

Thomas E. Kennedy

THE SPEED OF FRUSTRATION

Take some Vonnegut, some Nathaniel West, some Warren Miller, some William Gibson, stir in some sci fi along with the lead articles in a dozen issues of the bizarre tabloid culture, add generous dollops of environmental paranoia, combine with a base of traditional academic honest-professor against evil-administration theme, though twisted about a hundred seventy degrees, and this, and so much more, will give you an idea of the kind of brew Lance Olsen is serving up in his latest bash of a novel, *BURNT*.

BURNT begins on page nine. About halfway down the page, you begin to smile. Halfway down page ten, you begin to chuckle. Then you start to guffaw. The process continues, escalating for several pages until suddenly, at some point, you are no longer quite certain why you are laughing—in fact, you are laughing at something kind of horrible—a professor being bitten about the heart by a rabid squirrel and screaming “the high pitched deep-souled scream of disillusionment.” But still it is funny, you can’t stop laughing.

Then you know you are in Lance Olsen’s world again, and the rules are simple, as the Cheshire Cat epigraph clues you: everyone here is mad, you are, too, or you wouldn’t be here.

You read on. And what you find in this crazy world are people and things discomfittingly like those we see everyday and yet . . .

You meet writers who eat McQuik Healthburgers, sit up nights to watch entertaining cult advertisements on television, write experimental novels called *Tear Off Your Face*. You meet “students skateboarding up the sidewalks . . . and down the sidewalks . . . undeclared in their majors and despondent in their souls because they didn’t get into their first choice schools, or their second-choice ones, or for that matter their third-, fourth-, or fifth. They’d stripped to their wildly beflowered

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Hawaiian shorts and taken to terrifying unsuspecting pedestrians by zooming up behind them and rocketing past at the speed of frustration.”

By now you are laughing almost constantly but simultaneously marvelling at the fine prose, the rhythms, the finely drawn portraits of madness which, if it is not rampant this year, will be next. *BURNT* is a novel that immerses itself in the madness of our time and follows its trajectory into the future, taking the reader along on a confrontation course whose objective can only be liberation.

The novel takes place in a university town in Kentucky and plays with a pretty familiar and conventional theme: the protagonist, Murph Porter, is an honest and ethical professor in whose class is the corrupt and ignorant football hero, McTraz (a name which seems to suggest an amalgam of practically everything that has gone wrong in our society, from McDonalds to McVeigh to the unending proliferation of trazh, the whole trazh mentality of our times). With McTraz on the team, the university is likely to win the great championship. However McTraz is failing Professor Murph Porter's Popular Culture class—so badly, on the basis of such an abhorrent performance, that Murph can do nothing but fail him. Most of the rest of the university, of course, are on Murph's case with threats and bribes to let McTraz slide through so the school can win the big game.

A well-used plot. But: what follows is a big surprise as Murph and his beautiful Valkyrie wife Tanya embark on an adventure approximating a postmodern Dick Powell and Myrna Loy in *The Thin Man*. Murph and Tanya decide they will not merely resist this tide of evil threatening to destroy their moral fiber; they will take arms against this sea of troubles and oppose it.

What follows is a journey through an environmental sci-fi comic nightmare. One of the discomfitting things about it is that you are not always quite certain what is pure outlandish fiction and what is something picked up out of the daily press or by observation of one's fellow Americans. The academic committee debating reducing the size of the diplomas, for example? Fact or fiction? And the violent student protest that ensues because the size of their diplomas has been reduced again? The bumper stickers: BEAM ME UP JESUS. And GOD, GUNS & GUTS MADE AMERICA GREAT. Fiction?

“There was a time,” Tanya says, “when the tabloids could maintain a hefty lead over reality . . . Now they’re falling behind. Reality is getting the best of them . . . What do we do when our imaginations can’t keep up with the world? Do we stop imagining?”

This is in response to the fact that a friend of Murph’s in the biology department has shown him a human brain that he is keeping alive in a tank, a project which is well funded by the Defense Department. Forty years ago the film *Donovan’s Brain* was scarcely taken as anything more than pure science fiction. Today, in the age of human genome research and successful cloning of mammals, who knows? A conference at MIT not five years ago, run by the former head of the psychiatric department of Harvard Medical School, took up the theme of alien abduction. How many Americans literally believe that there is a government plot to conceal the evidence that has been collected proving the existence of UFOs, the bodies of aliens recovered from UFO crashes in the desert? Is there any truth to it? Who really knows?

In Lance Olsen’s fictional Kentucky university town, where all the houses are of pink brick and all the cheerleaders dress in pink hot pants, the squirrels are turning rabid from environmental damage, and people are falling ill with a new syndrome called EI, Environmental Illness disease, which of course is not recognized for reimbursement by health insurance. To avoid the industrially polluted water, everyone drinks bottled water which itself turns out to be contaminated, one of the sources of EI!

And the university is conspiring to make Murph Porter give a false passing grade to a football player. What comes of all this would be giving away the whips and turns and dips of the roller coaster ride.

Suffice it to say that Lance Olsen writes like an angel, albeit perhaps a fallen one, or perhaps one with electronic eyes, or both, all three. *BURNT* is a very dark comedy moving at the speed of frustration, a mad resonating cosmic laugh at the madness of what we have done, what we continue to do, what we choose to do day after day to our spaceship earth.

BURNT is the latest but one of Olsen’s six books of fiction. The first, *Alive from Earth* appeared in 1990; the more recent include *My Dates with Franz*; *Scherzi, I Believe*; *Tonguing the Zeitgeist*; and *Time Famine*. Anyone who has not yet discovered these feasts of laughter, language and intelligence have a great treat awaiting them.