

RUSSELL SCOTT VALENTINO

EDITOR'S NOTE

There's a definition of the modern novel somewhere—I think it's in Bakhtin but don't quote me—that says it relies on a kind of lifting the carpet on people's private lives. The examination of all the stuff swept under there, according to someone else somewhere—sorry, I've left all my reference sources at the office—allows us to see our own lives anew, to refresh what has become automatic, and, as a result, superficial. If someone comes to clean my couch every day and one day doesn't come but I think he does, it's as good as if he does. That's the automatic in practice. It can make you sick with all those germs it leaves behind.

“Experimental” works have long played on this insight as an artistic device, whether it's called defamiliarization, or estrangement, or slapping the bourgeoisie in the face. These moments of artistic dissonance, breakage, anti-conventionality, this “violence done to language,” as Roman Jakobson once defined poetry—these are supposed to shake us up, make us see the world again, experience life anew. It has never been quite clear to me how much strangeness is necessary to make this kind of thing happen. Sometimes it doesn't seem like it takes much at all. I mean, just one dissonant note in an otherwise consonant piece of music can open entirely new vistas, at least if you've grown used to the consonance. Nor do you need to cubicize or rayonize someone else's family members for them to show you your own with new eyes.

Family might not be the best example, I realize, maybe because they're often so invisible to start with. They're so familiar. You go to the state fair together, for instance, like the people on our cover. You ride the rides, eat on a stick just about everything it's possible to eat on a stick, and just about the only people you don't really see are the ones you're with, your partners or parents or siblings or kids. What is there to look at after all? You know them through and through. No, mostly you look at other people, other people's families. How else could you look like the people in those pictures? How else could they look like the people in those pictures?

But in your memory, very quickly, they're not clear at all, even if you thought you knew them through and through. Is that because you didn't look at them carefully enough, I wonder? Maybe no one was screaming at

you from a river or the dark interior of a car, save me. Or the last uncle had nothing more to say. Maybe you didn't have a teacher, or a guide like Virgil or a dying surfer, or a dad like Marco Polo, or an ideal like the Virgin Mary, or some Greek hero or heroine. Or a really good sandwich maker.

There's an aspect of the familiar routinely, I'll say automatically, neglected by the experimental, an acute sensation that art seldom conveys well. I think of it as what one of Richard Russo's characters refers to as "learning how intense the pleasure of the familiar can be, how welcome and reassuring the old, safe, comforting places of the world and the self." There, I managed to actually quote something. We offer some of that here, too. If not on a stick, something to relish at least.