

Black Clock

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Black Clock, Fall 2007, Issue 7; Steve Erickson, Editor; Dwayne Moser and Bruce Bauman, Senior Editors; Justine Schroeder and Michaele Simmering, Managing Editors; Arielle Greenberg, Poetry Editor; Anne-Marie Jetter, Editorial Assistant; Stephanie Martin Arguello, Allison Carter, Emily Eklund, Jenn Hawe, Beth McNamara, Joe Milazzo, Gerard Olson, Joe Potts, Associate Editors; Anthony Miller, Editor-At-Large; single copy \$12; 169 pgs; perfect bound; 8x11; website: www.blackclock.com; Correspondence: Black Clock, CalArts, 24700 McBean Parkway, Valencia, CA. 91355

A few defective pieces ruin the erotic mechanics of this “Clock.”

Reading the seventh issue of *Black Clock* reminds me of two sayings: “You never judge a book by its cover,” and “First impressions are the most important.” On the front cover of the issue is a photo that contains part of a bed, a cheap red chair and a nightstand which has a glass filled possibly with alcohol. Littered on the wooden floor and chair are boxer shorts, a lace bra, a thong, a condom and its wrapper, and a small clutter of erotica: *Lolita*, *Story of O*, De Sade, Henry Miller, and a few others. Provocative, indeed. It does possess an element of something that is both forbidden and desirable, giving the initial impression the book will delve into the many facets of sex. This cover is an effective eye-catcher to the casual observer; it beckons to be read, and bravo to the editing staff for taking that risk. And what enhances the initial curiosity of the cover are the list of writers on the back, including well-known authors like Aimee Bender, Samuel R. Delaney, Janet Fitch, John Haskell and Yxta Maya Murray. With regard to the first saying, I did break the rule by judging a book by its cover, but in this regard it is permissible because the issue’s cover does illustrate the overall theme of the book. And in many instances, the fiction and poetry explore these issues with a combination of dynamic power and soft-spoken eloquence. But, sadly, it also contains other works that show the darker aspects of sex in such graphic, angry and even adolescent ways (in both their themes and their writing styles) that, unfortunately, spoils the book as a whole, resulting in my decision not to recommend this issue.

When it comes to first impressions, Arielle Greenburg’s poem “On Typing (after Rachel Zucker’s “Sunday Morning”) is the wrong piece to open the book. Blunt, extremely bitter, and filled to the brim with disgust, Greenburg’s story illustrates in vivid detail a woman’s outrage at being objectified as a sex object. Although the tone of the piece successfully exhibits these intensified emotions, it is a poor selection as a way to bring the reader into *Black Clock*’s world of illicit sensuality; it should have been placed towards the middle of the book to serve as a nice contrasting balance to the string of excellently written tales that will be discussed later on. A more appropriate opening story would have been Lisa Teasley’s short story “Late Blooming,” which studies the emptiness of a “quickie” between a well-renowned painter and an interviewer. What is quite extraordinary about this piece---as well as other works in this issue---is “Blooming” is wonderfully erotic without using profanity or gratuitous descriptions of the sexual organs. And although a sad piece, it draws the reader into the affair without being smothered by the emotional backlash.

Guggenheim Fellowship winner Lynne Tillman’s short-short “More Sex” also examines sexual frustration. Her writing style is considerably sophisticated and subtle regarding the female protagonist’s emotional range. Its only fault is the editor’s decision to situate it along with a series of works that overwhelm the reader with the ugly side of sex, and to place this section at the beginning of the issue is a detriment to the book as a whole. “More Sex” is sandwiched in between Greenburg’s “Typing” and Matias Viegner’s

“Blindfold,” a short story about a man’s addiction to porn. What was frustrating about “Blindfold” is Viegener’s use of hard-core profanity and graphic imagery to demonstrate how trapped one feels regarding this stimulus. Addiction to porn is very topical, especially with relation to the Internet, and the story would have had more of an emotional impact to a wider range of readership if the sex were more suggestive rather than being overtly descriptive. Viegener wrote one passage that delivered an effective powerful punch regarding porn’s influence: “Where is sex really---in you body or in your head? Usually you think of it as something you need to *see*, but maybe seeing doesn’t matter.” It is a shame the rest of the story was unsuccessful in reaching the profound nature of this passage.

But the last story in this quartet, Yxta Maya Murray’s “A Girl Called Casanova,” was so shockingly poor in both theme and writing style that I was quite surprised it was published. I can understand why this pornographic tale about a female version of Casanova seeking to seduce Angelina Jolie can be considered as a social satire on the media’s obsession with celebrity and sensuality. And writing the story in the form of gratuitous erotica (which includes graphic depictions of orgies and various uses for sexual toys) that is usually found in the forum sections of *Playboy* and *Penthouse* does make sense because *Black Clock* is trying to sample all forms of erotica. However, this inclusion was a severe error on the editors’ part. And, with regret, I have to include Samuel R. Delaney’s scatological and almost unreadable “In the Valley of the Nest of Spiders” as the second of two of the most inappropriate stories for this issue. While Murray’s tone was satirical, I felt Delaney’s motif about a young homosexual’s journey into dark fetishism involving body fluids and waste was unjustifiably graphic and used for shock value. I was extremely disappointed because in the beginning there were the makings of an insightful story about how a young man hides his sexual orientation from his heterosexual stepfather by sneaking out in the middle of the night to indulge his appetites with a group of high-risk homeless men. But what killed the story’s emotional potency was the explicit descriptions of the acts themselves, which were so obscene that it became numbing, almost like reading fetish porn. I had the same reaction with “Casanova.” These stories may be suitable for those types of literature, but not for a mainstream literary journal. After reading the high quality of works in the rest of the book, these two lengthy pieces ruined what would have been a fascinating exploration into erotica.

However, many other stories in this issue avoid the easy trappings of explicitness by focusing on the importance of the *characters*, rather than just their actions. After reading the first quartet, I had a breath of fresh air with Aimee Bender’s look into voyeurism (no pun intended) with “On a Saturday Afternoon.” This story about a woman trying to achieve some kind of arousal by convincing her two male straight friends to have sex with each other while she watches succeeds where “Casanova,” “Spiders,” “Blindfold,” and a few others have not: it showed the eroticism of the act more through the emotional reactions of the participants rather than the details of the acts themselves. Bender expertly distills the scene by describing the two men in vague fragments, which is a good parallel to the fragmented soul of the female protagonist. The lack of detail adds to the readers’ imagination, resulting in a generation of sympathy and pity for the woman who is trapped in her own emotional limbo.

Other stories worth equal praise in this approach to the subtleties of eroticism include Sandi Tan’s “Ice Cream,” where two teenage acting students experience their first sexual encounter together that satirizes the famous balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. The lack of graphic detail is compensated by the humor it shows. John Mandel’s “Durga Rising” also follows this example adding clever humor to the eroticism he portrays when it comes to “battle of the corporate takeover” between the sexes. Arielle Greenberg’s essay on female masturbation is surprisingly poignant and universal in its themes of sexual awakening and awkwardness in “Here I Come.” Brian Evenson’s wonderfully odd “Invisible Box” cleverly delves into the risks and dangers of having a one-night stand with a mime. And Janet Sarbanes’s “Responsible Hedonism” is an extremely witty and hilarious satire on how a group of swingers chronicle their sexual escapades, neurotic complaints, and *Survivor*-like power games in a community journal.

But my favorite of these series of stories that examine the humorous side of erotica is Wanda Coleman’s novel excerpt “Howlin’ With the Woofdog.” Her narrative style is not only one of the strongest in the issue, but also the most humorous where the reader cannot help but smile at the absurdity of it all. The excerpt follows the sexual misadventures of Jackman Dogg, a legendary radio DJ who seems to be a combination of Wolfman Jack and The Dude from *The Big Lebowski*. The Woofman succumbs into temptation of infidelity when he tries to have a fling with his groupie, Tamala, resulting in one of the funniest sex

debacles I have ever read. The dialogue is crisp and its pacing was consistent. Best of all, its source of eroticism lies in the subtle touches that Coleman uses regarding her description of the sexually charged Tamala:

“Nearly a head shorter, she smiled up at Jackman. He was struck by The Glow again. Her eyes sparkled! He blinked. The sparkle was still there. He had never known brown eyes to throw off sparks. With some women it was the mouth and tongue, with some the breasts. It was as if the love flame started in her eyes then blazed up before leaping outward, cloaking her from her crown of reddish-brown hair to her red-enameled toenails revealed by brown-toed pumps.”

This passage demonstrates the truest sense of how eroticism should be portrayed. Coleman didn't have to use profanity and graphic descriptions of genitalia in order to illustrate how turned on Jackman is. It is the art of showing the sensuality of the character as a whole (not the parts) that makes erotica a fascinating read.

And this can be said for many of the dramatic pieces in *Black Clock*. “Respect”, Seth Greenland’s descriptive slice of life story about a brief encounter between a middle-class pimp and one of his working girls maintains a gritty, almost noirish flavor, but never crosses the line into overindulgent seediness. This can also be said for Grace Krilanovich’s poetic and passionate (but never crude) “Warlock,” which focuses on the sexual relationship between two homeless people and how they utilize some form of fantastic escapism to intensify their connection. Then comes my favorite story of the book, Francesca Lia Block’s “Sex and the Spirits,” where a middle-aged woman attempts to cope with sexual addiction by visiting an encounter group. And by trying to abstain from sex, she discovers a way to not only heal herself spiritually, but her fellow addict in the class. Block’s narrative style is heartbreaking and tender and her willful, yet flawed female protagonist is one that both men and women can connect with.

Although the two poems after “Spirits,” Danielle Aquiline’s “Your Filthy Mouth” and “What Not to Say When Asked Why You Are a Lesbian,” come dangerously close to being clichéd in their anger that almost jars the reader from the nice flow of the preceding stories, the book goes back on track with Tara Ison’s “Apology,” a modern fable about how a unfaithful wife attempts to atone for her sin by physically deforming herself as penance for her suffering husband. When he doesn’t forgive and approves of this disturbing submissive behavior, the readers soon discover that there are no victors when it comes to infidelity, only victims. “Apology” incredible portrayal of emotional and physical pain contrast nicely to the emptiness of casual sex between two singles in John Haskell’s “Pretending,” then dives into the poetically moody “Gothic,” where Arion Berger examines how sexual repression can transcend beyond the mortal realm into the supernatural. All of these works successfully illustrate the beauty and tantalizing qualities regarding the different facets of erotica, courtesy of strong characterization, elegant subtle prose and the philosophy that “saying less certainly shows more.”

It is understandable why the editing staff of *Black Clock* would want to explore all facets of erotica in this issue by reaching out to all of its readers, and I know it may seem unfair to criticize an entire book based only on a few unsatisfactory works. However, the editors must realize those particular stories, that small minority, has ruined the experience of reading this book as a whole and that there are cases where one has to be selective regarding controversial forms of literature. In the effort to include graphic stories to satisfy the minority who like pornography, Issue Seven successfully repulses the majority of readers who are fascinated by other forms of erotica. Hopefully, the next issue of *Black Clock* will accomplish in touching all readerships, a goal that Issue Seven regrettably fails.