

The Misanthropes: The true and accurate account of a fictional history

Tom Dulack

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Dulack's cross-format experiment is an undeniable success of delightful madness.

Acclaimed playwright Tom Dulack blurs the lines between genres, merging novel, play, and screenplay in his book *The Misanthropes*.

Tom Bowman is a middle-aged English professor at a university in 1972 New York. After he cuts a student's hair while discussing Alexander Pope's "The Rape of the Lock," the student threatens to sue. Bowman's English department fails to unequivocally support him, and he decides to give up teaching. He falls in love with Joanne, a former student, abandons his wife, and gets a makeover. Joanne is acting in a production of Molière's *The Misanthrope*, and Bowman finds a new calling writing the script and becoming intricately involved with the play's performances.

Bowman is a memorable character—rebellious, funny, and likable—though some might have a problem with the short shrift paid to his wife's side of things. Dulack's dialogue is convincing and sympathetic as Bowman attempts to explain his discontent:

What happens is that I get more and more sophisticated each year. The more you study, the more you learn, the more you know. Whereas the students are always the same. 18 years old and ignorant. I kept trying to bridge a gap that got increasingly wider every year. Teaching is for young people.

Dulack paints a vivid picture of New York, though there seem to be a few anachronisms throughout the text. One character mentions Steven Spielberg buying expensive clothes, but in 1972, Spielberg's most notable recognition was as the director of the low-budget film *Duel*, which makes it hard to believe he'd be the name-check director of choice for Bowman's rich friend. Another character, urging haste, says "Don't take all day because I wanna watch 'The Equalizer,'" in an apparent reference to the 1985 TV show.

These detract from the sense of realism that Dulack mostly succeeds in creating, but in the grand scheme of the book, they are forgivable. Written in a screenplay style, but with perhaps more detail than that format would normally permit, the story unfolds with the reader's imagination providing the camera lens. Dulack offers a lengthy preface discussing the different aspects of novels, plays, and screenplays, and explaining the use of specific elements of each in his story. He describes *The Misanthropes* as "a screenplay I never intended to be filmed," and though that may seem a less than flattering description, Dulack's experiment is undeniably successful.

Readers may find intellectual interest in the "how" and "why" of Dulack's efforts, but *The Misanthropes* is buoyed not by its method, but by its delightful madness.

PETER DABBENE (June 3, 2014)

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