
Review: Invasions of Privacy

Reviewed Work(s): Searoad: Chronicles of Klatsand by Ursula K. Le Guin: Mariette in Ecstasy by Ron Hansen: Brotherly Love by Pete Dexter: Lila: An Inquiry into Morals by Robert Pirsig: Hug Dancing by Shelby Hearon: The Goldin Boys by Joseph Epstein: Have You Seen Me? by Elizabeth Graver: Talking It Over by Julian Barnes

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Invasions of Privacy

FICTION, ESPECIALLY MODERN FICTION, licenses a certain amount of prurience. It invites us into the mind of a character or a narrator, and lets us indulge ourselves there rather freely. We are pleasantly exempt from the risks of any real intimacy. Readers are *supposed* to be eavesdroppers and spies, of a certain kind at least. Filmgoers have to confront their own voyeurism at some point, morally, but readers of Lambert Strether or Lily Briscoe or Quentin Compson are not likely to have that problem. Just looking, thanks. In the Nausicaa chapter of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom watches Gertie MacDowell on the beach while we hear by means of internal monologue the cliché-ridden contents of her soul come forth. Bloom watches her pruriently, and has an orgasm. We invade Gertie's privacy too, in a different way, remaining at what seems a safe aesthetic distance, since none of it actually happens—except by means of our looking at words printed on paper. We are supposed to be critically detached, having “participated” in the scene, if at all, only imaginatively and figuratively. No real Gertie MacDowell has been seen in actuality, hence no privacy violated. Still, I think Joyce may be offering a subtle lesson here about the potential for readerly prurience, a lesson usually ignored. Readers like to award him high marks for the relentless intimacy of his narrative, without asking what that intimacy might be for.

Obviously there's an undercurrent of something unsavory, something collusive, in the way modern fiction makes a commodity of what's usually kept private. So many novels cater so lavishly to our desire for intimate access to another. Really, of course, it's only the illusion of such access. But no matter: it creates a dangerous kind of appetite. Those fat books on the best-seller lists pander to it shamelessly. So does Norman Mailer's latest, fattest novel, purportedly an exposé of Eros and Faust at work in the CIA. Anything for the illusion of privacy and intimacy laid bare. There are a good many better novels around. Not that they eschew intimacy or censor the reader's investigative curiosity: plot, suspense, narrative drive would be lost without that. But these books are better partly because they make us conscious of our power to invade privacy, conscious of the very prurience and voyeurism latent in fiction itself.

Consider the way Ursula Le Guin for example broaches the problem in her latest book, a sequence of stories centered in a small

town on the Oregon coast.¹ In “Sleepwalkers” she portrays the character of Ava, a motel chambermaid, from five different subjective points of view. Most of her observers know nothing about Ava. The only one who sees her past her ordinariness and “niceness” is an older woman—Mrs. McAn—who is curious to understand why Ava walks “like a woman on a high wire. One foot directly in front of the other, and never any sudden movements.” Mrs. McAn’s curiosity represents ours, a desire for empathy masking a more primitive desire to probe the interior truth, to *know*. But even when we find out that Ava was driven to kill her husband and now seeks guiltily to hide that justified act, Le Guin reminds us that this too is only a version of Ava’s story—a product of the older woman’s educated liberal white feminist point of view. The whole story emphasizes the often careless and indifferent power of others in fixing one’s identity. Even those who presume to know Ava’s “truth,” like Mrs. McAn and the reader, participate in the process.

The best stories in *Searoad* concern people like Ava and Mrs. McAn, the more isolated and marginal figures of the town, people who are just passing through, or managing a failing business, or hiding from something in the past, holing up emotionally. Most of them are in a sense looking for a good novel to read. The woman who runs the motel in “The Ship Ahoy” likes to keep one unit free so she can doze and daydream there occasionally. She is startled to hear through her thin wall the anguished sobbing of one of her guests—a young man in the throes of suicidal despair. Shocked, she runs outside, unaware that the sobbing expresses her own repressed anguish. Nothing more is explained; Le Guin resists any further invasion of privacy. “True Love” makes a similar point. It’s the wry account of a librarian who knows her books better than anything else, but tries out a summer romance with the new bookseller in town anyway. Her disappointment in him is balanced by a sudden burst of love for the Other Woman in the case—the happiness of having shared something with an otherwise unreachable person.

Le Guin is a scrupulous writer, with a fine sense of the dignity and vulnerability of people—frequently but not exclusively women—whose privacy may all too easily be invaded and abused. Her effort to shape the sequence of stories into something more, a “chronicle” of this coastal village à la Dunnet Landing or Winesburg Ohio, doesn’t quite come off. There are some maps of the place, a wispy-poetical prologue about feminine waves and clouds, and a longish three-generations-of-women narrative, “Hernes,” at the end. Trouble is, Le Guin doesn’t seem to know the Herne family intimately, the way she knows her marginal or itinerant people. So the three generations of Herne women tend to sound alike, to blur into one another, to get lost

¹ SEAROAD: Chronicles of Klatsand, by Ursula K. Le Guin. HarperCollins. \$20.00.

in a welter of information instead of dramatized acts. Still, *Searoad* contains a sequence of ten richly interrelated stories, conceived entirely without benefit of science fiction, and the result is impressive if not up to Sarah Orne Jewett's level.

Ron Hansen's new novel, by contrast, flirts with prurience every step of the way.² It focuses on the beautiful seventeen-year-old Mariette, who has just entered a convent in upstate New York in 1906. Her purity and intensity of faith have an instant erotic effect on the sisters. But the narrative camera has already hovered sensuously in her boudoir at home, while she divests herself of worldly clothing, and it will do so again just as sensuously when she disrobes for a physical, and again when she dons each rough item of convent dress. So too will be recorded Mariette's every shiver and flush, abrasion and wounding, bleeding, seizure, and ecstasy. Hansen works by epiphanic flashes, finely chiseled sentences, moments of lush vignette followed by austere fragments and shards of narrative. Bursts of conversation followed by hours of silence. If he insists that we invade Mariette's privacy, we invade everyone else's as well, at least briefly—prioress, laundress, librarian, milkmaid, extern, gardener. There are more than thirty such characters. The effect is a little uncanny, couched in the present tense as it is. We seem to inhabit this convent of 1906 *now*. It's a remarkable *tour de force*; Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* is all thumbs by comparison.

It emerges that there are two narratives. First, a present tense story of Mariette's entry into religious life, climaxing in a series of miraculous ecstasies and crucifixions. But interspersed with it is a second narrative, looking backward and investigating these suspect "miracles." Although this recollective story is glimpsed only intermittently, it dramatizes Hansen's larger purpose: to test the relation of fiction and history. He makes the former so palpably, powerfully believable and the latter so familiar and sterile in its skepticism. Was Mariette's ecstasy indeed a divine mystery to be celebrated gratefully, or was it a shameful deceit and embarrassment, an episode of manipulation or insanity to be covered up? Improbably enough, Hansen's fiction makes you want to believe in the ecstasy—no mean achievement. But you have to wonder whether his success does not depend too much—as Ingmar Bergman's does in *Cries and Whispers*—on an obsession with the suffering female body. Mightn't we do without the suggestion that Mariette's odious father abused her sexually? Must she be attacked in the night by her convent sisters, stripped and "harried by hands"? Must she pose naked before a mirror, twice, to "esteem" her perfect breasts? If so, perhaps the *tour de force* gets its *force* from prurience after all.

Pete Dexter's force is all male, according to the dust jacket photo on

² MARIETTE IN ECSTASY, by Ron Hansen. HarperCollins. \$20.00.

his new novel.³ The brawny-armed author in T-shirt straddles a chair, staring at us glumly, with three punching bags hanging nearby. The invitation is to a bruising. But like Hemingway, his obvious mentor, Dexter likes to punish his heroes smoothly, systematically, with maximum purity of line—and maximum violence. In one fascinating stretch of the novel *Peter* (the author's younger self, no doubt) goes to the gym day after day to endure a mauling from a skilled fighter who hates him. Dexter spares us no detail of bleeding, battering, maiming, and breaking. In another fascinating stretch *Peter* goes drinking and gambling with a sleaze named Jimmy Measles (one of Dexter's best, thoroughly repugnant, characters) so that *Peter*'s cousin Michael can sleep with Jimmy's wife. Why *Peter* chooses these punishments—and prolongs them—the novel seeks not to explain. There's visceral intimacy aplenty, but almost none emotionally. About himself *Peter* is, in more senses than one, dumb.

Dexter was a tough-guy reporter in Philadelphia, and obviously knows a good deal about its crooked unions, mobster violence, ruling families, and political payoffs. He can put you instantly in the place with the right lingo. But his story is queerly vague about what any of these union organizers and bosses actually do, apart from their steady diet of murder and betrayal. Dexter's Philadelphia is not real like George V. Higgins' Boston or Saul Bellow's Chicago. It serves mainly as a backdrop for testing the male ego: son against father, cousin against cousin, male against female. The misogyny of this novel is particularly virulent, with graphic accounts of fellatio, rear-entry sex, degradation, women used quickly and ignored—or beaten. Not that Dexter's blood brothers could be, realistically, anything but sado-masochistic and latently homosexual. But Dexter seems not to have recognized these tendencies in his own figures. If anything he covertly celebrates them by offering up graphic sexual details for our prurient delectation. In the same spirit he prolongs a scene of killing a racehorse. Gritty realism? Call it rather the pornography of violence. Revealingly enough, the novel has only one funny moment, when a woman annoyed at *Peter*'s male imperviousness yanks a pair of panties over his head. Naturally he doesn't get the message.

Robert Pirsig finds women almost as problematic as Dexter does, but he's wonderfully open about it, and that makes all the difference. His second novel, the long awaited follow-up to *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), is another original mix of quasi-philosophical rumination and traditional narrative.⁴ "Phaedrus" is again our narrator, this time aboard a sailboat going from the Great Lakes through the Erie Canal to the Mohawk, the Hudson, New York and points south. The journey is to be a solo philosophical one, to re-think the great issue of Quality in Modern Life and to finish the

³ BROTHERLY LOVE, by *Pete Dexter*. Random House. \$22.00.

⁴ LILA: An Inquiry into Morals, by *Robert Pirsig*. Bantam. \$22.50.

endlessly sprawling book he's been writing about it. But he picks up Lila, a feral, hard-used woman of ambiguous emotions and needs. She swerves his focus. He wants to know who she really is. Does she have Quality? Is there a place for her in his ideal system, or on his real boat? If not, then isn't something wrong with one or both of them? It's quite a promising *donné*, a little like Crusoe finding Friday's footprint. Alas, Pirsig carries it out very unevenly.

His strength in 1974 was in the careful, physical immediacy of his meditations. You felt the moral issues at work when he talked about meeting the mind that made the machine as you worked on it, and grew to know it. You could savor his empirical way of knowing, his love of intelligent design, the justice of each moral inference so lucidly derived. By contrast the father-son motorcycle narrative wasn't very original or convincing. In *Lila* it's the other way around: the narrative has wonderful solidity, but Phaedrus keeps interrupting it with tedious and overblown lectures. At times the situation verges on Shavian comedy, with the practical Lila puncturing Phaedrus' verbal balloons. More often, however, Lila is too frightened and insecure to do that. And Phaedrus is too preoccupied mentally to notice her. There's a tormentingly long passage of this sort, cutting back and forth between Lila lost in the streets of New York after her purse has been stolen and she can't remember where the sailboat is docked, and Phaedrus safely ensconced in an expensive hotel room, totally absorbed in his role as author-lecturer, telling us about the wisdom of American Indians (and everything else). It's not at all clear whether Pirsig intended to prolong this contrast so ironically. Evidently, like many a lecturer, he just lost track of the time. To his great credit, however, Pirsig makes Lila a dignified, complex, convincingly troubled individual. For all his abstract talk, Phaedrus can still be impressive in his capacity to analyze everything originally and honestly—a Pirsig trademark—and that now includes women.

It is of course politically correct these days to assume that women will write better about themselves than men. But having waded through Marge Piercy's uninspired *He, She, It* and Leslie Marmon Silko's overwritten *Almanac of the Dead*, I can't recommend the politically correct. Try instead Shelby Hearon's latest novel, her twelfth, a good example of how interestingly a woman can portray herself.⁵ Cheerful and sharp-tongued, it's the first-person account of a wife who at thirty-nine decides to end her marriage. Not so easy to do when you're married to a sobersides Presbyterian minister in Waco, Texas. But Cile is no Updikean procrastinator. She's been having a bold affair with Drew, an old high school pal of hers, and she wants her freedom despite the church, despite the difficulty of her two teenagers, despite Waco. Hearon's plot is a bit frantic and

⁵ HUG DANCING, by Shelby Hearon. Alfred A. Knopf. \$20.00.

crowded, but that reflects something of Cile's susceptibility to the push and pull of everyone around her. Then too, there's a comic animism in Cile's world: street names, juke box tunes, multiple choice questions, T-shirt slogans, malapropisms, violent weather, lurid ties, flameburgers—everything takes on a quirky life of its own. She is exceptionally good at conveying the ungainly charm of well-adjusted American teenagers—their quick sarcasm, bursts of energy and idealism, childish wails, casual vulgarity, and moments of miraculous decorum. Underneath all the determined breeziness of Cile's narrative voice, you sense darker things—her tendency to panic as well as a shrewd selfishness. But she disallows any more invasion of privacy than that.

If Hearon's comic style reminds you of Ellen Gilchrist and Anne Tyler, Joseph Epstein's makes you think of Bernard Malamud.⁶ Comedy and sadness are nearly inseparable in Epstein's stories. The protagonist is almost always Jewish, usually male, and he's drawn into an intimacy with, or bedeviled by, an alter ego—someone who uses and insults him, someone he might have been. There's the fabulously inept Ira Pinsker who embarrasses and, in a novel, ridicules the narrator, his only friend ("No Pulitzer for Pinsker"). There's the suicidal Louis Schlifkin who cadges a loan and won't repay it, criticizing the narrator's successful business, refusing all help—a Jewish *Bartleby* ("Schlifkin on My Books"). There's the amoral student who flatters and betrays his teacher ("Marshall Wexler's Brilliant Career") and the celebrated novelist whom the narrator knows as a misanthropic bastard ("Another Rare Visit with Noah Danzig").

But there are other, less Malamudian, counterparts as well: homely little Paula Melnick who has a lifelong admiration for a mobster and his exotic family; businessman Sheldon Kaplan who wants to marry a divorced Frenchwoman because he's so taken with her eight-year-old son; and the Polish aristocrat Peter Kinski, a bachelor professor who finds himself in love with an ordinary Jewish woman, mother of two. Epstein is better when he's not trying to be funny. He should avoid flippant titles like "Kaplan's Big Deal" and "Low Anxiety." What's convincing and moving in his stories grows out of his intimate knowledge of Chicago's North Side over the last forty years. He knows exactly where these people live, how they sound, what ambitions they have for their children, and how they furnish their rumpus rooms. Epstein's most moving story, "The Goldin Boys," is about the fall from grace of twin brothers who seem blessed with spectacular athletic talent, good looks and charm, exceptional brains, and family money. It's told from the point of view of an envious high school friend, who doesn't really know why both boys failed so miserably in

⁶ THE GOLDIN BOYS, by *Joseph Epstein*. W. W. Norton. \$19.95.

life. But Epstein can make the bare recital of such family stories speak volumes. That's impressive in a first book of fiction from a writer so settled, after eight books of essays, in another genre.

Short stories—especially Epstein's kind—are less likely than novels to raise questions about prurient spying. They're too short. Elizabeth Graver's stories, however, take more invasive risks.⁷ Most of them hold us within a single consciousness—an old woman dying in a hospital, a teenager upset by his mother's sexuality, a small boy whose father dies. Graver's deliberate principle seems to be, select a point of view different from your own. Impel the reader to imagine being a young woman who is crippled and forced to take a menial job in a zoo ("Around the World"). Or imagine being a thirteen-year-old boy trying to get to sleep in the same tent with an attractive woman, his cousin, who is absorbed in her own problems ("Yellow Tent"). The good thing about Graver's work is not so much that she fully answers her own challenges (although she does, consistently) but rather that she is able to convey an understanding so gentle and full. At the end of "The Experimental Forest," for example, she has her unhappy fourteen-year-old, whose sexual advances have just been (nicely) rejected, follow the woodsman around at a safe distance and remove all the research labels he's just carefully painted on each tree. But we understand what she wanted, and it wasn't sex: "I wanted to tell him that all I needed was a little something, a tiny bit of change to poke a pinhole through my summer so that I could see through it—a small hole so that some air could reach through the heat and clear things out." Graver's stories are full of such eloquent moments as this, and it's only her first book.

Julian Barnes's latest novel addresses the problem of intimacy head on and wittily.⁸ He is probably the most brilliant inventor of fictional experiments currently writing novels in English, and *Talking It Over* is far and away the best book I have chosen to review. The story is told from three points of view (mainly), and it's about a domestic triangle: Stuart is a dullish young banker, Gillian is the somewhat withdrawn and very attractive woman whom Stuart marries, and Oliver is the neurotic sham-sophisticate friend who falls in love with Gillian. But they tell their stories in a series of *spoken*—rather than internal—monologues, as if to an invisible interviewer. They give verbal performances, then, meant for public consumption and so of course laden with rationalization, self-justification, and half-truth. Barnes's neat epigraph is a Russian saying: "He lies like an eyewitness." Eventually it dawns on you that the person each character comes to confide in so privately is, simply, you.

Other characters address the reader too, occasionally, like Gillian's mother, Madame Wyatt, and a sweet old landlady who thinks Oliver

⁷ HAVE YOU SEEN ME?, by Elizabeth Graver. University of Pittsburgh Press. \$17.95.

⁸ TALKING IT OVER, by Julian Barnes. Alfred A. Knopf. \$21.00.

“has the AIDS.” Then there’s an unknown woman who forces her way into the text and is peeved at us:

What did you say? You want my credentials. YOU want MY credentials? Look, if anyone’s got to provide documentation it should be you. What have *you* done to qualify for *my* opinions? What’s your authority, incidentally? . . . Look, as far as I’m concerned it’s a cream bun to a twopenny fuck whether or not you believe me. I’m giving you an opinion, not an autobiography . . .

Have you ever had your authority as a reader challenged so boldly as that? Come to think of it, what do readers *ever* do to earn their rights to voyeurism and eavesdropping? The above speaker turns out to be Val, an old flame whose lowdown opinions about everybody threaten to ruin *their* authority. So Stuart and Oliver simply gag her to regain control of the book.

As usual with Barnes, what begins as a clever entertainment grows progressively deeper and better. The characters evolve in complexity and pathos. Oliver who tried always to be the dazzling *blagueur* and wit falls into a painfully real love. The staid Stuart is fairly crazed with grief and split by contradictions—he learns a sardonic wit (of all things). Gillian emerges from her customary watchful reticence and, in a sublime imaginative act at the end, resolves the impasse created by the two men. The suspense is perfect. No formula will enable you to guess who wins whom or how it will happen. Few novels seem as authentic and lifelike as this one. My quick summaries fail, of course, to convey the fluidity and idiosyncrasy of Barnes’s speakers. You must listen to them yourself: let them invade your privacy.