

Reviews

FICTION

Sarah Schulman, *The Mere Future*, Arsenal Pulp Press, 2011

Sue Sorensen, *A Large Harmonium*, Coteau Books, 2011

Sarah Schulman's *The Mere Future* is a utopian-cum-dystopian satire, a collide-oscope of postmodernism, lesbian romance, heterosexual tangles, literature, murder, injustice, art, the inversion of public and private, politics, social status, betrayal (individual and societal), media/advertising/marketing, and the insidious, shifting-yet-never-changing loci of power. The title introduces one of the book's most common tropes: taking a familiar word or phrase, changing it, and thereby spreading ripples of meaning; it's a sort of 'near future' (impossible though nightmarishly almost plausible), and it's also 'mere'—paltry and inadequate. In a similar vein is Schulman's poetic sensibility, her love for the semi-echo: 'I have a collection of memories, too numerous to list...too onerous to miss, mutinous too' or 'Horror finding me. Horrifying me.'

88 Behind the word play, though, is world play. The book begins after THE GREAT CHANGE. A new mayor has kept 900 campaign promises (!), one of the first of which is to do away with homelessness: 'A six-floor walkup tenement with mice and no closets was no longer three thousand dollars a month. People were only willing to pay what it was really worth, and so that place rented for eighty-five bucks.' The minimum wage is \$45,000 a year. Bus fares have changed, too: '[W]hen we stepped on the bus in the morning, each one of us paid proportionally. If women earned seventy-five percent of what men earned, we only paid seventy-five cents, while they paid a dollar.' All franchises have been abolished, so every block is a collection of shops and restaurants that reflect the unique individuality of their owners. Logos on clothing have been banned. This is a world where nearly everyone works in advertising, where the only employer is THE MEDIA HUB; they spend all day creating 'cyberpages that were not real pages for stores that were not real stores.... There was no material plane.'

The narrator's lover, Nadine, is the only one who sees through it, 'really seeing our grave new world.' The new mayor has 'moved all advertising so that it only takes place intimately. In our private space. Inside. It comes to us at home and at work and through the many, many shifts of mail.' She has cut a deal 'with the Richies. No more advertising in public places. But in return she handed them the private sphere on a silver moon.'

Like all good dystopian satire, the book is at heart a reflection on the present, generally by extrapolating or exaggerating the ills of today. Many of the targets are obvious, with both backhand swipes and overhead smashes: The narrator reflects that a comment ‘sounded vaguely familiar, yet meaningless. Like *People’s Court*,’ and people take classes in Competitive Yoga. In a truly gnashing turn, a celebrity literally gets away with murder because of ‘Lifestyle Appropriate Trial and Sentencing’: The rich have always manipulated the system privately, but now they can do so openly and publicly.

Those who are wrongfully convicted of the murder—an unloving father and his messed-up sons—‘knew they were doomed. I suppose that in some other kind of novel, they would use this opportunity to realize how much they had actually hurt each other... Unfortunately, this was real life, so they just sat there missing every opportunity.’ Yes, this is a book very much aware of its bookness. There are sensitive, perceptive readings of literature, and ludicrous misreadings (a character finds in Ellison’s *Invisible Man* a valorization of incest). There is the mayor’s *Dissolving the Pretension That Has Come to Define Literature Act*. Typically, the book even comments on itself. The point of view is first person (following the narrator, who never names herself, and her lover, Nadine)—except when it isn’t. As Nadine explains:

My girlfriend, the ‘author’ of this despicable, unforgiving book you are currently reading...is a real jerk.

Look at the way she knows what every character is doing and feeling, even when she is not in the room. That’s just wrong. Any teacher of fiction knows that much.

The relationship between literature and life takes on a rather different cast in Sue Sorensen’s *A Large Harmonium*. Late in the novel, the narrator inadvertently has too much (or enough) to drink before she presents a paper at a pretentious, theory-ridden academic conference, and uses the phrase ‘self-congratulatory, masturbatory brain swill,’ as well as beginning by saying she ‘was sorry that [her] paper was a concrete study of actual books and that some of [the audience] might have difficulty following it.’ It’s her ‘*Lucky Jim* moment’ (a reference, of course, to Kingsley Amis’s wickedly funny academic satire).

So is *Harmonium* an academic satire? Well, yes, but it’s a lot more than that. To be sure, English departments these days frequently verge on self-satire—as Sorensen’s narrator, scanning the program for the conference and finding a ludicrously entitled paper reflects, ‘Is this for real? I can’t even tell any more what is real at these confer-

ences. Everything seems parodic to me.’ It is certainly an academic novel. The narrative arc is a year in the life of a harried English prof, Janet (Janey) Erlickson, who is also a wife and mother, and finds that juggling these roles is almost too much for her. Fittingly it begins in April. As no academic needs Eliot to point out, it’s the cruellest month, with its mountains of marking followed by the feeling of being strangely bereft—abandoned—by the students around whom life has revolved for a semester or two.

The details of her teaching life, especially, ring *exactly* true, which is hardly surprising, given that Sorensen is an English professor. Janey’s preferred teaching method should strike a chord with chalk-stained (oops—nowadays that should probably be Jiffy-marker-stained) wretches everywhere:

The way I teach works better if the students have actually read the book. I teach informally, with a lot of open-ended questions and areas of rambling discovery. But I need someone to discover it with me. If it’s just me standing up there doing the rambling and discovering, the whole enterprise starts to resemble a dentist working on a mouth that has no teeth. It becomes surreal.

90

Note also this hilarious marking moment: ‘Elizabeth Bennett’s pride,’ a student has written in an essay on Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, ‘prevents her from licking Mr. Darcy when he first proposed.’ (This *has* to be from an actual student essay—it’s too perfect to be invented.) As is to be expected, the novel is thick with literary allusions, from Chaucer to e.e. cummings, but Sorensen supplies enough context to help the reader through them.

But Janey isn’t completely happy—with any of her roles—though she keeps on trying. She sends out articles, which don’t get accepted, tries unsuccessfully to start an electronic journal, and takes a stab at a mystery novel, to no avail. Her attempts at matchmaking (between one of her colleagues and a charming, rakish musician friend of her nearly perfect husband, Hector, who is a music prof) seem to have gone awry. Little Max, their toddler, emphasizes the terrible in *enfant terrible* and of course she worries that she’s at least partly responsible. There are even cracks in her relationship with Hector.

By now, though, it’s March, the season of hope. Unexpected support lifts Janey’s spirits, and even the seemingly unsuccessful matchmaking shows promise. What really pulls it together for her, though, is the titular harmonium, barely mentioned until the end of the novel, gathering dust in a Music Department practice room. Hector has been writing a short opera based on Patient Griselda, hoping Janey will sing the title role, and he plays music from it for

her on the harmonium: ‘Hector is taking everything awful about the Griselda story into his own body and making it over, making Griselda’s nakedness his. But it is also still hers. And mine. So there is no difference, no Other.’

Earlier in the novel, Janey has been tantalized by an idea that keeps eluding her: ‘It is something about the entire basis of domestic life, about what it really feels like, from top to bottom, to be a wife and mother... but it will always elude you.... I cannot hold it in my head for long enough to trap it, envelop it in language.’ Yet this is precisely what Sorensen has done, and not a note rings false.

— *David Ingham*