The Fan Man Short Guide

The Fan Man by William Kotzwinkle

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Characters

William Kotzwinkle's creation of Horse Badorties will stand as one of the more significant achievements of twentieth-century American literature.

Drawing on the tradition of the genial eccentric of British country life, and combining this with the outlandish frontier/back-country humor of early, rural America, Kotzwinkle has developed a character who is a refreshingly original incarnation of the spirit of the hippie ethic of the late 1960s. He is a man about thirty, clearly well-educated at some time in the obscure past and essentially well-meaning, who has evolved a highly personal, antic approach to the world as a defense against assaults on his sensibility. Both numbed and energized by years of experimental activity, he is like other characters in American literature who would "prefer not to." His resistance to submission is quite determined, but never bitter or cynical. He maintains an openness to experience that recalls Whitman, and a clarity of understanding that parallels Emerson's philosophical tranquility — "whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist." He has a base in the fundamental precepts of American culture, but he has been shaped by the circumstances of his own time, and is a distinct product of his age.

The continuing collapse of social institutions in the 1960s elevated solipsism to an art form, and Badorties is a man who is exceptionally self-absorbed. Consequently, his primary place of refuge is his own mind. His narrative unfolds as a kind of autoanalysis, marked by constant introspection and a doubting of motive that leads to rapid shifts in mood and focus. Discarding the detritus of middle class American life, he is compelled to seek other means of establishing and maintaining identity. His method consists of inverted axioms from Eastern religious mysticism mixed with unusual personal rituals like the repetition of his "dorky" mantra, or the purgation of the inner-demon known as "Uncle Sulky." His interest in the intricate, often absurd details of the acquisition and consumption of mind-altering vegetative substances is an attempt to impose meaning on a void, while other apparently ludicrous activities (compulsive purchasing of worthless objects like a school bus, hot-dog stand umbrella or propeller) are a part of a strategy of accumulation based on the precept that instinctive action will be justified by some eventual revelation which will explain everything.

At the conclusion of the book, Badorties's plans for a concert have actually been carried out, although he is not present at the event itself. When last seen, he has returned to the country of his origin, Van Courtlandt Park at the northern tip of the Bronx ("picking up vital energies from the earth of my childhood") where he sits, protected by the huge umbrella he has been lugging around for days, surrounded by a satchel of worthless objects, the things of his life. He is apparently out of touch with everything, but he sees himself as "covered," and "waiting for the monsoon." This is a picture of self-sufficiency, total disengagement and a kind of serenity, and it reflects the author's ambiguous, tender attitude toward the central and sole character of the book — a mixture of rue, astonishment, and delight.

Social Concerns

The era known as "the sixties," covering the time span from the emergence of the "Beat Generation" to the conclusion of the debacle in Vietnam, is already being mythologized and demonized as a special period in American history. Its depiction in literature and film, however, has been largely inadequate, often a vehicle for manipulators and hustlers or the setting for shallow, cliche-ridden moralizing. The books which will define and crystalize that particular era's unique perceptual consciousness probably still have not been written, but there is one book which superbly captures the ethos of the urban, hippie/drop-out subculture of the late 1960s. Written with the intense, total involvement of an insider and the clear perspective of a sympathetic but wary observer The Fan Man is an authentic recreation of an important, often misunderstood aspect of American life.

The Lower East Side of Manhattan, somewhat optimistically (and euphemistically) re-christened the "East Village" by boosters and hucksters in the mid-1960s, has always been a seething, polyglot neighborhood, home to many Jewish immigrants in the latenineteenth century, then Ukrainians and Poles, and most recently to Hispanic families and beatnik/bohemian young people from every race and style. Its dilapidated, decaying tenements, ingenious shops, and storefront clubs and hang-outs made it an intense, daunting, and exciting place to be, a one-time mecca for middle Americans choosing a new way of living.

Low rents, lowered economic expectations, and elevated artistic inclinations were its primary attractions, and for Horse Badorties, an aging narco-bohemian and the protagonist of The Fan Man, it held the promise of a spiritual home and a supportive community of fellow citizens of the "Woodstock Nation."

Badorties has been lured to its streets by a very idiosyncratic vision of a revolutionary New World; but in actuality, he has settled into the substratum of the counter-culture. Life on the Lower East Side, as Kotzwinkle captures it, is immensely colorful, replete with visual and sonic stimuli, wildly unpredictable and comfortingly nonjudgmental. Because so many members of this amorphous community are identifiable by some personal version of weirdness, there is a strong sense of live-and-let-live tolerance. The bizarre is commonplace, the outrageous unthinkable. People share a frontier mentality, complete with the sudden rush of excitement that danger and drugs provide. Kotzwinkle, in the tradition of the local colorist, evokes the atmosphere of this "scene" with precise, carefully chosen details and an offhand tone that makes everything seem casually familiar.

Badorties's adventures on his homeground, and in the wider city beyond, are a part of a life-pattern which regards the social realm as a great laboratory for experiments that test the phenomena of the universe in conjunction with the ongoing discovery of the self. He is following a process of growth through exploration — albeit from an extremely eccentric point of departure — in which the vast city is like a strange and wonderful new continent. The streets of the city overlap a map of the self —an evolving, internal cartography — and each incident or event contributes a new set of coordinates.

Badorties's apparent difficulty with the normal circumstances of survival work to project well-known landmarks like Central Park and the Museum of Natural History into an unsettling and wondrous perspective, renewing the power of the familiar. New York is both ancient and fresh in Kotzwinkle's eyes; the artist, like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, recreating the reality of his race and time yet again.

Techniques

The technical invention of The Fan Man is at the heart of Kotzwinkle's narrative. Since Badorties is nearly always the source of action, Kotzwinkle has him recount the events of his life in a perpetual conversational present tense. His language is a street-hip vernacular laced with literary references, and he is essentially telling his story while it is happening. Accordingly, Kotzwinkle alternates between an immediate first-person voice ("I am alone in my pad, man . . .") and a kind of present progressive tense ("Sitting in chair, staring at wall . . .") which develops a quality of immediacy. For short interludes, the narrative focus leaves Badorties and there are brief descriptions of action often written in a nasty parody of Puerto Rican English and short dialogues set like a script without stage direction or the player's name. But most of the book is located in Badorties's mind, and the organization of his thoughts is usually a kind of quick free association of words and ideas; immediate responses to random stimuli frequently keyed by the sound of similar words (dragon leads to dragging) which illustrates the often manic nature of his thought process.

The use of the word "man," a form of punctuation and emphasis here, as well as the familiar beatnik multipurpose salutation, provides a series of coordinates to anchor the flow. This constant repetition — sometimes within a clause — can be somewhat irritating, but like reading subtitles at a foreign film, it rapidly becomes an almost unconscious part of the act of understanding, and it also operates effectively to create an air of confidentiality between the speaker and the audience.

In addition, the rhythmic variations help to convey the patterns of Badorties's restless expressions of energy amidst an overall state of torpor.

Appropriately, to present the life of a character who himself is learned in a nontraditional way, Kotzwinkle is unrestrained in his use of imaginative typographic arrangements. Blank spaces, capitalization, and frequent use of italics indicate who is speaking and in what tones. Badorties's obsession with sound as chant or drone to induce a trancelike state of being is echoed by Kotzwinkle's use of chains of adjectives without definite articles and by comic strip sound effects created by onomatopoeic word choices in serial order. In a kind of excess typical of Badorties's exuberance, the twenty-first chapter, "It's Dorky-Day Once Again!" intermingles long strings of the word "dorky" throughout the chapter, surrounding and engulfing everything else done and said. Kotzwinkle's attempts to duplicate in print the wide range of sound that is such an important part of Badorties's world is an American expression of the great language experiment of Joyce's Ulysses.

Themes

The Fan Man is an almost agonizingly sweet lament for a man caught between an unconventional, highly personal vision of existence and the casual horror of urban life in contemporary America. Because Horse Badorties is involved in such seemingly trivial activity (waking up; ordering food; organizing a musical performance) his encounters and disruptions are cast in a highly comic form, but it is his soul and sanity which are actually at stake in each instance of confusion and perplexity. He is a mutant form of the classic "outsider," the man apart, who does not quite fit into the flow of any society. Even in his own milieu, the demi-bohemia of New York's counter-culture, he is never really able to communicate clearly, although his amiability and deceptive acuity tend to mask this. Badorties's adventures are a strong argument for the preservation of a unique, individual consciousness against all the pressures to conform, and the book itself is a celebration of the fascinating diversity of life in America, the pluralism that is crucial to this country's strength and resiliency.

Literary Precedents

The style and sensibility of The Fan Man invite comparison with some of the comic masterpieces of Western literary tradition, particularly the spirit of bawdy humor found in Rabelais, the Cervantic gravity of Don Quixote (another rueful figure), and most of all, the gentle, whimsical characters of Lawrence Sterne's Tristram Shandy (1759-1767). The form of Kotzwinkle's comic invention, though, is distinctly American, evolving from Jack Kerouac's "open" method of composition, and taking its language and shape from the work of Beat poets like Ed Sanders, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Gregory Corso. And somewhere in the background, the spirit of the nineteenthcentury Russian writers who created characters who refused to accede to the demands of the world exists as well.

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