

Alistair McCartney, *The End of the World Book: A Novel*. Madison: Terrace Books, 2008. 314pp. \$26.95

“Surely there is nothing more melancholy than the sublime act of fingerfucking,” writes Alistair McCartney. One detects, beneath the cloistered smell of soap, the “the faint odor of feces, reminding us that all men, including ourselves, inevitably decay.” This entry, alphabetically organized in the “F” chapter of *The End of the World Book*, touches on McCartney’s predominant obsessions: death, desire, and memory. Even—or especially—in the midst of sex, an “abyss” opens up, linking the parties involved in the act not only to “every historical instance of fingerfucking” but even “to every bar of soap that every man in the history of humanity has ever used, in a hopeful yet ultimately futile attempt to erase the stench of death.” McCartney’s book—a kind of parody of an encyclopedia—ranges through traces of literature and philosophy, recollections of porn films, and meditations on AIDS, looking for the scent of the human in an industrialized, information-crazed, and increasingly coffin-bound age. It is a familiar story about the melancholy of modernity told in a strikingly new way.

*The End of the World Book* is a novel, and, while it might not have a plot per se, it exploits the encyclopedic form to generate dramatic tension. The narrator assumes multiple voices in a bricolage of small pieces, sometimes resembling ephemeral comic routines or surrealistic dream scenes, at other points recalling seemingly autobiographical anecdotes. These stories are “barely stories, just shards really,” but, as they accumulate, they echo each other, and the novel gains a sense of urgency. McCartney couples his formal experimentalism with a straightforwardly didactic drive, drawing lines between Aristotle and the Holocaust, assholes and eternity, gym machines and death, suicide bombers and boredom. At one point the narrator identifies himself “in large part a satirist...born into an age that is unavoidably satiric—satire being a natural response to overwhelming foolishness and horror, the two qualities that perhaps most characterize the present day.” This narrator teaches at a “progressive university,” sterile as a nursing home, and likes to watch the heaving bodies of the USC track team as they rest after their morning run among the stones of Rosedale Cemetery. He seems self-identified with the author, who thanks Dennis Cooper (an obvious influence) in his acknowledgements.

Satire requires a delicate instinct for balance, however. McCartney’s text when it fails does so by slipping into the overly cute locution, the clichéd aphorism, or the cheap cattiness of camp. At such times the book reads like the work of a very young writer, too wedded to the imitation of past fathers (Cooper, certainly, but also Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* and Kafka’s short, strange tales). His appreciation of the erotics of Freddy Krueger or

the dreamy interweaving of the Brontë sisters and L.A.'s Latino gang cultures may be ultimately forgettable, his quips on homosexuality in the Bible a little canned, or his observations on the ontology of football players' asses a bit flat. There are several weakly served attempts at the scatological citationality of Kathy Acker (see "Hula Hoops," a discussion of Hegel and his ex-boyfriend Immanuel Kant), and moments indicative of someone who spends a bit too much time as an English professor (See "Hardy, Thomas," and the relation of the term "bonnet pink" to the assholes of young English farmers). Yet such minor off-key moments may indeed be necessary to build the sort of text McCartney has designed, one that often forces a crossing of discourses, as when holding forth upon the romance of "awaiting one's HIV test results," or locating Burke's notions of beauty and sublimity in two scenes from the same kitschy porn film.

It is notable that in this book there is no entry for "AIDS" (the closest is "AIDS, pre-"), nor is there an entry under "Holocaust" (the closest to that is, perhaps, "Stein, Gertrude"). McCartney's interest is in edging around a subject, contemplating the fragrant rim of the abyss instead of toppling over into the abyss itself. Here, in full, is the entry under "Diana's Wedding Dress, Theories of":

A group of scientists in Paris are currently examining a possible connection between Princess Diana's wedding dress, designed by the Emmanuels, and the AIDS virus. The link, which at this point in time still remains tentative, is that both the dress and the virus appeared in 1981, and the dress was itself a bit like a virus, a virus of ivory silk. The scientists are conducting tests in an attempt to prove that the Emmanuels and the wedding and the dress—in particular the puffy sleeves—somehow caused AIDS, which up until then had been latent, to bubble to the surface.

The end of the world being nothing compared to the world itself, the narrator finds himself "besotted" with "every object and every hairline crack in every object," rhapsodizing even about threats. "It's safe to say that if there were a contest, AIDS would probably win the prize for the most interesting disease," reads one memorable school-essay-like line. Another entry begins, "If there's one thing I love, it's asbestos."

The encyclopedic project creates a contradiction: it produces knowledge, but, as it does so, it threatens to eliminate that experience from which knowledge arises, namely, wonder. The entries in *The End of the World Book* deliberately hinge on wonder, flirting with yet simultaneously transcending the end of the world. Suicide bombers become depressed boys in hoodies, exit signs on their wrists, jeans sagging sensually. Death becomes Erik Estrada in *CHiPs*, with mirrored shades and "tight crème regulation pants." When such entries succeed—striking an unexpected juxtaposition between reality and

fantasy—they open an abyss, a new perspective, allowing us at once to transcend the real horrors evoked and recognize how deeply moored to them we are. Death is not degraded or defused by our laughter; rather, we come to some deeper, elusive knowledge of it. At his best, McCartney delivers these moments with surprising grace. Here is “Liberace,” wherein beauty is celebrated in the midst of deep melancholy, sublimity at the edge of death:

It is said that Liberace, in an attempt to come to terms with the Kaposi’s sores that covered his body, thought of them as sequins. In the days leading up to his death from AIDS-related symptoms on February 4, 1987, he made numerous references to his sequins, often remarking that his sequins were hurting him. *Yes*, he said in his final interview, *I am disfigured by sequins. I am studded with the strangest, darkest sequins.*

Spencer Dew