



Stern

Bruce Jay Friedman , Jack Richardson (Introduction)

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Grove Press continues the reissue of Bruce Jay Friedman's critically acclaimed fiction with two classic novels by the comedic genius. Friedman's first novel, *Stern*, tells the story of a young Jewish man who relocates his family from the city to the suburbs, where they are besieged by voracious caterpillars and a bigotry that ranges from the genteel snub to outright confrontation.

Stern Details

Date : Published December 21st 2000 by Grove Press (first published 1962)

ISBN : 9780802137500

Author : Bruce Jay Friedman , Jack Richardson (Introduction)

Format : Paperback 192 pages

Genre : Fiction, Humor, Comedy, Literature, Jewish

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david says

We are responsible for the diversions we choose. And why do we seek to be entertained? Because we all need a break from wherever or whatever we are. Movies are a quick hit, something that we can imbibe in a couple of hours and return to everyday life. Television is more interactive and we can turn it on or off as we see fit. A dinner out with a glass of wine is also a short splurge. How about a brisk walk or a game of tennis? Also a worthy distraction, and possibly healthy.

But reading a book is an investment. It requires time, it necessitates some skill, and it cannot generally be consumed quickly. It is not a one-night stand. It is a relationship that extends much longer in time than the afore mentioned activities. So when we pick a book to read, we will try, to the best of our abilities, to research it before we become intimate with it. Some stories require a couple of days of our time and other require significantly more of it.

All that 'works well' is based in transactional parity. Quid pro quo.

This book is considered 'a bible' of sorts by a specific cadre of comedic writers. I have read nothing but rave reviews of it from writers of humor over the last twenty-five years. I looked so forward to enjoying it. Junk is worth more than this.

There is no plot line, no arc, no beginning, middle or end. No worthy protagonist. There are no funny parts of it to persuade you to read more. But you read it to the end because these quoted professionals, they who make a living from joke construction, all admire it as if it was naan from the beyond.

It is a shame when time is unnecessarily wasted. But wasted it was. I would like to recommend this book to tyrants, abusers, haters, and to all the blue inhabitants of Mars. Indeed, I would want the writers who endorsed it, to eat their croissants backwards.

This book is not inspiring, not well written, and does not even contain a whiff of funny. A reminder to its' advocates, "camp and gags and laughter are serious business."

Now, who's zoomin' who?

Charles Cohen says

I wanted to like this more. I could see the humor, I could see the character growth. But I cannot handle the Woody Allen stereotype of the nebishy Jewy Jewison. It makes me ill. So nope.

Maurizio Manco says

Un "piccolo Giobbe americano degli anni Sessanta." - Guido Fink, *La nostra metà del Paradiso*, postfazione, p. 201

Iletrado says

Ligera decepción.

Gary Peterson says

A great first novel that entertained while also making me think. Friedman can be compared to Woody Allen, but Friedman was there first. Same for Philip Roth. I thought of Stern as a proto-Portnoy. Friedman is definitely an unsung author of Jewish-American fiction, overlooked along with the very different but just as insightful Chaim Potok.

I discovered Friedman through his short stories, finding and falling in love with his collection *Far From the City of Class*. This novel ranks right up there with those "honeys," to use an expression from my favorite story, "When You're Excused You're Excused."

Stern is a put-upon everyman, an insightful man with intellectual ambitions. He moves to the suburbs and finds a snake in Eden--a Jew-hating bully who calls Stern's wife a "kike." Even worse in Stern's mind is that the man pushed his wife and when she fell her skirt came up and she wasn't wearing panties. The thought of this Jew-hating thug--dubbed "kike-man"--having possibly glimpsed his wife's nudity haunts Stern throughout the novel, undoubtedly contributing to his ulcer and subsequent nervous breakdown.

Stern's ulcer and five-week stay in a bargain-rate rest home were the highlight of the novel. The rogues' gallery of characters he meets there were imaginative comic inventions, from Lennie, the black porter with mechanized leg braces that whirr and click, to the half-man, to Rooney of the softened bones, to the wheelchair-bound one-legged Greek. There are fun scenes here with the baseball game and later the poor man's great escape when Stern and a couple patients slip outside the home for a night on the town.

One of the book's weak spots came during that night on the town. There's a surreal barroom brawl, but suddenly it seems as if it were only in Stern's imagination. And Stern's indiscretions with the Puerto Rican hairdresser didn't jibe with his fastidiousness for chastity and modesty, such as his periodic panics about his wife and her dance instructor Juan.

But these are mere bagatelles in an otherwise outstanding novel that deserves to be ranked alongside the best of Bellow and Roth. And Woody Allen.

Javier Avilés says

He leído la edición de La Fuga Ediciones con traducción de Rubén Martín Giráldez.

Y me sabe mal que una recomendación de Laura Fernández y del mismo Rubén, me decepcione. Quizás no he sabido entrar en el juego del humor "judaico", quizás esté (yo) agotado tras Woody Allen y Seinfeld-David. No sé.

He podido captar las referencias a Stern que los hermanos Coen volcaron en *A serious man*, una de las películas que más aprecio de los Coen.

Y ya está.

El humor es muy relativo y subjetivo. Me ha entretenido, pero no entusiasmado.

Lástima.

Maia says

I'd read a few of Friedman's stories in college (including the very good 'A Change of Plan', the basis for both versions of *The Heartbreak Kid*, screenplays for both also having been written by him) and found them full of interesting so-called 'black humor' (a label Friedman has been fencing for years) so now that i'm in a 50s, early 60s kick, I thought I'd try his novels.

I enjoyed Stern--was drawn in by the hysteria, the neurosis, the apocalyptic humor, as well as 'another side' to the whole 1950s 'life in suburbia' world, a la John Cheever or Yates' *Revolutionary Road*. Friedman's world, as a native New Yorker and a Jew, is necessarily and interestingly more urban than Cheever's or Yates'--or, for that matter, that of *The Man in The Grey Flannel Suit*. This makes it a more contemporary view.

There's something about Friedman's writing, though, that never quite convinces me 100%, as if his scope remains small, his view of humanity rather narrow.

Eleanore says

"And it was true that for a while Stern's last concession to his early Jewish days was to stand outside synagogues each year and listen to the ram's horn. It was as though listening to the ancient sound would somehow keep him just the tiniest bit Jewish, in case it turned out someday that a scorecard really was kept on people."

Definitely the most deeply imagined examination of quiet neuroses I've read in a long while, if not ever. Very human, and very funny.

Drew says

A real laugher. A tad slow and repetitive, but still, it makes you laugh. What more do you want?

Laura says

Una maravilla. La novela más divertida que he leído este año. Especialmente indicada para amantes de

Joseph Heller y otros crazy writers norteamericanos.

Alana says

Stern, the book's main character, would be at home in early Woody Allen films. His slight story focuses on his angst at being the target of antisemitism, or more specifically a single antisemitic act perpetrated on his wife in the opening pages. The book is at times, funny and sad and just plain strange.

Lala says

This character study will make you very uncomfortable. It describes the neuroses of a man who has moved from New York City to the suburbs. His insecurities and fears are overwhelming his daily life. His Jewish identity is being tested in a anti-semitic atmosphere while his concerns about his family contribute to his breakdown.

As a New Yorker and a Jew, I enjoyed this book.

Although, I'd like to hope that most people would have more strength than the lead character.

Dave says

Bruce Jay Friedman, totally unrecognized in most literary circles, wrote the movie SPLASH with Tom Hanks, which we can't hold against him, though John Candy was in SPLASH which gives it automatic street cred. STERN has no street cred, so I've been walking around with it in my back pocket for the last two years, hoping someone would steal it. We live in a fairly honest world (it's still in my back pocket), but not a world that recognizes the almost there genius of Bruce Jay Friedman, the worried man's writer.

If STERN doesn't tickle you like it tickles me, pick up ABOUT HARRY TOWNS or his collected short stories. He also wrote the screenplays for film THE HEARTBREAK KID (starting that hairy heart-throb Charles Grodin and a very young Cybill Shepherd) and STIR CRAZY (which pairs Richard Pryor and Gene Wilder in a prison rodeo) BTW, any movie with Gene Wilder in prison is automatic street cred.

G.D. you Friedman, you write great films, you write great books, why does no one know who you are?

Matthew Budman says

The first third of Friedman's debut is flat-out brilliant, both insightful and delightfully clever; you'll wonder why he's not regularly mentioned as a peer of Roth, Bellow, and Malamud as an early-'60s novelist exploring American Jewish identity. And then the story turns inward and gets uncomfortable, as well as much less funny, and you find yourself hoping it ends even before it does. Still, *Stern* is good enough that I'm looking forward to dipping into Friedman's later fiction.

Eric Woodard says

I liked the first half. It felt like a Cheever novel written by Philip Roth. But in the second half the Cheever went away and the Roth neuroses were overamplified.
