

KEN KALFUS'S TERRORIST ATTACK ON THE ABSURD METAPHYSICS OF 9/11 GRIEF

Ken Kalfus. *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*. Ecco/HarperCollins, 2006.

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This is a first. Kalfus has come upon an interesting synthesis between fabulism and realism, peculiarly suited to literary presentation of the historical turning point we're currently in. This is avant-gardism not overly impressed by its stand, not particularly enamored of the hows and whys of narrative (comparisons of Kalfus's work with Kundera, Calvino, and Borges are difficult to sustain even for a moment, because in those instances the fictions are more loosely attached to reality, and in any case Kalfus deserves his own classification for the new type of fiction he is attempting). This is pretty much the first book of the post-9/11 era to attempt and execute a new technique reconciling persons with impersonality. Kalfus succeeds in again making the novel new, confronting a reality that demands novelty.

On the one hand, the American novelist today must squarely face the question: What to do with the whole apparatus of domestic realism that has dominated the fiction of the last thirty-plus years, attracting so much of the best talent? Can it be put to good new use? Must its entire scaffolding be abandoned? Must one worry about throwing the baby out with the bath water, or is it just stagnant dreary sludge with nothing but toxic qualities? On the other hand, the novelist must decide to what degree the importation of European fabulation and its derivative forms must undergo a change to match the thickly descriptive texture of American fiction (this latter quality can't be departed from too strongly, if the work is to retain its American character).

We live in a new reality. Many of the sacred assumptions of liberal bourgeois life have been chucked overboard, and there is no such thing as the old middle-class which was regnant in the first fifty years after the end of the Second World War. The guarantees of the constitution and bill of rights have assumed a fictional quality, and omnipresently true is the Orwellian nightmare of words changing meaning, ideologies turning into their opposites, and enemies of ever-shifting and ever-transformational capacities living amongst our midst and assuming the incarnation of pure evil. Frank Kermode wrote, in *The Sense of an Ending*, of fictions (of apocalypse, crisis, turning points, decadence and regeneration, endings really) becoming destructive myths (which can eat us alive), when their fictional qualities

become unmoored from base fact, when the restricted potential of mere fictions becomes all-consuming myth (another word for ideology). We are in such a time, and the fiction writer must take risks in returning the mythological to the fictional status. Kalfus does exactly that – or rather, he takes a necessary step in this direction, even if we can understand possibilities for a future fiction that would take greater liberties with the materials of myth than Kalfus at this point feels assured enough to undertake.

Cross-breeding of genres and styles has often been accused of descending to triviality; Kalfus escapes like Houdini from his self-imposed strait-jackets of convention over and over. The novel begins with a seductive (to those who still care for such entertainments) reprise of an upper-middle-class Manhattan household in the process of breaking up; Joyce and Marshall Harriman, with their two kids Victor and Viola, are in the throes of a contentious divorce proceeding, which will decide the usual payoffs, when Marshall gets caught on an upper floor of the first World Trade Center building. He barely makes his escape, but not before watching the head of an older man, Lloyd, he's trying to save, blown off, and witnessing numerous people bursting on the pavement as they jump off the towers. Meanwhile, Joyce, at her own office, doesn't know Marshall's fate. At this point, the novel has already put into play several contemporary realist conventions, all of which will be subverted.

There is no therapy to be offered to the reader, via the protagonists' cathartic soul-cleansing. There is not even the beginnings of therapy, because there is no grief *per se*. Marshall is in the mode of the great stoic heroes of Hemingway and Greene, refusing to make a fuss of the trauma he's experienced. Still, the attractiveness of the novel is that we don't know at this point (and probably don't until the very last few pages) if subversion is going on, and to what extent, and with what degree of deliberation. (This doubt, until the very conclusion, and perhaps past it, is part of the great charm of the book; it invites compulsive readability, with Kalfus apparently in complete control of the extent to which he wants us to feel sympathy for Joyce or Marshall or any of the other characters.)

The drama of the modern dysfunctional family in all its banal ups and downs is played for all it's worth, but not as an end in itself (which is where too often commercially successful literary fiction seems to stop); it becomes the perfect device to explore the individual's incomprehension of history. Just as one doesn't ever quite know why one falls in and out of (mad, passionate) love with someone, so one doesn't quite understand why nations and races choose to express love or hate at particular turning points; or rather, this too is one of our delusions in keeping ourselves sane (we pretend

that we understand far less than we really do), and Kalfus punctures this delusion in many conceivable ways.

Soon the novel turns into something we never expected it to be. One rarely finds straight passages of history (even more rarely contemporaneous history) in recent American novels (unlike, say, Margaret Walker's brilliant use of the tactic in *Jubilee*, following of course from the paradigmatic use of it in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*), but Kalfus is smart enough to include this forgotten convention, and then to exploit it to fascinating new uses. We wonder at first if Kalfus is simplistic enough to have bought into the propagandistic version of the "events of 9/11" as other fiction writers (prominently Ian McEwan in *Saturday*) seem to have done. Yet at some point (and we're not quite sure when) Kalfus's journalistic/essayistic injections of the official version of 9/11, the anthrax attacks, and the leadups to the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and their conduct assume a definite glow of unreality.

If Kalfus were only making the point that there is a penumbra of fictionality surrounding official versions of global events (that is, events so large that the individual strains to grasp the various connections unifying the actual occurrences), then it wouldn't be something innovative. Yet Kalfus achieves distinction by exploiting the juxtaposition of the flat, journalistic tone of the current affairs inserts (precisely as naïve receivers accept the established version) with the accomplished domestic realist novelist's seductive tone (he must constantly tease us with the potential of banal domesticities to explode into transcendent revelations, without, as we know from the experience of reading many, many such novels, this explosion ever quite occurring). Kalfus's fabulation consists in retaining both tones, incorporating them wholesale in the precise container of his narrative, and then letting the mingling of the different registers of language do their own work of self-revelation.

There is a sense in which the reader feels like a privileged observer of larger meanings that are just barely escaping the protagonists, a common response to some of the greater novels. One guesses this was all along Kalfus's mature intention, as he sought to reward the patient reader (the kind not willing to go along with imposing one or another genre or style on this very fluid narrative).

Of course, there is one final trick (which won't be given away here), without which the novel would have remained anchored in only the vaguely experimental. But the concluding few pages force a reinterpretation of all the preceding events, even as the reader is compelled to forgive Kalfus the sheer trickiness of his maneuver. Because it succeeds, we accept it. Here too, he seems to say, I, the novelist, have shown you the kind of mirror (even if a

twisting, distorting one) you had long forgotten was possible to show you in these days when everyone wants to claim prestige for the very acts and delusions which used to be fodder for purging in days not long past.

The nature of this reflection is lucid and luminous. It suggests many corridors and closets that might be revealed without fear, if only our novelists would have more courage. It expresses not the vaunted compassion for or identification with characters-just-like-us that the publishing industry has lately constructed as the sine qua non of fiction, but a deliberate complicity in the fine art of fabrication and mythology, lies by which we live. What if novelists were to expose these dangerous (even deathly) lies by daring to outdo the spinners? We have often been told that the absurdity of contemporary events makes fictional exposition of their absurdity impossible; Kalfus shows one way in which this too is a lie by which we live.