Goncourt Prize-winning novel, *The Kindly Ones*, written from the point of view of a gay Nazi officer. In *The Fata Morgana Books*—named for the small press that first published these works—Littell proves he can go both long and short; *The Kindly Ones* was nearly a thousand pages, but this book contains several short novellas written after that *The Kindly Ones*, as well as a suite of short stories that were written earlier.

The new book dips briefly back into the subject of wartime brutality and sexual violence but focuses more squarely on questions of sex and identity. Littell's protagonists experience constant physical and emotional dissociation, recalling the character Meursault from the Albert Camus novel *The Stranger*. This sense of drift carries through to plot and setting—unnamed men wander through lives bearing recognizable characteristics but confounding our usual expectations.

In "In Quarters," for instance, a man shuttles between his wife and child and a mistress but never feels he belongs anywhere. This notion of life as a constant, puzzling migration reaches its peak in "An Old Story," in which a man jogs through a dark hallway, entering rooms that represent alternative realities, including an orgy with transsexual women and a night of group sex at an all-male bathhouse. In the delightfully judgment-free "Story about Nothing," a man spends his day walking the streets wearing women's lace underwear.

Littell's stories are structurally elegant, but his prose is characterized by flat linearity and convoluted sentence structures. Settings are described in a clinical, banal manner. This aptly reflects his characters' stunted emotional lives but can also be fairly impenetrable, as in "Fait Accompli," a paragraph that dryly extends for ten pages in its exploration of questions of math and logic. *The Fata Morgana Books* is not always an easy read, but it's a frequently thought-provoking one.

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