

Who reads Paul Auster?

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Auster's new book, *Invisible*, plays to rarefied appetites

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Paul Auster's fifteenth novel may leave those who haven't read his previous fourteen feeling oddly unqualified, for *Invisible* ideally demands a certain kind of reader: someone literary and intellectual; someone mesmerized by puzzles and Möbius strips; someone with an interest in all things Lacanian, a soupçon of Francophilia and a receptivity to High Postmodernism. Even if you don't have these requirements, the novel offers delicate rewards, but appreciating them

needs a patient willingness to inhabit what one character terms the land of If, a slippery world of contingency, of endless unanswerables, of missing and, yes, invisible authors of words and deeds.

We first meet the novel's protagonist, Adam Walker, as a twenty-year-old student at Columbia University in the tumultuous spring of 1967, just before the Summer of Love. He is an aspiring poet, but what matters more than what he is, is what he does: like most characters in *Invisible*, he authors. Even his memory of his dead seven-year-old brother centres on a heartbreaking note little Andy had penned.

Adam describes himself as a know-nothing boy, but he possesses an uncommonly mature knowledge of fine wines, medieval Provençal poetry and carnal pleasures. Auster presents specks of historical context—the war in Vietnam, the draft, growing urban unrest—but telescopically. We are mainly down in the potent muck of Adam's narcissism, sexual fervour and his compulsion to write, in all senses of the word, his life.

It is soon suggested that much of the first three of the book's four parts form Adam's memoir within the novel, in a typically twice-removed narrative scheme familiar to Auster's readers. (The precise conceit that delivers the memoir's text to us, which I will not spoil, hinges on another author/reader, Adam's college acquaintance, Jim Freeman.) Also familiar are the menacing expectancy, smeared memories and empirical bafflement that almost immediately surround Adam. When he describes meeting his nemesis, a Franco-Swiss international studies professor at Columbia named Rudolf Born, and Born's mysteriously quiet special friend Margot Jouffroy, at a party, he can barely remember where or why they were there.

"I have no memory of why I was there. Someone must have asked me to go along, but who that person was has long since evaporated from my mind. I can't even recall where the party was held—uptown, downtown, in an apartment or loft—nor my reason for accepting the invitation in the first place."

Such cloudiness drifts into many of the scenes Adam recalls, and into the act of writing, too, finally turning his prose into what Jim calls encrypted, Morse-code jottings. Adam's memoir never comes across quite like that on the page; Auster deftly creates an illusion of aphasia in a way that never makes us feel unpleasantly confused. But more often than not, when the fogs of language and memory clear, what emerges are stereotypes. And when they open their mouths, more question marks pour out.

Margot is presented as a type, a sensitive Parisian seductress dressed in a black turtleneck sweater and black boots, who sits on a radiator at the party, without stirring a muscle, staring into space as if her central mission in life is to look bored. She wants to be a painter but takes few real risks. She seems less a figure of the Rive Gauche than a bohemian caricature from a comedy sketch, though less entertaining. Adam finds her deeply attractive, but more as a simulacrum of beauty, as if the style and sophistication of her appearance embodied some feminine ideal of the age. Our suspicions that Auster is playing with his readers mirrors Adams own mistrust of initial observations. He feels sexually attracted to Margot, but he is not sure what to think of her, nor are we of her, him, or just about anything in the novel. This isnt necessarily a bad thing, but it requires forbearance.

While Margot comes across as dreary, Born is more fun. He is also a type, but a colourful one, a classic Continental villain with shades of Iago, Svengali and Dr No, with murky connections to secret military intelligence, espionage, or dirty work of some kind or another. He is a political scientist who hides a switchblade in his breast pocket: the perfect scoundrel for the late 1960s.

Wealthy, cultured and hysterically condescending, Born takes an interest in earnest Adams well-being, or so he says; yet he regards him with a cold eye and an even chillier heart. When he learns Adams name, he says to Margot, in front of his subject: A good, solid, American name. So strong, so bland, so dependable. It is the name, Born says, of a gunslinger in a cowboy film, or of a kindhearted surgeon in a soap opera tragically in love with two women at the same time (a prophetic remark). But nothing in America is solid, Adam somberly responds, adumbrating a bit too loudly, another signature Auster theme. When Adam, who is Jewish, explains that the family surname was actually simplified from Walshinsky at Ellis Island, Born exclaims, with characteristic merriment: What a country . . . Illiterate officials robbing a man of his identity with a simple stroke of the pen. Writing words is everything. Here Austers debt to the ideas of Jacques Lacan, especially to the notion of language as beyond the control of the self, seems almost too limpid. It is Borns wit that feels more sly and natural.

If Born first strikes Adam as a brittle, mocking jester and not someone to be taken seriously, that impression, like many in *Invisible*, does not last long. Born offers a surprised Adam, an undergraduate with no publishing or management experience, financial backing to start a literary magazine. It sounds too good to be true to Adam, but he puts together the prospectus Born says he requires, if only as a formality. During a strained dinner meant to celebrate the new venture, Born asks Adam in front of Margot if he would like to hold her naked body in his arms. When pressed, Adam, who doesnt want to lose the magazine job by offending Born, finally admits, yes, he would. Its a set-up. When Born goes on a trip to France, Adam and Margot sleep together.

The sex and there is lots of it in *Invisible* is gleefully detailed. At times Auster might as well have staged his sex scenes on Dr Lacans couch, where it might better comport with the pleasure of taking part in a wordless animal dialogue that was conducted in a language of looking and touching, of biting, tasting and stroking. These examples of not so subtly imposed concepts on characters bodies grow tiresome.

On his return to America, Born quickly learns that he has been betrayed and announces his engagement to another, older Frenchwoman; Margot leaves for France. Born bears Adam no ill will, but thanks him for showing me the light of truth, a designation close to meaninglessness in this world. It is shortly after this that an act of brutal violence by Born, involving that switchblade, severs his and Adams not-quite-friendship and sets in motion more scandalous if not more evil proceedings. The rest of the novel, which skips between 1967 and 2007, follows Jim Freeman as he grapples with the moral dilemmas raised by Adams memoir manuscript, as well as the shocking events involving Adams beautiful sister, Gwyn.

Invisible undoubtedly plays to rarefied readerly appetites, yet Austers painless, if at times overwritten, prose style, and the conventionally artistic, middle-class characters, go down easily. One could not spoil the ending because there isnt one. Differentiation and development of character are of less interest to the author than the idea of authorship and thematic

forces. Original imagery and a fresh, world-discovering sense of exposition are pushed aside by self-conscious riffs on literary typecasting. When the characters within a clever fiction within a fiction in Paris pull out a Gauloise or wear a little hat that resembles a beret, as happens about midway through the novel, one must suspect the author is either careless or teasing his readers. There is a third possibility: the author may be trying to tease but is not getting away with it. Since Auster used the detective story genre to fashion one of the true achievements in postmodern fiction in the mid-1980s in his brilliant New York Trilogy, he should be given some benefit of the doubt.

All in all, *Invisible* is an intriguing but lugubrious work. More actual rather than theorized farce, more of Borns wit, and less Lacan might have leavened things nicely. The novel astonishes when its author suddenly captures characters pitiful loneliness in their struggles to commend their stories to others. The tales pendulous swings across a forty-year gap do allow for absorbing meditations on ageing and loss rarely encountered outside poetry. When *Invisible* works best, we find ourselves feeling empathy for souls from whom we have frankly come to expect less, and Auster artfully whittles question marks into deadly little daggers of insight.

Paul Auster

INVISIBLE

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