

A SKEWED, QUIRKY WORLD HOLDS A DEEPER MEANING FOR OUR OWN

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Nancy Lemann's third novel, "The Fiery Pantheon," looks, at first glance, like a love story. Grace Stewart, 28 and engaged to Monroe Collier, her ideal Southern gentleman, finds herself tempted and distracted by eccentric young Wall Street securities analyst Walter Sullivan, who is lurking around the Virginia hotel where Grace is on vacation with her family. Which man will Grace love? This is the question the novel half-pretends to ask, yet it quickly becomes clear that the love triangle is little more than a pretext for other questions Lemann wants to explore--questions about language, nostalgia, obsession and the powerful, often-blind human attachment to place, history and home.

The world of this novel is strange and unsettling. In a book obsessed with location and dislocation, the ground often shifts beneath the reader's feet. At first, it seems we have found ourselves in some prior time, perhaps the 1920s, in "genteel old Virginia," at a mountain resort where the orchestra plays fox trots, melancholy people lie strewn about in chairs and "you (have) to get dressed up for dinner." Grace and her parents come from upper-class New Orleans and seem as much a part of the ambiance of the hotel as the potted palms and cane chairs. Grace, we learn, wants to "set her star to a course of Decency and Decorum," her mother has "a different pair of gloves for every color in her wardrobe," and her father always has "a dream of honor in his head."

FULL TEXT

THE FIERY PANTHEON

By Nancy Lemann

Scribner, 255 pages, \$22

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It soon becomes clear, though, that the world of this novel is neither historic nor, exactly, contemporary, but is instead a skewed, exaggerated, often-comic universe of Lemann's creation—a place that brings to mind the darkly funny cartoons of Edward Gorey, where manners and mores are stretched and examined until they take on grotesque, telling shapes. References to video cameras and workshops on sexual harassment alert us to the fact that this is no Jazz Age novel; yet such details almost get lost among the fanatically nostalgic preoccupations of the characters, most of whom who are clinging hard to the dying ways of the Old South.

Grace's fiance, Monroe, we soon learn, is a reporter for the New Orleans Times-Picayune. He spends most of his time visiting various ailing relatives; for Grace, he personifies the Old South, "the romance of their native place." Walter Sullivan, by contrast, grew up in the South but lives in New York. "He did not pine for the South and dislike the North. He liked the North. He noticed. He liked. He did not repine. He did not have angst." Grace, not surprisingly, is located somewhere in between the two; she has lived in New York and gone to law school, yet she finds herself, somehow, traveling with her parents from resort to resort, first in Virginia, then in Europe, where the family—plus Walter—take a trip whose route follows the borders of the fallen Roman empire. "She neither lived here nor there. She lived in hotels. . . . She felt that she was sinking into a quagmire of crisis and decay and Southern Living."

Readers looking for complex characters drawn in the realist tradition will be disappointed by "The Fiery Pantheon." Lemann's characters are defined almost entirely by their exaggerated obsessions, which are repeated endlessly with minor variations, in the manner of a jazz improvisation. Mrs. Stewart is obsessed with psychoanalyzing anyone who crosses her path. Grace is obsessed with the Fiery Pantheon—an imaginary place where she puts the men she most admires. "Fallen empires," we read of Walter, "appeared to obsess him." Mr. Stewart is "enamored of something called the Severn Bore. It was some sort of tidal wave."

When this charting of obsession succeeds, it works beautifully, revealing not only the compulsiveness of human behavior, but also the absurd, approximate, slippery nature of language itself; the characters return again and again to the objects of their obsessions but can never quite communicate them to others or pin them down themselves. Lemann often takes clichés and pushes them to their extremes, rendering them both comic and absurd. "Wild horses had to drag her to Los Angeles," we read of Grace. Then, a few sentences later: "When she moved from New Orleans to New York . . . she grabbed on to the bedstead and wild horses were harnessed to her and she held on for dear life while they dragged her away."

Elsewhere, though, the repetition works less well. Words ("world weary," "decorum," "honor," "romance," "debonair," "gaiety") are endlessly repeated without this sort of playful treatment, and the device grows stale, becoming a distracting tic. The novel's attempts at a traditional love plot and denouement are also not wholly convincing, though the slipperiness of "The Fiery Pantheon" leads one to question whether this, too, is perhaps part of the book's playfulness, its ironic parodying of convention. Monroe is never portrayed in a way that allows us to understand why Grace is drawn to him, and the answer to the question of which man Grace will love is clear from the start.

Where the novel shines is in its precise renderings of the pitfalls and lures of tradition; in its vivid, painterly descriptions of place; and in the marvelous moments when it abandons realism completely and enters a stylized,

skewed realm all its own. At one point, the waiters at the Virginia Hotel start to bring Walter two breakfasts every morning and stop him in the hall with sly bits of advice on how to lure the "lady" to his room. At another point, Walter has a surreal encounter with a New York watch repairman, who repeatedly tells him to "please relax in the lounge," though Walter's watch has been lost in the shop for six months and there is no lounge in sight. This is Lemann at her witty best, showing us the quirky mannerisms beneath the manners and leading us through a world that, through its exaggerated gestures, reveals both the charms and dangers of our own.

Illustration

PHOTO; Caption: PHOTO: (Book cover.)

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