The Midnight Examiner Short Guide

The Midnight Examiner by William Kotzwinkle

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Characters

Howard Halliday edits and writes semipornographic stories, creates narratives to suit people's writing proclivities, knocks off snappy captions for every type of photograph and illustration, and generally maintains morale in the office. He thinks of the office as an "arcade of dreams" and sees his job as "turning out fairy tales for the modern reader."

Among Halliday's coworkers is Hattie Flyer who has begun to describe everything in intriguing headlines ("I Love The Coffee Cart Boy. How Can I Let Him Know?") and whose specialty is seizing on some deep yearning in a reader's heart and manipulating it. Her pieces rely on a basic formula that includes an initial titillation, a rebuff, rekindled hope, an inhibiting factor, and a final positive resolution. Kotzwinkle sees her, and the others, as slightly debased versions of the artist who is caught in commercial circumstances but still believes in the value of his or her work. For Hattie, writing has become the most profound expression of her identity, suggesting the selfconsuming, self-absorbing nature of artistic experience. Each member of the staff shares her obsessive nature. Various disappointments have brought them to this substitute for their original goals, but it seems a happy substitute and one which they cannot afford to relinquish.

The publisher Nathan Feingold cultivates eccentricities designed to keep the staff (and the world) off balance but compensates with enough organizational ability to coordinate all of the separate publications. Amber Adams, the beauty editor, can propel the most useless product into the realm of some conceivable need. Celia Lyndhurst, the editor of Real Detective, is sensitive, beautiful, and stylish, but writes and speaks in the received cliches of the detective novel. Forrest Crumpacker is a failed WASP; his instinctive ability with clothes, speech, and manner is constantly undercut by his weary awareness of the sham and shallowness of this kind of posturing. He is a would-be aesthete who distrusts his heritage but does not know how to overcome it. Each of these people has some essential flaw—or gift—that renders them unfit for a conventional career. But since they are living in the New York of the late 1980s, in a flux of change and instability, they seem about as well-suited to their existence as anyone else.

Kotzwinkle's dual subject is the city itself and the unreal carnival of debauchery, ugliness, and entropy it has become.

While both the characters and the magazine appear distinctly unusual by the standards of realistic fiction (and by most people's lives), within the mad New York of Kotzwinkle's mind, their activities seem quite understandable, even logical and appropriate.

Social Concerns/Themes

Howard Halliday, a self-described "good-natured zany," is a writer and editor for a sensational tabloid magazine empire whose flagship publication the weekly MidnightExamineris William Kotzwinkle's conception of the ultimate National Inquirer. He is a man approaching middle age, who, in the company of other ex-literature students and would-be writers, has found a job that permits him to use his gifts with language, his humanities background, and his active imagination.

Their situation is not one of diminished expectations, but is instead a sideways movement in their lives. It has opened an entirely new field of experience for people who are a bit too sensitive and reflective to live comfortably amidst the inexplicable chaos of the modern megalopolis. In The Fan Man (1974; see separate entry), the city of New York was a fantastic source of wonder and excitement, the city's dangers and frustrations balanced by its amazing energy, variety, and possibility. At the end of the 1980s, the city has become a vicious carnival of unpredictable characters and bizarre situations.

Halliday and his coworkers have learned to appreciate the unpredictable and sometimes wonderful mutations around them, to choose a course of avoidance and deflection rather than active resistance, and to anticipate the most prominent threats. They gather the essence of their experiences into a group of publications (among them are Macho Man, Ladies Own Monthly, Knockers, Teen Idol, and Prophecy) that Kotzwinkle suggests speaks directly to the psyche of the city's inhabitants.

At the core of everything Halliday and the staff write is a latent sexuality aimed at enabling readers to develop fantasies that allow them to momentarily escape from their concerns, frustrations, and limitations. Kotzwinkle knows that this kind of journalism is not constrained by the truth and that nothing he can invent will ever surpass the stories that appear in supermarket tabloids every week. But he has developed a comic context which places these stories somewhere between an appalling self-deception verging on lunacy and awe of the human mind's ability to conceive of so much outlandish, preposterous, and irrational nonsense.

The staff writers themselves embody this same contradiction, knowing (with ironic self-amusement) what they are doing and then entering into the spirit of the game anyway. At the heart of this portrayal is a respect for this kind of journalism, an absence of condescension, and a delight in the imaginative talent of those who must satisfy an audience ravenous for the same bizarre material in ever-new forms.

Techniques

Kotzwinkle presents the routine at the magazine with wit and invention, and describes the city streets with an expressionistic poetry of urban madness that draws on the same fabulist imagination that informs the stories that the characters write. The "plot" almost seems like an inconvenience. Kotzwinkle has centered the narrative on a pornographic film actress/pre-classic French language poet, Mitzi Mouse (nee Mouskewitz), who semi-accidentally shoots a mobster who controls a porn empire when he refuses to let her work on poetry on her coffee break. Fleeing from Tony Baloney's (nee Bulloni) henchmen (whom Mitzi calls "The Hounds of Mordacity"), the staff enters the frenzied world they have previously been reporting on from a safe distance, shifting from spectators to participants in a phantasmagoric pageant of monstrously comic effects. The structure of this section of the narrative is a double chase, with the writers and mobsters seemingly in constant motion, their mutual pursuit evoking the rhythms of the city. Their strategies combine guile (a voodoo sorcerer/psychiatrist) and force (the publisher's blowgun and fishing rod; the mobster's muscle and firearms) as they stumble toward some nebulous resolution. The journalists form a kind of commando band, enacting versions of the imaginative fantasies they write about. Through this chase sequence, Kotzwinkle constructs the narration as a surrealistic quest carried through an escalating series of obstacles and challenges. The journalist-commandos ride in a mythic vehicle (a dilapidated taxi) driven by a representative of the newest clan of citizen, an unflappable Egyptian who is resourceful in handling the constant street obstacles. When Halliday asks the driver if he wonders "why one of your passengers has a fishhook in his lip," Uqal Mussa replies, "I have learn is good explanation for everything." This motto—along with Hattie Flyer's observation to Halliday, "It can never work between us, but that's no reason not to try"—exemplifies the unabashed attitude that seems necessary for survival in a city where, as Halliday describes it: At my feet were the jagged nerve endings of the city, thick strands of cable leading god-knows-where, to facilitate the lives and business of decent men and women, as well as cheats, thieves, and fiends, all pottering around somewhere at this very moment, their plans and my own faintly connected, like the threaded cables below, the city one great brain whose thoughts were always haywire.

Consistent with the comic nature of the novel, the outcome of the confrontation seems relatively satisfactory to everyone. The characters find ways to rationalize the thwarting of their primary desires by shifting focus to another potentially fulfilling area. The comic mock-heroic raid on the Baloney estate by an intrepid, outmuscled band of writers partially succeeds because the artists can resort to a kind of creative invention while their adversaries are limited to the often effective but not always appropriate means of massive brutality. Celia Lyndhurst, for instance, immediately neutralizes Baloney's power by observing that his decor is ghastly ("The question isn't who am I, Mr. Baloney, but what are you doing with that horrible couch in this room?"), which leads to the revelation that Baloney, in spite of his wealth and power, is as insecure as most Midnight Examiner readers. His life seems to be the culmination of the people's dreams who buy all of the Chameleon publications, but he is beset by anxiety that his wealth is

no guarantor of respect, that his lifestyle is entirely artificial, and that his entire empire is tenuous. When it turns out that his son Paolo is poetic and dreamy, Halliday offers him a position on the magazine and, in an obviously contrived but satisfying ending, Baloney uses his power to cancel the magazine's debts and lawsuits and puts pressures on its deadbeat creditors. The implications of the narrative, however, are that this is just a temporary reprieve, and that the tensions of production and finance will recur.

Key Questions

Those who enjoy wordplay and cheerful depictions of the ridiculous in life are likely to find Midnight Examiner a happy novel for discussion. A challenge to discussion will be bringing group members past the common resistance of "I don't want to spoil it" that often comes with discussing a comic novel. A novel can be funny and still have ideas worth discussing, and Kotzwinkle's satiric look at New York in the 1980s has a number of ideas that may pique interest without harming the general merriment the novel engenders. For instance, the portrait of New York is idiosyncratic and open to debate: Is the novel's New York City a satiric reflection of actuality, or is it a fantasyland in which Kotzwinkle can place his misfits? Beyond that, is the portrait of the city a reflection of what it would be like if the tales from the tabloids were true? In addition to those questions is the manner in which the city is presented: How effective is the metaphorical language? How does Kotzwinkle make the city come alive? In sum, there is plenty of depth for discussion in Kotzwinkle's comic portrayal of an often vilified profession.

1. In what ways does the Midnight Examiner paper reflect its readers?

2. Of all the fabrications that go into the Midnight Examiner paper, which is the most outlandish? What readers would it please?

3. How psychologically dependent on their stories are the writers for the Midnight Examiner paper?

4. What is the vision of New York City in the novel? Does it reflect only the social concerns of the moment, or does it touch on issues that transcend the 1980s?

5. What metaphors does Kotzwinkle use to describe the city and its people?

Are the metaphors imaginative? Are they comic? Are they true?

6. What insecurities does Kotzwinkle examine? Are they universal?

7. How do the characters of the novel exemplify their era?

8. Is Kotzwinkle's depiction of tabloid journalism sympathetic? Why would many celebrities detest such papers as the Midnight Examiner? Why would Kotzwinkle not detest them, too?

9. Is the ending suited to the plot, characters, and themes? Are there any loose ends?

Related Titles

The passage of almost twenty years has not diminished the power of Kotzwinkle's incisive portrait of American counterculture in the 1960s in The Fan Man (1974). The open-ended aspect of the novel's conclusion has intrigued readers who wondered how Horse Badorties, the book's mythic proto-hippie protagonist, might have managed his life during the succeeding years. In turning to the last decade of the century, however, Kotzwinkle has not written a Badortiesredux to conclude the 1980s, but instead, in developing his comic vision of life in postmodern America, he has created another appropriate character to exemplify the times.

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