

in *The Long Goodbye*. In that sense, *The Wilshire Sun* presents a considerably bleaker image of the Los Angeles myth than these more obviously venomous predecessors. Because Jacob never really struggles, and because he never feels a desperation that disrupts the comedy of his experiences, his entrapment is all the more complete. If occasionally, in reading *The Wilshire Sun*, one wishes for a more original treatment of Los Angeles, a treatment that goes beyond the accreted representations of the city and dissolves the clichéd attempt to grasp the city's mood or meaning—well, then, Jacob's struggles suggest that Baldwin himself might desire a better, fresher set of cultural fantasies.

Quentin Ring

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Helen DeWitt, *Lightning Rods*. New York: New Directions, 2011. 273pp. \$24.95

Who speaks? For Roland Barthes it was the premiere question of narrative itself, and it is posed in remarkable ways by Helen DeWitt's second published novel, *Lightning Rods*. The story repackages the quintessential American myth of the plucky entrepreneur who overcomes all obstacles in a rise from obscurity to wealth and fame, a personal success that brings with it—according to the myth, at least—social progress. So it is with Joe, inventor and salesman of the novel's titular "lightning rods": in the process of transforming a humble sexual fantasy into a service commodity designed to disarm the threat of sexual harassment in the workplace, our hero profitably resolves a host of issues—around equal opportunity in the workplace, national security, faith—that beset American society in the latter half of the previous century.

One needn't go far with such a description before it becomes obvious that the book is a satire. The "lightning rod" service itself consists of nothing more, as the narrator confesses to himself at one point, than getting a woman "to stick her fanny through a hole in a wall." These holes connect the men's and women's disability stalls in office toilets; women are hired by Joe's agency to perform routine office tasks as secretaries or assistants, as well as secretly to service male "high performers" in conditions of guaranteed anonymity. The novel charts a series of refinements in the engineering of this service and the sales strategies that attend its eventual widespread acceptance, but this comically grotesque image remains at its center. By the time the women's fannies are sheathed in PVC plastic, the "lightning rod" service has come to suggest nothing more than a quotidian wall socket. The office lingo for plugging into it is "going to the disability." It is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the instrumentalization of sexuality, one that was often implied anyway in

modernity's pneumatic, mechanical model of human libido—that thing of impulses, blockages, and outlets. And yet, in the world of *Lightning Rods*, both users and providers find their lives improved by the service, the men growing less instrumental about sex in their personal lives and the women freed to achieve professional goals. It is as if gender parity and world peace might be achieved by commodification's reach into every aspect of nature.

But simply to address the “aboutness” of the novel risks leaving the impression that it is only a little less banal than the myths it appears to satirize—a sort of corrective in which the politically salutary conclusions might be drawn once readers put minuses in place of the story's pluses. The novel's corrosive genius, however, resides in the brilliant badness of its prose, which might be seen as a kind of Oulipian exercise in which the constraint is to violate all the rules of “effective writing” retailed in countless usage manuals and creative writing workshops. Every infelicity of style is to be found in its pages: redundancies (“some little idiosyncratic eccentricity of Joe's”); euphemisms (“adverse collaterals”); non sequiturs (“people who had happened to be born short through no fault of their own”); needless prefatory phrases (“in fact, of course, as it turned out. . .”); amateurish frequency of underscoring (“but that was *exactly* what a lightning rod was supposed to do”—one of nine examples on a single page); and those word repetitions that were the bane of Flaubert (“the funny thing was that he just thought it was funny to begin with”). The most basic units of this prose, however, are the stock phrases and clichés that stud every other sentence: “The thing that separates the sheep from the goats is the willingness to go that extra mile”; “In other words, the result of being head and shoulders above the rest was that she didn't have a life to call her own.” And it is all delivered in the loose, awkward syntax familiar from colloquial speech and freshman composition papers:

If it had been anyone other than Lucille it might have been that it would have been fair enough to take certain things for granted, especially taking into consideration the fact that she had agreed to come back with him. But Lucille was a real dark horse. You never knew where you stood with her.

Since at least Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, American literature was supposed to have been ceaselessly revitalized, rescued from arid classicisms, and given its unique national character by the vernacular. The demotic was the democratic. Here it is simply and mercilessly a coinage debased by counterfeit. If there is a unity to the novel's motley of management-speak, advertising hyperbole, junk science, journalese, and pop psychology, it comes from that idiom of national boosterism that is really a form of hucksterism.

Readers will likely cope with this feature of the novel by seeing it as fidelity to its chosen mode of narration: “free indirect discourse.” An author writing in this mode will keep the diction and syntax of a character’s thoughts and utterances close to how such a character might think and speak given their age, education, profession, and region. Such “tact,” as it is sometimes called, is a convention of psychological realism, the default mode of so much of the literary fiction that is produced and consumed in today’s marketplace. It is meant to give the stamp of authenticity to the depiction of interior life, that humanist holy of holies. But most novels eschew the monotonous hiccups and backtrackings of actual thought and speech; the prose of psychological realism more typically represents a synthesis of realist tact leavened by an equally conventional lyricism. This lyricism is allowed to expand, predominate, and take on an ostensibly “universal” resonance in those moments of epiphany that are the mode’s crowning feature. Epiphany is ethical as much as it is aesthetic: along with creating the illusion of psychological depth, it is intended to signify free will and subjective agency. The style in which changes are rung on these variations of realism and lyricism becomes, in turn, the surety of the author’s own enfolding presence as she plumbs the intimacies of individual subjectivity.

But what are readers to make of characters whose interior lives consist almost solely of slogans drawn from those books and tapes that elide business success and self-help, Dale Carnegie meets M. Scott Peck? “Any salesman knows that you have to deal with people the way they are. Not how you’d like them to be.” “You’re only as good as your last sale. What works in one context won’t necessarily work in another.” It is less like Joe “uses” this language because it is appropriate to his background, values, and milieu, and more like this language thinks *him* and imbues him with all its speciousness—it is interior monologue without an interior. The corollary is that such a novel should be anti-epiphanal, yet *Lightning Rods* abounds in epiphanies: Joe experiences a “sudden realization” in almost every chapter, often yoked to the corniest of cliff-hanger chapter endings. But because Joe’s realizations are invariably further business schemes rather than ethical revelations of his place in the cosmic order, the bells of these epiphanies are sounding brass and tinkling cymbals. For all its bustle, the only agency in *Lightning Rods* is the one established to hire fannies for the holes in the wall. The book’s relentless sentences steamroll even the conventional signatures of authorial agency: “There was a full moon in the sky and ducks quacked softly in the reeds” is about as lyrical as it gets. Instead we are confronted with a new candidate for degree-zero prose, a truly “blank” writing that makes the phenomenologies of the last century’s *nouveau romanciers* seem like a lingering nostalgia for a subject.

Satire makes allowance for two-dimensional characters and hyperbolic

plots. But the airtight stringency of *Lightning Rods*' narration, its refusal of the knowing wink, and its singular fidelity to the discourse that has forged its every element leaves little room for an alternate system of values to signal its presence, even if only by implication. Is it a satire of corporate culture? Male sexuality? Political correctness? It doesn't diminish the novel's power of ridicule over these targets to press the question further; the book itself insistently does so, teasing the reader that Joe's last name could after all be Schmoe, and that the action itself might be nothing more than an extended masturbation fantasy (a version of the "it was only a dream" ending prohibited in every beginning creative writing course). With the citation of Mel Brooks's *The Producers* in the book's Acknowledgments, one comes to suspect that the book might itself represent a kind of hoax along the lines of "Springtime for Hitler," that *Lightning Rods* may just be a 273-page long con. We are challenged to regard it with the same incredulity that some within the story regard Joe's invention: are you serious?

In *The Producers*, "Springtime for Hitler" was less a satire of Broadway than the instrument by which Broadway satirized itself. The same may be said of *Lightning Rods*. If it is a satire "of" anything, it is of the predominant literary novel of our time and its assemblage of hackneyed conventions meant to give us the "uniquely human." In the unsparring light of *Lightning Rods*, the contemporary novel of psychological realism stands revealed as a patchwork of readymade materials— clichés and slogans, the hoariest sententia and newly-minted banalities made "original" by the unspoken complicity of all parties involved to find each particular identikit combination worthy of suitably breathless blurbs. DeWitt's "bad" book makes a joke of all the agents and editors, marketing and publicity departments, booksellers and book reviewers, and readers who take genuinely mediocre works for good coin. Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* is no less a howling absurdity than *Lightning Rods*; the difference is that one of them knows itself as such.

Edmond Caldwell

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Cathy Park Hong, *Dance Dance Revolution*. New York: Norton, 2007. 120pp. \$23.95

Cathy Park Hong, *Engine Empire*. New York: Norton, 2012. 93pp. \$24.95

"We offal de finest sampla," announces the "guide" of Cathy Park Hong's *Dance Dance Revolution* as the sequence of poems nears its end. The book,