

The Day of the Locust by Nathanael West

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Reviewed by Alissa Valles

Nathanael West's masterpiece is so exquisitely put together of tack and tatter, so densely packed with crazy yet precise images, so perfect in pitch and rhythm that it is one of comparatively few novels that gain from being printed in a form that encourages you to linger on every page, shudder over each short chapter as you might over a chapter of Exodus or Revelation. You may think you can make do with your old yellow-paged paperback with its broken spine, stains, and crowded print—the tale itself is already rubbed raw with cigarette ash, with spit, sperm, and sweat, and no one would think West himself would mind you using it to kill a fly or shade your face on the beach. But besides that copy, you can now have the thrill of one in which each merciless word is caressed and printed in Bodoni type (you're reading a Hilton bar menu) on soft ivory paper (you're slipping incognito between clean sheets) with plenty of breathing space (the room is air-conditioned) and its intermittent glimpses of the L.A. circus through a tinted window or a pair of shades.

If, as David Thomson suggests in his introduction, *The Day of the Locust* is Hollywood seen by an eclipse of the sun, Lucy Gray's photographs capture exactly that eerie light, which glances but doesn't probe, shimmers but doesn't flatter. It's as if the separate shadows of all the book's desperate wannabes are stripped away, mixed up together, and evenly smeared over the surface of their world like smog residue. Gray catches the marvellous cast

of characters—Faye Greener and her father, the peddler-clown Harry, the dwarf Abe Kusich, the sap Tod Hackett, the dupe Homer Simpson, the dude Earle Shoop—at moments when they are oblivious, either in the grip of a dream or spinning in a vortex of need or rage, when the gap between what they are and what they dream is most pathetically exposed. The only fleeting presence of joy appears, ironically, in a shot of the Mexican drifter Miguel gazing impishly into the face of his fighting rooster.

The one crucial aspect of the book that the photographs do not address—but Thomson does in his warm-up—is the life of the crowd or, more accurately, the mob. It's what starts the story on its way—the young artist watching a movie-set army dissolve into a mob from his office window—and what wraps it up with an unforgettable account of a riot at a movie premiere. My personal favourite, however, is the scene in which Tod Hackett runs after the object of his desire across the studio lot, past “the final dumping ground,” “a gigantic pile of sets, flats and props,” in search of the Battle of Waterloo, in which he thinks he'll find Faye working as an extra. He reaches the set just in time to see a plaster slope of Mont-Saint-Jean collapse under the weight of a charging French army and the scene turn into a rout, with the “victors of Bersina, Leipzig, Austerlitz, [fleeing] like schoolboys who had broken a pane of glass. ‘Sauve qui peut!’ they cried, or, rather, ‘Scram!’”

Intentionally or not, this summons the scene in *The Charterhouse of Parma* when the young Fabrizio is desperately seeking the Battle of Waterloo, so as to join Napoleon's forces and ally himself with destiny.



He gets to the right place at the right time, but he can't find anything resembling a heroic battle led by great men. All he sees is chaos, absurd skirmishes, horses in flight. He himself can't possibly play a hero in the dead hussar's uniform he's stolen in an escape from a Belgian jailhouse. Without myth's light effects, history loses all its glamour.

It is easy to see West's book exclusively as a satire on Hollywood, the West, on America, and of course it is that too, it *is*—at 125 pages—the Great American Novel. But it reverberates with a much older tradition, not only that of Stendhal but also of a whole string of superfluous Russian young men who populate the novels of Gogol, Goncharov, and Dostoevsky with their languid (often ludicrous) yearnings and frustrated ambitions. And the way it explores the menacing enigma of the mob is what

turns it into a masterpiece of the twentieth century, a prophetic vision of war, revolution, and mass violence born of bitter dissatisfaction and ennui. The sordid psychoses of Hollywood illuminate the Nuremberg rallies. And when you close this edition, you find the mob right there, battering on the green field of the cover in the shape of a swarm of locusts. Or is it a swarm of dead souls?

***Flatey–Freyr* by Guðbergur Bergsson**
Reviewed by Birna Bjarnadóttir

When W. H. Auden travelled with Louis MacNeice to Iceland in 1936, Guðbergur Bergsson was a child in his hometown of Grindavík on the southwest coast of Iceland. Decades later and well into what he once termed the Machine Age, Milan Kundera wrote a review of Guðbergur's novel *The Swan*. Widely translated and awarded, the novel presents a memorable protagonist: a nine-year-old girl who travels inland away from her seashore home. In his review, Kundera talks briefly about Iceland, this isolated place where "people watch other people closely." Every single sentence of the book, he also writes, "breathes the landscape." He continues:

However, above all else, I would like to ask you, readers, not to read this novel as "an Icelandic novel," or if you like, as an obscure text. Guðbergur is a great European writer. His art does not originate solely from a historical, sociological curiosity, and less so from a geographical one, but more so from