

## Angus Woodward

### ON JACQUES SERVIN

Jacques Servin's book is not for citizens of the actual, those who see things for what they are. This collection of experimental short stories instead addresses those who see both meaning and absurdity in the fervent riot of western civilization. In an age when realist fiction dominates, whether it is magic realism, lyrical realism, or so-called minimalism, it is difficult to find stories written for "alert citizens of the abstract" (14). The fact that these radical experiments entertain as much as they signify is especially gratifying.

There are seventy-three stories in the collection, most under two pages, a statistic which makes the labels "sudden fiction" or "short short stories" tempting, although the stories are so connotative and dense, so full of ideas, that those tags seem inadequate. The titles alone are significantly profound and silly: "How the Fish Merchant Turned Out Okay," "Sadness-causing Piece," "How I Discovered Many Things and Became Well-Known for Helping the Infirm in Moments of Explosion," and "Only the Wicked Are Marching (A Difficult Hour)," which is used twice. In addition, there is the introduction, itself somewhat fictional, and an "Hortatory Index." The stories are by turns ridiculous, surreal, and dark. "Belles-turning-punk" from Des Moines take a group trip to the beach. As they run toward the water, their feet slip in the sand. Unable to make forward progress, they dig a deep pit with their feet ("Beach Trench: A Fable of Parents"). At a big city convention center, marketing types have beautiful experiences admiring various products ("Sundry Improvement Our Mark"). A person wearing blue eye shadow gets in trouble with New Hampshire authorities for habitually "sticking my legs into baby carriages and fending off the requisite mothers with great swats of my eyebrows" ("Shady I Blush But the Mystery Stands").

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*Aviary Slag* by Jacques Servin. FC2, 1996.

Reading Servin is a unique experience, because the stories achieve a dizzy combination of hilarity and significance. The result is sometimes vertigo—after swinging so wildly between deep seriousness and high comedy, the mind is reeling, intoxicated. The author’s introduction (“Luminary Notice (Optional): Concerning the Vital Stutter of Crows”—perhaps best called a pseudo-introduction), maintains that the collection follows a strict outline, the first section (“Torchings of Tethers, Potshots at Arteries: A Pickler’s Guide to the Highway”), ostensibly addressing the use of marijuana and its mind-freeing capabilities. The second section (“The Rote Less Ravelled: Being Less Than a Sum”) concerns other mind-freeing agents, and the author explains that, “These first two parts outline the whole of this world.” Section three (“Romancing the Smelt: Self-Colonization, Mischief, and the West”) “deals with issues of self and its mysteries,” and the last (“He-Man Moments: The Matchless Shafts of Eventfulness”) contains “more potshots at arteries.” It is possible to see evidence of this plan as one reads the collection, if one is willing to perform mental gymnastics—perhaps interpreting “Beach Trench” as a comment on the compromise between rebellion and conformity, and perhaps supposing that marijuana has had or could have an influence on one’s degree of defiance, or that the story has less to do with drug use than with “LSD, cults, Plato well grasped, and all other scourges of America’s youth’s parent’s mind-blowingly dopey instructions to youth, often mistaken for youth itself,” which is what marijuana “stands for,” according to the introduction. But on the other hand, perhaps investing in such an interpretation makes one as ridiculous as the protagonist of “A Lot of Us Were Wearing Head-Dresses,” for the author also claims in the introduction that the book is in fact an aviary, as evidenced by the “two-inch layer of inky green matter covering the ground,” and that by compiling a few choice pieces one “could form an excellent prom-advice pamphlet.”

The stories comment on many other subjects—sexuality, capitalism, computers, bureaucracy, fascism—and parody many forms, including contemporary realism, diary, drama, travel literature and propaganda. Every sentence seems to echo or distort some particular mode of discourse, from the rhetoric of commercials to the argot of criticism. It would be easy to read the collection as the purest comedy, to get caught

up in the absurdity of “Drs. Guigui Priff-Mews, Lambertine Shrovemanshipt, Panical Beef, and Horseblende Puriah,” who are residents of Pallet of Awe, Missouri. It is also tempting to devote solemn study to Servin’s highly suggestive sentences: “Free beer entails the release of unquestionably false myths of origin into the slick, crime-happy skies full of each other hovering, staid, in those skies, dressed in khaki and wine, absorbing said myths with a puppy-dog look for a long time, intent on the curvature of one another’s earth, which one can perceive just barely, in the distance, with the use of seventeenth-century instruments of navigation and perception.” Perhaps the author would like us to laugh while thinking, to delight in the juxtaposition of Budweiser and violence and astrolabes, and also consider the relationship among the three.