

Insulting the National Vanity

Thomas E. Kennedy

HOW DELIGHTFULLY TIMELY, following the recent Republican backslide, to find a collection of short fiction more concerned with reality than realism, with insulting national vanity than flattering it, with offering the reader dreams and visions rather than snapshots of the ever-worsening blue collar quotidian. For this is what Lance Olsen and Wordcraft of Oregon deliver in the recent micropress collection *Scherzi, I Believe*.

Lance Olsen is a fiction writer and critic with six books to his credit, including two novels—the large press *Live From Earth* (1991) and the small press *Tonguing the Zeitgeist* (1994), both finely crafted. The former is full of warmth, belly laughs and blithe defiance of the laws of nature, the latter a kind of MTV vision of the cyberplosion of the imagination (not surprising that, wearing his critical mantle, Olsen has written the first full-length study of the pope of cyberpunk, William Gibson).

In *Scherzi, I Believe*, we get the full range of Olsen's craft and decidedly unsullen art, a kind of Whitman sampler of fictions, each selection different, but all filled with humor, dazzle, and a reality that realism seldom achieves. The influences are catholic—Cheever cum Weaver cum Crews, Coover, Barthelme, Borges, Robley Wilson, a hint of Stephen King, more than a little twentieth century philosophy, all seasoned by pure Lance Olsen—with a cast of characters that includes everyone from miners to teachers to toxicologists to Hieronymous Bosch to a flatulent St. Augustine, all queuing to jab a thumb in the ribs of the American police-state-neighbor mentality.

The things happening in this universe could fill a catalogue of postmodern amazements. Where else might you find a teacher who marries one of his students after they both become frightened by the Western philosophy he teaches her? “Faulty language,” he says, “may be all that binds us. Every decoding may be another encoding. But Angie's long bobbed ash blond

Scherzi, I Believe by Lance Olsen, 1994. Wordcraft of Oregon, Speculative Writers Series #9, P. O. Box 3235, LaGrande, Oregon 97850; ISBN 1-877655-11-2, 130 pp, paper, illus., \$9.95.

hair and hazel eyes make perfect sense to me.” Where else do you find “merchurochrome-colored butterflies,” Nietzsche on his birthday hiding in his attic while Richard Wagner boffs his sister, a town being decimated by tiny monkeys no one will admit exists, a woman obsessed with dreams of wrestling Samuel Beckett, and the last of a Frenchburg, Kentucky family of strip-miners driven from their home by the pressures of feeding all the ghosts who haunt it (a story first found in this magazine then reprinted in *Best Stories of the South*)? The book is illustrated by assemblage artist Andi Olsen whose techno-Bosch collages would put a scissor in the ear of any fiddling postmodernist.

One can't help but speculate over what might happen if Senator Jesse Helms were strapped to a chair with his eyes propped open before *Scherzi* and a blaring injection of Sousa administered everytime something surreal happens.

The wonder is that it took a micropress to publish this book. On the other hand, as beer and book lovers are learning, micropresses and microbreweries are putting out some of the best stuff in the land these days!

In any event, here is a collection to water a parched place with laughter, delight, and that rarest of commodities as we approach the third millenium: intelligence.