

# Between The Covers

By Gerald J. Gargiulo

The body is alive, its meanings are many, its death a sadness. The flesh is linear, flat, and opaque. In David Galef's novel *Flesh*, published by Sag Harbor's Permanent Press, we have a linear recounting of the adventures of two professors at Mississippi University.

All the ingredients for a possible novel are here but somehow the work never achieves more than a flat history of events, bereft of evocative metaphors, bereft of complexity. What we are exposed to is a series of events, somewhat like a long-running soap opera, with its simplistic sexuality and studied seriousness. The most involvement the reader is asked to contribute is to wonder why Max, the new arrival on the faculty scene — young, bright, athletic, and progressive — dates and beds larger and larger women. Eventually, of course, he succumbs to the weight of it all. (Sorry!)

This story of Max is told through the captivated eyes of Don, an English professor, who intersperses minor, yet expected, subplots into his narrative. One of his female students is raped, a football hero is seriously injured, a revivalist preacher arrives on campus, and a politically active faculty member, British no less, is intent on showing the government's oppression and insists on getting himself jailed.

## Max's Peephole

Actually, these various subplots would have been better served had they been written as a series of short stories — the themes are worthy of development. This might have distracted the reader from the fact that there is little character or plot development beyond the primary motif: voyeuristic Don follows the romantic (?) adventures of Max. On the other hand we are stranded with the author's writing style. Not only does it not capture the reader's imagination, it functions as a sedative.

As a reader, I presume I'm supposed to wonder why Don, the storyteller, is so captivated by his new neighbor and faculty member. When Don discovers

that he has a peephole which enables him to view Max's next-door bedroom, the growing curiosity about Max and his seemingly bizarre desire to bed larger and larger women takes on the presumed excitement of viewing flesh to flesh. Is Don's repeated masturbation at these scenes intended to confirm, without the reader being privy to any internal or external dialogues, their erotic nature?

Instead of exploring man as a phallic creature and what that means, singularly or collectively, we are given peephole scenes. At one point, as Don is watching, we are told that both men "came" at the same time; "male bonding" we are informed. Perhaps. But to a greater extent than the author seems willing to explore.

## Ambient News

The psyche in *Flesh* seems reduced to a camera, observing different characters, recording their movements, but with a superficial awareness of the many levels of meaning we humans inhabit. In this style we are told of Don's eventual divorce, presumably as a consequence of his voyeuristic interest in Max. Such an outcome is portrayed as follows: "The courses I was teaching were repeats from previous years, so the drudgery of preparation was minimal. I was trying to step up my research. My marriage was becoming theoretical."

Have we all been watching too many sit-coms? Have we confused story line with story telling? "Monday morning found me in the department office, picking up morning mail and ambient news. Everything was post-holiday, subdued. The students roamed the hallways like rats in a maze." Like rats in a maze — such trite similes pervade the text.

Finally, the author portrays his incapacity to convey the complexity of life as evidenced in Don's misquoting Freud: "I referred to Freud on how to replace neurotic misery with ordinary misery." What Freud actually says is that at the end of analysis neurotic

misery gives way to everyday unhappiness — that is just part of being human. "Ordinary misery" is flat, uninteresting, and indistinguishable from neurosis.

Given Hollywood's obsession with linear stories rather than human

drama, with sex rather than human sexuality, this book has a chance of being a grade B movie. I give it a C minus.

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