

Zed Ander

SIDE EFFECTS

When I finished Leslie Edgerton's *Monday's Meal*, I reached for the vacuum.

Proposition: Every word in every sentence in a short story contributes to the creation of a world.

Proposition: A collection of short stories makes a universe.
(These are metaphors.)

Proposition: What happens after reading is an index of what it was like to be in that world, that universe.

I vacuumed the floor, the rugs. I went after spiderwebs, especially the tacky floor-level filaments of summer's young spiders who have yet to attain the high corners. I put in a load of clothes.

Chaos was leaking from Edgerton's pages. I mopped the floor. I vacuumed the underneath side of chairs.

A man convinces another man he can make a lot of money by helping chop off the hand of a tycoon; they'll hold the severed hand for ransom. They flub it ("I Shoulda Seen a Credit Arranger").

After a man stuffs his wife's body in a trash bin, he goes to a bar. He grabs the bartender's hair demanding she tell him how much three feet of brown hair weighs, how much a soul weighs ("The Bad Part of Town").

When a man's wife tells him it's over, he boils some water to kill the dandelions. When she takes a nap after telling him she's got a date besides, he boils some water and pours it on her ("The Last Fan").

A woman with no food and several children holds an axe. She has a plan—

At this point, as a reader in this universe, I want some distance, and not merely the distance provided by a scene shift (referred to in workshops, I believe, as a "jump cut"), the notation of the passage of three days, and two

Leslie H. Edgerton. *Monday's Meal: Stories*.
University of North Texas Press, 230 pages, \$14.95

Ron Block. *The Dirty Shame Hotel: And Other Stories*
New Rivers Press, 160 pages, \$14.95

John Taylor. *Mysteries of the Body and the Mind*.
Story Line Press, 128 pages, \$12.95

deputy sheriffs finally happening on the grizzly consequences.

“Gritty Realism” in New Orleans and environs might describe Edgerton’s stories. “Hard Times,” the story of the woman with the axe, has all the elements of tragedy, but—

John Kerrigan, last spring’s winner of the Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism, said he was “attracted to revenge tragedy because of its fusion of brute violence and high artifice”; Edgerton’s “Hard Times” has not much to do with revenge but a lot to do with brute violence, and this alone leads me as a reader to want some high artifice when the woman is holding her axe. There is no high artifice in Edgerton’s stories, so chaos leaks off the page.

By high artifice I mean something about style. Give me, says my readerly self, give me here some densely packed, building periodic sentence that blooms with this horror and frames it; give me some high style that contains that all-too-believable thing (but why doesn’t the woman just cook up one of those damn hunting dogs that, starving, too, threaten any child who steps out the door?). I don’t mean diction; I don’t need roseate instead of red. I mean syntax sophisticated enough to contain one horrible thing after the next. Since this is not forthcoming, what might have been tragic is merely, though horribly, sad. Moreover, Edgerton’s commitment to low style (characters say “would of” when “would’ve” would do [Thank you, Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy {with his aversion to apostrophes}, other writers who perpetrate this grotesquerie which college students have to be taught out of]) deprives most of his characters of something resembling competent literacy, and also, as if by coincidence, of anything like honest self-reflection.

A woman joins AA. She has a lapse because of her cornet, but there’s a promise she’ll make the next meeting (“My Idea of a Nice Thing”).

In “The Jazz Player,” a man plays jazz trumpet. It seems someone tried to rape his wife, so he shot at the man but hit his daughter. Two years pass. Miles Davis dies. On the same day, the man’s now ex-wife shows up to tell him she’s getting remarried and what should she do with their daughter’s things? (There are dead children in these stories: stillborn, miscarried, starved, shot). The man, for the first time in two years, considers his daughter. He takes his trumpet, he goes to her grave. There, he plays his trumpet and at last he hits Miles Davis’s high C, the high C that splits the lip, that in the last two years has gone mushy, at last—

and here, this glorious scene gets mired in a run-on sentence and veritably

spins its wheels: “tries to cry tries to cry tries to cry but he can’t can’t can’t can’t.”

So the chaos isn’t just the material, but the style, too, that won’t give me artifice. Horrible things happen in *The Decameron*, but Boccaccio gives you the artifice that contains them, that keeps you from mopping the floor.

As for population, “disenfranchised” seems appropriate, and more so in Edgerton’s stories than in those of Ron Block’s (Block’s cover blurb notwithstanding). Edgerton’s population is more diverse than any other in these three collections, diverse enough, and hints of that diversity tossed in at such disparate points, that I wasn’t sure who was what at the end, white or black, and then I wasn’t sure how much it mattered, since if race is unstable and untrackable, poverty is constant.

The jazz player plays in the Mockingbird Cafe, which readers visit several times in these stories, although not until late in the collection is the Mockingbird called a “black bar” by a white guy who comes in with a date. The white guy, Tennessee Law, gets in the face of a black escaped con from Detroit (“The Mockingbird Cafe”).

Is the jazz player African-American? Or is he a white guy doing jazz like Bill Evans? What about those two and their plan to chop off the tycoon’s hand? Or the homophobe in the last story who’s on the verge of coming out? (“Voodoo Love”) Or the woman with the axe in “Hard Times”? The boy who tells what the sheriff didn’t do in “Phone Call”?

This is very interesting. Once the Mockingbird is identified as a “black bar,” I have to go back and reconsider these characters. The hints about race are few. Might there be hints then in a character’s self-concept? Problem: Few of Edgerton’s characters are granted enough introspection to have a self-concept.

An African-American reader may have stronger opinions about this thing that I find interesting. Some African-Americans may wish Edgerton hadn’t wandered into their stories, but what’s the alternative? Segregated fiction? Haven’t we had enough of Segregated Fiction?

There are movies in these pages, and narrative voice-overs won’t do them any favors. I’m thinking, though, of the Coen brothers, though they’d need to go somewhere else for surrealistic effects, to Ron Block, for instance.

After Ron Block, I said “Gorgeous, beautiful!” and went to kiss my sweetie on his head. Why? Because of love. It’s not easy love, or expected, or sappy or cute. A few surrealist moments allow things to transform themselves into

something like beauty—a disorder of filings, as if touched by a magnet (we might call this effect a fineness of shape, or an excellence of craft). People can do things in this universe, and sometimes things happen like grace. We're in Nebraska, Iowa, the Dakotas.

A marching band whose director aspires to greatness fumbles its maneuvers, loses direction, is led by this director highstepping into pastures; the band plays better than ever before, with only the cows and the quail to hear it ("The Gothenburg Marching Band").

The title story centers on a character, Dr. Orrin, a proponent of Lawsonomy (after Alfred Lawson, a pioneer aviationist with whom I am familiar, whose biography stands on my shelf [sofar unread]), whose philosophy (if we may be so generous) predicted the evolution of the human species to new forms called Alti-Man [as in altitude] and Ground-Man.) Many characters live in the Dirty Shame Hotel, all of different situations, all transformed by Dr. Orrin's spin on the laws of Lawsonomy, all brought to a tornado apotheosis—and I think, as a reader, "He knows what he's doing, this Ron Block knows what he's doing!" But I ignore the publisher's press release, because after all, the proof is in the prose.

And this prose sings. Not everyone is kind, however. A guy is infected, physically infected, reading a library book. He visits the last reader of the book, an old woman who, with this same infection dispatched three husbands, not intentionally, however ("Bookworm"). Two brothers have it in for a local country western singer ("The Stanley Andrews Story"). A demon appears in some family's closet and one of the daughters attacks a local priest ("Demon in the Closet"). Some woman thinks honesty is always best, and where does that get her? Fired, a terror to first graders ("A Bad Case of Honesty"). A nun appears in a farmer's driveway ("Saint Anthony and the Fish").

One of the things I do, first faced with a collection of stories, is check: How many first person narratives are here? How many third person narrators do I actually get?

Proposition: Not all first persons are habitable first persons.

Proposition: Female readers get habituated early on to trans-gendered identification.

Question: Does it work the other way?

Because I can't answer this question, because I don't know the answer to this question, I am suspicious, but still, persuadable.

Edgerton has a story in a female first person. I don't like it, since the female

concerned is a smug self-righteous racist well-heeled New Orleans Princess ("Princess"). Ron Block doesn't attempt a female first-person story in this collection; I do not consider this a flaw. There are female main characters, credible, complex, and likeable, in the very first story even ("Zadoc Xenophon Cannot View Bright New Moons. Can Vera Montague?") A title taken from an exercise in a self-guided instruction manual for typing), but then, later, you get the crazy woman in "Bonehead" who dresses in clown garb, works as a clown, does strange things, has obviously recently been "de-institutionalized" and who could be my sister. This is frightening.

In Block's final story, "Land of the Midnight Blondes," he writes in a fictional first-person sheer enough to admit his own proper initials, R.A.B. While this first person is not exactly habitable (identification is a messy affair anyway), it is a voice I hear with the same pleasure as, after a leisurely dinner with friends, I pour myself and friends another glass and lean back as one of same friends tells a thoughtful and beautiful story, one in which self-deprecation, wit and intelligence compensate for the shaggy dog quality of the narrative proper. By the end of this collection, I learned to anticipate this writerly mode from this narrator character.

After reading John Taylor, I picked up my address book. I took note then of how many names I no longer had faces for; I scanned a decade or so of memory, and noted the faces whose names had gone missing. What happened to these people?

Taylor, whose style is as well crafted as Block's, uses it to different ends in a collection that purports to be stories, though it is more a series of vignettes all told by a single first person narrator, who might be, in actuality, John Taylor. Suppose then that Taylor's stories are lightly autobiographical; they disturb beyond the powers of memoir to disturb because of an edge articulated with questions: why do people do the things they do? what complex of often not laudable motivations drives a person to this or that action? what happened to those people we knew once upon a time, some of whom were involved in things we're not exactly proud of having done?

Taylor's narrator remembers being a child, remembers a great many things about being a child in Des Moines. But his narrator is an adult in France, and though he remembers, he's never nostalgic.

Proposition: If not all "I"s are habitable, neither do all "I"s invite habitation (i.e., identification). Some "I"s just want your ear. Some "I"s make you You.

In a recent *New Republic* (August 10, 1998), Czeslaw Milosz's "Pity" sits in a bordered paragraph: "could I start anew" (I quote mid-sentence, mid-paragraph) "every poem of mine would have been a biography or a portrait of a particular person, or, in fact, a lament over his or her destiny." Much of what John Taylor gives in his collection is the material of such a practice, though there is less of lament than meditation, and less of destiny than the little bit you learn about a person in youthful or passing acquaintance. The mysterious mind harbors odd memories and dreams, and leads from one to the next by associations of images rather than by logical progression. The mysterious body holds memories in its parts, in the eyebrows, in the spots on a hand, makes memories surface at the touch of an object, at the sensation of thirst.

This "You" you become as a reader of John Taylor is as meditative as he, as capable of introspective curiosity, as able to cogitate about a plan (I'll start a food stand in the Gare du Nord), and as able to imagine as soon as such a plan is conceived the long years that end in a rusting demise ("The Food Stand"). Among the strategies Taylor uses to assist your transformation into the lively but thoughtful intelligence is the rhetorical question—which, once it moves beyond Edgerton's Princess's "You know?"—can very powerfully recruit a reader into subletting a fictional space: "Why is it that I have to follow myself along such trains of thought, before the world can seem, simply—the steam rising from the cup of black coffee—miraculous?" (39) "Why, so fearful of pain in calmer moments, so afraid of the suffering that one day will come, do I imagine myself dying only thus—by my own hand, brutally?" (40).

Other such questions appear to bring an event, through memory, into significance, to pose to the narrator's response to an event the simple and always question Why?

I might know something about that! That's my readerly self speaking, my recruited "You" in virtual conversation with Taylor's narrator. Pour me a coffee. Let's talk about it. Perhaps because of the restraint in the tone, the pace of the prose, the sense of calm, "You" thinks Taylor might even be interested in what "You" have to say.

As in "I knew a person like that!" "You" responds with associations, too, not a cool logical progression. The friend from high school who over-estimated his powers to attract women ("Al"). The two aged sisters who lived down the street and never returned balls that fell in their yard ("The O'Connell Sisters"). The crabby elementary school teacher ("A Daydream"), the small

family upstairs and the irritated couple below them, and the small interventions that neighbors can make to restore apartment building peace (“Belle Maman”). The young loves (“Charlene,” “Childhood Sweetheart”). What-ever happened to all of them? What was the destiny of each one?

Taylor’s narrator mostly doesn’t know what happened to them, or what destiny handed out to them. He gives that sense of the un-finished, almost in such a way as to give as well a “how” to think about it, a way to feel how true it is, a sentence here and there for speaking the vague desire of that bewilderment, the vague regret about your own part in the problems of names and faces.

“Blacky’s Story” tells the life of the childhood dachshund, though the narrator’s not sure what happened to Blacky either, having been told, along with his siblings, by parents who had to know better, that at last Blacky went to a farm—believable enough, in Iowa. Our neighbor’s dog, too, “went to a farm.” Maybe he actually did; maybe Blacky actually did, too. But looking back as an adult, maybe you suspect that parents are masters of euphemism, and maybe you remember all the people and dogs whom you’ve remembered enough to have forgotten them.

Maybe Taylor, living in France, has had a stronger dose of *nausée* and *ennui* than home continent Americans who can often go on and on *ad infinitum* about their own little stuff without a trace of existential discomfort. Self-disgust can be salutary, and Taylor’s version is instructive; sometimes, it can be paralyzing, and there’s a hint of that, when Taylor’s narrator confesses, “Our living-room couch, how well I know it” (5). Sometimes self-disgust can smell up a room like a rotting cucumber; then, some action is required to move the air about. Taylor’s weak point in terms of narrative is a minimum of such actions in a maximum of thinking about it. If he pursues the “why” of things so ardently, and the “how” of thinking about them, he is less adept in this collection at pursuing the “what” of what to do next.

For the “what” of keeping on, keeping on, my own recourse is to go to Fargo with Ron Block, back to “The Land of the Midnight Blondes.” Sit with him through a film class, go to a bar, a party, notice students mimicking your unconscious gestures, walk home on a clear night over a frozen pond. There, crisp and clear as the night and the pond, find this person who shows you how to keep moving.

Stylistically, in my opinion, gold stars go to Block and Taylor. For surreal effect, Block is a category in himself. For diversity of population, provocative

racial confusion, the violence of poverty and general underside of human existence, see Edgerton.

Alas—Edgerton's book, in its physicality, is the least attractive: a larger typeface than Block's or Taylor's books makes for a narrower margin that has just a whiff of stinginess about it. Block's collection is printed handsomely enough not to invite derogation, and the cover collage, like *Iowa*, makes me smile, because of the unlikely timidity of some long-horned cattle among the roses. Taylor's pages are beautifully designed, and the whole has a certain elegance, though the cover, in even the easy humidity of September, curls like a caterpillar in defense mode.

The collection I want to read (probably, it should be a novel): Edgerton's raw material filtered through Taylor's introspection in Block's sentences printed in Taylor's page with the solidity of Block's cover. Readers are so greedy; three writers in one and two presses.