



Such

Christine Brooke-Rose

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Author : Christine Brooke-Rose

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m csmnt says

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Cosmic theatre of the soul →

The very depths of the human capacity for image creation →

At

Nate D says

When you don't understand something, go on as if you do, it will all become clear later.

This isn't CBR's advice to the reader (though it is sound), but advice given to her protagonist. Who has awoken in a coffin, been dragged into the orbit of a Girl-Spy when he helps to hide her (their?) quintuplets by having them baptized via blues songs, and finds himself traveling the range of the visible spectrum and space-time (time heals all, space-time even faster), through heavy water and leech-choked canals: the whole bewildering comic-phantasmagoric internal landscape through which one must fight to return from the dead into some kind of meaningful semblance of life. The beauty of this book is that the protagonist's confusion and incremental progress towards something like lucidity is precisely calibrated to the reader's own, ontology recapitulating underlying semantics, experiential writing that forces the reader into the work. When you're writing about someone grappling with an experience they are unequipped to understand or properly deal with, the proposition gets dicier: I almost mistook this for nonsense ("antic and zany" were my words I believe), almost put this down and moved on. Which would have been a mistake. Beneath the obfuscation and apparent nonsense, Brooke-Rose's novel is all to real and all too tragic. Various sources (all too often obituaries (would that they were premature as here)) suggest that CBR was more concerned with form and grammar than plot or character, but this has never been true. She merely maps her plot and character onto form and grammar more closely than most.

To explain my understanding of this story too comprehensively would be to diminish the experience for anyone else whose interest is piqued by my words. It's a book that must be stumbled through first, coordination and fluid movement comes only further into recovery. But suffice to say that the protagonist has suffered a trauma, one that he can initially remember almost nothing of but a few raw sensations, and so is doomed to rehearse endlessly in memory in an attempt to work through it, to gradually clarify it. He is (we will eventually learn) an astrophysicist turned psychiatrist of troubled scientists, and in his attempts to work through his experience, he continuously conflates the two, mapping particle physics and the life-cycles of stars onto all of his interpersonal relationships, warping and confusing them, leading him into dissociation and alienation and collapsed communication, most devastatingly in his attempts to find a way to relate once more with his wife, but also in his work, his friendships, his once-ordinary interactions. All of which intrude on the narrative. At the heart of the experience, a brush with eternity and nonexistence, an eternity and nonexistence that he can only relate to the singularity just before the big-bang, a point outside space-time, torn through life and reality, just where he seems to have been. Which would seem to have begun and justified his floundering forays into scientifically translated human interaction. As I said, things may clear somewhat, for reader and protagonist, but will they do so in time?

A marvelous theoretical monster of a novel. More completely her own than *Out*, but also at risk of being much more unfamiliar, daunting, opaque.

MJ Nicholls says

What the WTF is this batty and brilliant book “about,” I hear you crying in the valleys of Aberystwyth. Far it be from me to attempt to untangle this knotty prism of brilliance, so here is our friend Susan Birch from *Christine Brooke-Rose and Contemporary Fiction*:

“*Such* begins with a voice in the first-person describing the process of climbing out of his coffin into an unknown world of orbits and ellipses. He meets a character who describes herself as a ‘girl-spy.’ When he insists that they must have names, she agrees to call him ‘Someone’ and allows him to call her ‘Something.’ Something carries on her arm five offspring, variously described as planets, moons and cylinders. Someone adopts two of these creatures and urges that they too be named. Accordingly, the five bodies are baptized with the names of famous Blues songs: ‘Dippermouth,’ ‘Gut Bucket,’ ‘Potato Head,’ ‘Tin Roof,’ and ‘Really.’ Upon receiving names they fly off into orbit, and return one by one during the course of the first part of the novel to be given ‘rebirth’ by Someone.” (p63)

“In *Such* the discourse of astrophysics is used to subvert that of classical psychoanalysis. Astrophysics is concerned with bodies of cosmic proportions, but it is also involved with the smallest of particles, those postulated by quantum mechanics. Specifically, astrophysics studies the origin of the universe through analysis of the characteristics of subatomic particles of light, matter, and energy. Thus, while *Out* dramatizes the consequences of the principle of relativity for the observation of effects, *Such* turns instead to the exploration of the origins of identity in terms of contemporary theories of cosmic birth. The concepts of astrophysics are mapped onto the human psyche in such a way as to contest the assumptions which depth psychology has popularized.” (p63)

That really is enough. If that doesn’t convince you this book is battily brilliant, you are an ape-like creature with only one eye. Freak!

Ash says

The cosmic made flesh, the personal made... astrophysical? A book that seems in many respects impossible: to talk about, to analyse, to recommend. There is much I do not understand and more that I think cannot be understood. Coming back from the dead might be a miracle, but it certainly doesn't solve all your problems.

Geoffrey says

Well...I read this! Brooke-Rose does not fail to astound. It seems a bit much sometimes, but it's worth persevering, even if it remains somewhat opaque to me. Multiple readings would definitely be in order.
