

in the untitled poem xxiv, where Waldrop uses assonance and repetition to evoke the speaker's longing in lines reminiscent of both Wyatt and Hardy:

and love you more, beauty, the more you flee from me, the more you seem
to me ironically—night's ornament—to generate a space that keeps my
arms from reaching blue immensities.

It turns out we do need this book.

Dustin Simpson

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Andrzej Stasiuk, *Nine*. Translated from the Polish by Bill Johnston. Orlando: Harcourt, 2007. 240pp. \$23

“Fuck that gun! What do I need a goddamn gun for? I’m a normal guy.” How many of us, in our more stressed out moments, have uttered those words to our closer comrades? Or at least whispered them to ourselves while riding the subway, driving the car, walking the boulevard, browsing the liquor store? Not many, perhaps. But you read Andrzej Stasiuk’s novel *Nine* and these words, and the paranoia they represent, seem *realistic*, appropriate to city life today.

From a Seurat-like euphoria (“Baby carriages like large moving flowers”) to a Philip Guston-like formal funk (“a plate with leftovers looked like a big ashtray”) *Nine* traverses late-nineteenth-century pointillism to late-twentieth-century cartoonism and ends up exhaling a heavy gray cigarette smoke cloud of modernism. Cassettes, radios, televisions, VCRs, remote controls, elevators, escalators, trains, planes, automobiles, pinball machines, phone-books, tickets, matches, tampons—these are the ordinary objects that fill the cracks of the broken-down city that is *Nine*’s millennial Warsaw. If you thought that modern times were over, read *Nine*, and think again. You’ll be relieved, or perhaps scared. “The Old Spice had been crushed, but there was still something left in the white plastic cover.”

In other words, there’s still something encouraging to be found in Baudelaire’s “The Painter of Modern Life.” *Nine*’s hero/protagonist, the artist of the book, is Paweł. In debt and on the run from loan sharks, he kills time wandering and smoking through the city. Paweł surely carries Baudelaire’s essay in an inside pocket of his beaten leather jacket, for like Baudelaire he realizes that “from the beginning he’d wanted to be at the center, in the navel, pupil, asshole of the city, and that his imagination had raised a series of shining, supernatural images of Downtown in which both the glow and the chill created a perfect mirage.” Inside *Nine*’s borderline slapstick crook

comedy lurks this astoundingly perceptive City Artist, through whom Stasiuk delivers a black-and-white kaleidoscope of a book that is an actual tool for seeing your city afresh.

Nine is a book to be read while leaning against scaffolding in the dark, or amid the muttered clatter of a fast-food restaurant. You look up from the page and all of a sudden a weird economy—the transaction of counterfeit diamonds, the sale of drug-covered porno magazines from a rug on upper Broadway, the rise of a new bank headquarters out of the rags and feces of the Chicago River—can be seen with clean eyes. And you're not some innocent bystander; you're a detective, and clues are everywhere. You *should* carry a gun. You're not a normal guy.

The good news, according to *Nine*, is that the modern world is made for detective-artist-heroes like Pawel. There's no excuse for boredom. Take a walk, ride the underground. You have all day, and there's work to be done:

He walked by an endless line of cars, noted the makes. A mustard apartment building protected him from the wind. The trees had grown, and the field of rubble had become a playground. He reached the end of the building, and the cold hit him in the face, but then came the next building. He counted the stairways. Intercoms had been installed everywhere. Block 4, stairway 6. It was supposed to add up to ten. He could never remember the numbers. His finger roamed the buttons. Someone asked questions, stopped, then someone else, then finally the buzzer sounded. He pushed open the door, caught the smell of wet concrete, and to save time took the stairs.

Intercoms, questions, buzzers, stairways—where to? *Nine* can frustrate in its passive refusal to answer.

The novel's protagonist—and therefore the story's action, for Pawel is *Nine's* passenger—does not deliberately turn street corners, but rather disappears behind Vietnamese kiosks and stops for a cigarette. And all too often a void is lurking behind the kiosk. At its worst *Nine's* prose falls into Radiohead liner-notes mimicry:

Everything in place, fifteen channels, ten news programs, no surprises, everything matching. Express trains set out in all four directions. A long-distance train pulled into Central Station after an overnight journey. Nothing needed to be added or subtracted. There was no wind. The flags over the gas stations hanging motionless. It was promising to be a nice day.

These lapses into robotic descriptions of nothingness pile up to the point that, toward the end of the novel, I became concerned that the book itself might fall through a trapdoor.

But too much of extreme interest occurs in *Nine* for the novel to fade

into the oblivion of an empty lot. The brain is stimulated, not benumbed, by the superabundance of public transportation route references, digital clock-face blinkers, and brands of cigarettes smoked. This is no soft elegy—this is a muscular celebration of the city as the supreme place to practice observation, to distinguish between enemies and allies, and to get some determined grip on reality. For all its humdrum meditations on emptiness, *Nine* emerges as an ode—like Wordsworth’s “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge”—to the city as the place where the silent and bare, once perceived by the artist, becomes blaringly full.

Joshua Baldwin

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Amanda Nadelberg, *Isa the Truck Named Isadore*. Raymond, NH: Slope Editions, 2006. 94pp. \$14.95

Amanda Nadelberg’s first book comprises sixty-three poems, each of which takes its title from a dictionary of first names. The second poem, “Albert,” has the most conventional name in the book; the rest read like a grab bag of oddities culled from the attendance lists of a progressive preschool: Blodwen, Ceridwen, and Rhonwen from the Welsh; Elijah, Enoch, and Naomi from the Old Testament; Ferdinand, Leander, and Xavier from history and the classics; Dottie, Myrtle, and Nan from your grandmother’s bridge table; Helmet, Pancrazio, and Wilberforce, the requisite head-scratchers.

Nadelberg’s poems are jokey and hip like much contemporary poetry. Indeed, *Isa the Truck Named Isadore* is a charming book. This is not a quality that should be underestimated. Charm is a powerful weapon in social relations: it is a way of getting people to do what you want. And, at their best, these charming poems are didactic in a way that most contemporary poetry is not. Their didacticism is most effectively aimed at pretension—in particular the familiar pretension that jokey and hip is all that poetry needs to be. Pleasing your readers is one thing; getting them to criticize their own pleasure is another. When Nadelberg can do both in the same poem, her work is sharp. Consider “Geraldine”:

Today is not a day to be pregnant.
The environs are such that
anything could result in an
anti-pregnancy. The air
pressure makes a
fetus impossible. On
airplanes especially. Once,