



Arkansas: Three Novellas

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Here are three novellas of escape and exile, touching and funny and at times calculatedly outrageous.

In "Saturn Street," a disaffected L.A. screenwriter delivers lunches to homebound AIDS patients, only to find himself falling in love with one of them.

In "The Wooden Anniversary," Nathan and Celia - familiar characters from Leavitt's story collections - reunite after a five-year separation.

And in "The Term-Paper Artist," a writer named David Leavitt, hiding out at his father's house in the aftermath of a publishing scandal, experiences literary rejuvenation when he agrees to write term papers for UCLA undergraduates in exchange for sex.

Arkansas: Three Novellas Details

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Author : David Leavitt

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Marshall Wayne Lee says

I have not read Leavitt since "Family Dancing" (which I bought at an Army bookstore on post before don't ask don't tell.) I think I've read a few from Lost language. . . but I can't remember. Still, glad I visited with Leavitt again. I'll read some more.

These novellas get four stars; however, The Wooden Anniversary, in my opinion, was not as interesting a work as the two surrounding it. So let's start with that one.

The Wooden Anniversary left me feeling annoyed, and yelling "why don't people just be honest." I found all characters in that work unlikeable. I often was rolling my eyes at their pretensions. But, as a writer, Leavitt is successful for me even with this piece. The writing was good, and my feelings of annoyance prove that--I was annoyed with the people.

The other two were excellent works. While I was horrified at the narrator in "The Term Paper Artist." and his unethical choices, I still appreciated his honesty (if in fact, he was), and watching him de-evolve and then come back (sort of). Also, on a personal note, Leavitt writes a few things that have inspired me to do an academic work.

"Saturn Street" was interesting in what it did to me. I appreciated hearing about HIV patients during this time. I was annoyed at the search for sex of the narrator (sometimes I think: ok I get it. but did I?) I would pause at times noticing how pulled into the piece I was. The characters are likable; they are real people: people we all know. For me, the symbol Leavitt is creating with Saturn street, this bit of sci-fi, always looking forward, yet realizing we have to be where we are. In many ways, Saturn Street is about being somewhere else while being where we are.

Arkansas--good fast reads. The writing is clear, solid, and at time beautiful!

Kevin Orth says

Love, love, love David Leavitt's work. This did not disappoint. Highly recommend.

koi says

3.5/5

can't say i'm satisfied after reading this book, however i have to make a point, david leavitt writes fine! after the first novella i was quite sure he is going to be another murakami to me, an author who is never going to be among my favorite ones, but whose books i can't stop picking up after one another. (not that there was anything that's related between the two writers hahaha)

now talk about the novellas.

the term-paper artist was fun and all uncanny. i was disagreeing at first (about the character's choices) but then it weirdly settled itself.

the wooden anniversary stroked the memories of *a home at the end of the world* in me, and, hence, made me sad. but that was personal. truth is, the writing and philosophy of this piece of writing was really interesting (the cow thing was both funny and sad at the same time). but then the ending... coughs. i didn't know how to make a remark of that ending.

saturn street was poignant. i was really sad. god, i was. there was a mess there, in the story, but lingering around that mess, there the sadness was. what did i even expect? it was a story about AIDS after all, and no matter how subtle, how aloof the narration towards the matter was, it still hurts.

Trixie Fontaine says

In the beginning, read to me a little like Paul Auster crossed with a gay sex blog. Really enjoyed it - had a crooked smile on my face through the entire first story and the three were well-balanced against each other. No extreme highs or lows, but very touching, sensual, and funny in a daily and true way.

Hard to believe one of the words used to describe this book was "shocking", but I'm guessing that's what straight guys say about stories that tell the truth about male sexuality in a mundane, daily way. Whatever. On that note, as a webwhore/phone sex op/internet pornographer/camgirl I appreciated reading what felt like accurate descriptions of how some men integrate casual sex and pornography into their daily lives in a mundane, sort of resigned, semi-conflicted way. It rang true, unlike most mainstream depictions of these everyday behaviors.

A smooth, easy, pleasant read that still moved me and did new things for me. I want to pick up another one of his books after reading this one.

Timothy Urges says

"I should like to flee like a wounded hart into Arkansas."

- attributed to Oscar Wilde, near the end of his life.

David Leavitt has a thing for Forster, Wilde, and brown ankles.

The writing wasn't bad but I wasn't in love.

The introspective moments in "Saturn Street" were uncomfortably close.

-3- "The Term Paper Artist"

-2.5- "The Wooden Anniversary"

-4- "Saturn Street"

Sacramento Public Library says

Arkansas contains three very different stories, all humorous and poignant. Leavitt crafts his characters brilliantly, the main one after himself, ditching clichés from the gay community. His smart, tight dialogue makes for a fast though satisfying read. He successfully weaves stories of Aids in the 80's, professional jealousy, and creepily co-dependent straight/gay relationships while remaining playful. Highly recommended
--Geoff

Guillermo Jiménez says

Tengo problemas con las palabras y su significado, o su interpretación. En la contraportada dice de este libro: «"Arkansas" reúne tres espléndidas variaciones sobre el universo de la seducción». Y leo en el DRAE que seducir viene del latín seducere y que tiene tres acepciones: uno, engañar con arte y maña, persuadir suavemente para algo malo; dos, atraer físicamente a alguien con el propósito de obtener de él una relación sexual; y, tres, embargar o cautivar el ánimo.

Y, creo, que esto solo aplicaría para la primera de estas tres novela que conforman el libro titulada, El artista de los trabajos universitarios. Donde si sumas la primer palabra con el título de la novela, bueno, pues es un tanto predecible de qué va. Lo que no es predecible es el humor, el descaro, el atino con que Leavitt logra captar el mini mundo universitario de la costa oeste. La descripción sin alardes de loca ni nada por el estilo de un universo de tráfico de emociones a flor de piel, visceral. Digo, que aquí si aplicaría, porque las tres acepciones están presentes en un solo texto. Que la verdad, leí más por curiosidad de comprender lo que no comprendo, que por un talento narrativo. Bueno, no, me equivoco. Talento narrativo tiene el graduado de Yale. Leavitt es buenísimo para escribir (solo recuerdo haber leído una sobre una secretaría malandra, buenísima, estilo culebrón) y contar e hilar las acciones e ir desglosando los personajes en una trama que se sostiene de cabo a rabo (sin albur de por medio). En fin.

La segunda novela es... cómo decirlo, bueno, a mí parecer es un bodrio. El ritmo caduco del «juego de seducciones a tres bandas» como reza la contraportada es infumable. La narradora no sé que haga de su vida, pero, parece salida de las revistas de decoración, jardinería y cosas-para-la-mujer-contemporánea que da una flojera terrible seguir leyendo. Continué, esperando una última «vuelta de tuerca» que sí llegó, pero, que llegó mal, y tarde.

Ahora bien, la tercer y última novela es una belleza literaria. Chale, que mala descripción, pero, intentaré explicarme. A mí, en lo personal, me cautivan y llaman la atención sobremanera, las relaciones personales. Sean cual sean su tipo o género. En el caso del relato largo titulado, La calle Saturn, la pausa y el buen ritmo que lleva el autor, la economía de lenguaje y los silencios bien empleados, las mínimas acotaciones que dotan la historia de un control pleno de la trama y sus personajes bien delineados y con luz y sombra justas, nos permiten disfrutar de una pieza literaria en su punto. Y, finalmente, al terminar el libro, podría justificar ese armado de las historias. Quizás, son necesarias las dos primeras para no sentir esa desolación de la última. Leavitt, quien en ocasiones peca con sus referencias literarias (Forster y Wilde, de este último aplica las sentencias aforísticas a mansalva), pareciera estar debatiéndose entre lo personal de escribir ficción sin que esto traicioné la realidad que busca inventar. No sé, no me gusta hacer recomendaciones, pero, creo que en este caso sí lo haré. Yo diría que si les interesa conocer a este autor se vayan directo a leer, La calle Saturn, y si le late, regresen por los otros.

ida says

4/5

Normally not a fan of short stories but I finished this one in one sitting and liked all three stories; my favorite one was probably the last story, but again I liked them all.

Nick Duretta says

The novellas are well-written, wry, clever and occasionally poignant, but the gay male protagonists of two (apparently modeled on Leavitt himself) and the principal gay male character of the third, are all sex-addicted horn dogs who, when not trolling sex lines, porn shops or watching video porn, are trying to couple with any nearby man. Yes, I know there are gay men like this (I've met a few), but it is also a (misleading) gay stereotype that often fuels homophobia (not that many straight people will be reading this book). Ultimately, these stories seemed a bit too far-fetched for my tastes, but perhaps I'm being too naive.

Jimena says

Historias de amor que acercan el desconocido vivir de los homosexuales a cualquier lector. Una guia para comprender que no hay diferencias entre las vivencias de los homosexuales y los heterosexuales.

Miguel says

Três excelentes novelas, escritas por um autor no seu melhor.

Scott Smith says

Novellas can be strange animals. And, as in any collection of fiction, you tend to like some more than others. David Leavitt brings all his writing chops to bear on these three distinctly themed stories. The first, "The Term Paper Artist," is on the surface quite funny and absurd. Yet, underneath the narrator's hard shell lies a sensitive, vulnerable and ultimately lonely soul. If you know a little about Leavitt's publishing history, this story screams with self-effacing honesty. I really liked it. In the second story, "The Wooden Anniversary," Leavitt revisits three characters he's written about before. But rather than feeling the warmth of intimacy, the author seems to disdain these characters, who come across as often petty and self-serving, and who are upstaged by a fourth character -- a chef with confused allegiances. A somewhat ironic ending made the piece feel as though the entire story, rather than growing organically from character conflicts, was written toward satisfying that ending. Overall, it's a bit of a plodder. The final story, "Saturn Street," picks up where the first novella leaves off but goes much deeper. It captures a particular time in history when gay men lived with a constant fear of getting sick and an immense sadness for their fallen friends. It raises profound questions about the sanctity of life, the purposes of relationships, and the particular ways we both assert and deny our humanity. In all three stories, Leavitt combines capable storytelling, a keen ear for dialogue and a brave

candor for exploring what others only want to hush.

Kevin says

Good longer works from a great short story writer. The first one is a stinging self-implication. It was a fun book to travel with, and a nice follow-up read to *Family Dancing*.

Jesse says

An offhand comment in Felice Picano's *Art & Sex in Greenwich Village* intrigued me enough to pick up this collection of three short novellas. Arranged in an ascending order of gravitas, all three are drastically different in subject matter and tone. And while they all are rather excellent in their individual ways, there's something prickly about the concluding "Saturn Street" that's difficult to shake off (and not just because it deals with the struggles of an AIDS patient): it just really starts poking into the surfaces of identity in ways that are unexpected, painful. Wish Leavitt would have resisted that finishing "aha!" moment, but still.

"He noticed the world that he lived in, perhaps too much. His mind was an attic stored with heirlooms, not one which he could bear to toss away. The accumulated wreckage left less and less room for identity, and that threw him into a panic."

-D. Leavitt, "Saturn Street"

Skip says

These are neat stories exploring all kinds of terrain. Perfect and short enough to read on an afternoon. "Love's poison, I've noticed, has a way of lingering in the body even years after love itself has withdrawn its fangs."

"The Wooden Anniversary."

And personally, I think a blowjob is nowhere near enough payment for writing a whole term-paper. I'd expect a lot more.

But then again, the real fun there was the whole negotiation and deal-making...I guess.

S.

Kim says

It's a cold mid November day. More gray than blue. This is a good soft book to lose oneself in. I've always followed David Leavitt and he leaves me in this.. comfortingly morose state. He speaks of regrets, the unrequited, the sorrow and loneliness and I eat it up. But, I wrap it around me and it keeps me warm. Because this is how it is. Retakes on memories and quiet grips on reality. It doesn't help to throw in some EM Forster and Henry James history as well. :) Thank you.

EMM says

I really enjoyed reading this collection, and it reinforced my faith in David Leavitt as a writer. The first novella, *The Term Paper Artist*, is one of those stories that's held up by its premise. It has an interesting take on gay for pay. These guys are gay for research papers. Once the premise has been explored, the story is allowed to slowly wind down. I wouldn't call this a fault. I think that's just the story taking its natural shape. The high points of *The Wooden Anniversary* are the inexplicable happenings as well as the nearly inexplicable human behavior in the story. Though what is a surprising development to the characters is easily guessed by the reader, the story's last revelation cannot be guessed by any sane person, and that's what makes it awesome.

For me, *Saturn Street* held the most promise so I went into it with high expectations. I worried me a little as the story seemed to become mired. The protagonist's feelings were shrinking and blurring under constant self examination. A nice, surreal porn moment near the end came to the rescue and set things right. I fully expected this story might wind down like the first one, but instead right at the end the story grabs hold emotionally and solidifies into something with real impact. Though they are good separately, the three novellas taken together make for a highly rewarding reading experience.

Frabe says

Sapevo da "Ballo di famiglia" che David Leavitt scrive bene e che - dettaglio - è gay; ma tre storie su tre incentrate su gay molto irrequieti, pur se raccontate formalmente bene, mi sono risultate piuttosto pesanti. (Vorrei rileggere Leavitt... alle prese con altre tematiche.)

James says

This is the first thing of David's I've read: I'd known him for two years before I decided to read anything of his. These three novellas take his best personal qualities I've witnessed and condense them into one book. They're funny, sharp, worldly, and full of empathy. I'll have to read more now.

Mark Landmann says

Just lost the review when I changed my edition before I'd saved... so briefly...

-all 3 novellas very readable, especially the first and last, which left me thinking about the characters and had some sexy scenes.

-often I found the writing sensitive but then I found it pompous too (or maybe it'd be better to say over my head). That left me feeling some distance from the characters

-amazing what a different world 1997 was for gay fiction... obviously in the centrality of AIDS to gay life. But not just that... he's calling phone sex lines and renting porn on VHS... this could have been my life if I'd come out just a bit sooner, but it's almost unimaginable.

