

The Melancholy Strumpet Master

Zeb Beck

Broadly Reviled Books (Feb 22, 2023)

(239pp)

979-821812669-8

The Melancholy Strumpet Master is an insightful, deliberative novel about a graduate student at an interminable crossroads.

In Zeb Beck's novel *The Melancholy Strumpet Master*, a beleaguered PhD candidate struggles to fight off misanthropy and depression as his candidacy stretches into its eighth year.

Can never quitting be a kind of giving up? Beck's humorous novel examines this question through the case of Gilmore Crowell, a shameful fixture of his university's anthropology PhD program whose refusal to quit his fruitless dissertation requires him to give up any standard one might have for a tolerable life. Working as an unqualified English teacher at a juvenile detention facility, Gil passes the minimum possible threshold for an employee, reading out loud from a textbook to classrooms full of checked-out delinquents.

This pattern repeats itself everywhere: Gil lives in a boardinghouse otherwise populated by seniors with nowhere to go that barely passes for a home. His car should still be booted to the sidewalk under the authority of the city; it barely passes for transportation. His closest friend is Rex, a slimy fellow PhD candidate who barely passes for a friend. Gil's life is barely a life. He pursues the completion of his dissertation to the detriment of everything else, including his ethics: his frustration over a lack of promising sources spurs him to break his most sacred rule, and he begins sleeping with the girls he's studying.

Gil's sphere is populated by characters whose own outlooks represent the possibilities and consequences of giving up. Rex is a highlight—a reptilian wheeler-dealer whose unflinching self-awareness allows him to shrug off failure and move forever forward. Rex's flexibility and Gil's contempt make for some of the most insightful and engaging comic exchanges in the book, the only shame being their rarity. Without Rex's heightened responses to serve as a foil, Gil's communication style drains most interactions of their momentum. He approaches every conversation with witty indifference.

The novel's dialogue glimmers with wit and intelligence, but the monotony of following a character who refuses to change, to absorb criticism, or to alter his understanding in any way is wearying nonetheless, causing interactions to become redundant opportunities for clever one-liners that lack ultimate significance. Gil's misanthropy and hypocritical attitudes toward women make him unlikable and impede investment in his success, though taking pleasure in his downfall is also impossible.

The book's progression is episodic, with many chapters describing events that do not tie into Gil's journey or the novel's core in a meaningful way. Further, Gil's submission to the misery of his circumstances robs scenes of their meaning and comedic potential. Nonetheless, the prose is evocative enough to make Gil's story often pleasant to engage with. The question of how and why one might choose to give up is considered with insight and deliberation, though depressed, intransigent Gil is an imperfect vehicle for these questions who does great damage to the book's momentum.

Displaying intermittent charm, *The Melancholy Strumpet Master* is a woeful novel—the tale of a graduate student who's on a desperate losing streak.

SEB FLATAU (April 25, 2023)

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