

Wretchedness

Andrzej Tichý

Nichola Smalley

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Vertiginous and gritty, Andrzej Tichý's novel *Wretchedness* depicts the seamier side of Europe's society.

Cody is a cellist for an avant-garde ensemble, and Tichý's narrative weaves in and out of his drug-infused past. While waiting for two musicians to show up at their meeting place by the canal, Cody interacts with a junkie who asks for money; then his long stream-of-consciousness memories emerge, covering his childhood and teenage years in Malmö, Sweden, with his drugging and drinking friends.

Little happens; the novel takes place in Cody's waiting periods, first for his bandmates and then while he's walking to the train station. His memories are peopled with immigrants, the impoverished, addicts, and his abusive parents; they skip back and forth in time. Cody's mind moves like jazz riffs, and he's preoccupied with two topics: the musician Giacinto Scelsi, and the people whom he knows survive, more than live, on the fringes of society.

Though brief, the novel is uncomfortable and complex to follow. Cody's ruminations and recollections span pages, their language colloquial, conversational, idiosyncratic, and without much punctuation. There's no respite from the disturbing events of Cody's life, and the incessant barrage of neglected, abused, and disadvantaged people and situations suggest that no one should be able to turn away from such people in real life, either. The text indicts a society that routinely ignores such people, or passes them by without a thought. Music is a stabilizing influence through it all.

Wretchedness is a social novel whose descent into hardship is haunting, and whose lead is an example of the hazy line between surviving a lifestyle or falling prey to it.

MONICA CARTER (July / August 2020)

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