

## MOTEL GIRL

Greg Sanders

Red Hen Press

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The stories in Greg Sanders's debut collection are difficult to categorize. They owe a debt to Franz Kafka and fabulists like Jorge Luis Borges but seem just as strongly to want to transmit from a realist world where small psychological insights and gritty detail carry the day. The stories aspire to the have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too achievement of existing in both literal and symbolic realms. Many of them reach this rare ground.

A good number of the stories in the collection are about sex and sexual deviancy, though to label the predilections we find in these stories as deviant may be problematic as the stories implicitly argue that when it comes to matters of the utmost human intimacy feeling "a bit dirty" in pursuit of satisfaction is the norm. The collection's final story, "Aesthetic Displeasure Unearths Lack of Marital Fortitude," asks us to consider acts of oral sex alongside a narrative strand about an escaped robot wandering the wilderness searching for its missing foot. This juxtaposition raises all sorts of questions about the base mechanics of human need, the transcendent ability to make a robot in the first place, in addition to questions of animal qualities in

a robot and machine-like characteristics in human beings. In "American Hoverfly," semen spills on the ground under a blossoming apple tree in the height of spring to engender, in a moment reminiscent of James Dickey's poem "The Sheep-Child," a strange plant "neither fern nor reed nor sapling. Something dark-hued..." Sex in this collection is a portal to other worlds, a source of necessary mystery and a means of escape from the dull mundanity of work, the incessant nag of responsibility, the low hum of loneliness. In its more unusual guises, sex is also an escape from more conventional sex. It can also be a dangerous distraction.

*These stories are interested in the question of how much sober maintenance and how much letting go a sane and decent life requires, or will allow.*

The collection's titular (and in many ways also its strongest) story is set in, and very much engaged in defining, the actual and symbolic space of no-tell-motel sex. This story judges a reader by asking him or her to buy into an archetypal modern fantasy about easy illicit sex in a rundown motel, then turns these expectations, built on gender and class norms, on their head, as the narrator becomes the victim of an acne-riddled but beautiful (the narrator congratulates himself for noticing) motel clerk over whom he had assumed a fantasy position of power. This is a case where Sanders gets the balance between the literal and symbolic just right. The motel functions as a fascinating psychological space even as its seedy grounds serve the story as a literal, extremely run-down motel at the very edge of a reader's verisimilar credulity. The adolescent waif's taste for real deviance (brought into existence, we are led to believe, by her treatment at the hands of others) trumps and explodes the protagonist's safer fantasies about her to produce reading surprise and to call readers' assumptions into question. The result is unsettling in the best sense of the word—bracing, invigorating.

As with the best fabulist fiction, many of these stories employ the supernatural in order to better make and emphasize points about the nature of human existence. A giant vagina statue in a run-down Guggenheim-esque museum is a portal to certain viewers' re-births, and, so, a kind of immortality. In "Mr. Hallucinosi," a little man, physically like one of Gulliver's Lilliputians, and also a sort of anti-superhero, bears witness to others' plunges into the abyss, encouraging their downfalls by appearing to them during



their lowest moments, which appearance further convinces them of their insanity. By literalizing the metaphor of bigness and smallness in human behavior, the story asks readers to consider what it means to choose to be big or small in our interactions with others. We all have a little person in us, the story implicitly suggests, a smaller self who may indulge in many forms of rooting for another's demise, from enjoying a small jolt of *schadenfreude* to the active willing of someone else's harm. The story pricks a readers' own guilty pleasure at encountering, from the safety of a reading chair, a character's suicide attempts, while reminding us of the choice we have in our reading, and in our actual lives, of being the bigger person and helping another, or of indulging our smallness and taking secret passive pleasure in others' slips from "normal" sanity. In this way, "Mr. Hallucinosi" and other stories in the collection turn on moral hinges almost in spite of their hip, indifferent-seeming surfaces.

While the brand of strangeness we encounter in these stories is all their own, of other contemporary writers it most resembles Steven Millhauser's short fiction. While Millhauser's stories often flesh out bizarre concepts, sustaining them to a readers' delight until the very end, the stories in *Motel Girl* typically offer brief glimpses into the supernatural, the purpose of which seems to be to mirror us back into more traditional concerns of character and psychological insight. At their worst, the result of this glimpsing is an impression of underdevelopment that might serve as a reminder that, as Kafka's work proves, successful departures from realism in literary fiction require more verisimilar detail than a story built on familiar turf. At times, it seems as if Sanders is seeing how much he can get away with in a short space. These stories average between eight and nine pages, while, in some cases, their outlandish elements raise questions that beg for a novel's worth of fleshing out. At their best, the small glimpses provide flashes of revelation, reminding us of the weight and heft of mysteries we glimpse every day behind a thin—(necessary? the stories seem to want to ask)—and all-pervasive veil of manners and normalcy.

— Elliott continued on next page

# MR



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The majority of the stories in the collection are set in New York City, many of them in the East Village. (A notable exception is the misfit opening story which is set in Moscow and involves a circus bear named Choco). Most of the stories are critical of what the city can do to a life over time, as if one of the smaller purposes of the collection is to offer a warning to New Yorkers not to let the city's great possibility and diversity of options (sexual and otherwise) distract them from their personal development and meaningful connections with others. A character named Grey DeSilva in "Grey" is the last shabby holdout against total gentrification in a dirty, cluttered East Village rent-controlled apartment. He doesn't have much to show for his years there. He is cut off from everyone in his life and fails, in the last chance he's given, to establish a meaningful connection with someone who's lived in an apartment above him for several decades. In keeping with the role of sex in the collection, Grey seems to keep himself alive by summoning distant memories of sexual adventure. In "Another New York Love Story," L. and his girlfriend are at sea in their confusion about what they need from one another. In one chilling moment, L. laments the life they've found in the city: "this grand city that had now sucked down almost two decades of my life had left behind...only nights like this and nights like this and nights like this." L. considers it a miracle that he has found someone, in his girlfriend, to lean on given this existential treadmill. He finds that he likes being rough with her during sex, mostly because

she likes it. She knows it's an act, however, not really who he is, and seeks succor elsewhere for this need, leaving him to wonder about the solidity, which he's found he needs, of what they have together.

Like the late David Foster Wallace in the novel he was working on when he died (*Pale King*) and in some of Wallace's stories in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (2000), Sanders is interested in the psyches of men who are indolently employed or who have what on the surface appear to be terribly dull jobs. The "work stories" in this collection seem invested in piercing that dullness to see how it might bleed, in looking into how a desperate human need for interest and excitement might forge imaginative or real satisfaction despite a disastrously frustrated species-being. In many cases, the stories attempt to use our misguided expectations about someone in a dull job in order to generate surprise. Nowhere is this more evident than in a story like "I Am an Actuary" where the accountant-protagonist tells us he and his coworkers live in bunkers made of paper and that he retreats through a trapdoor in his office into a bathroom to have wild sex with his manager whom he compliments for doing an excellent job of seeing to his needs. The story is deadpan, leaving us to wonder if this is a worker who has finally snapped so that his fantasy life, out of grim necessity, is leaking into his real life, or if we are meant to believe we're being given a glimpse into some alternate world where such things actually happen. The answer, again, is that the story wants to have it both ways. "PS2 Mouse

Adapter," a meditation on inter-office romance in the shadow of 9/11, asks us to contemplate the banality of the workplace in the aftermath of a catastrophic event. What are the new rules after the world has changed in ways that the pretended normalcy of the workaday world hasn't yet accommodated? This story includes an exchange between a male boss and his younger female employee, who lives in an apartment near Ground Zero, that expresses in miniature the reality versus non-reality questions that many of the stories implicitly or explicitly take up: "Mostly I operate in reality.' [says the male boss.] 'Let it go,' she said pulling me back onto the sofa so that we were pressed against each other. 'Let it go.'"

These stories are unsettling for their quiet awareness of a reader's "baser" instincts and mysterious needs. They are interested in the question of how much sober maintenance and how much letting go a sane and decent life requires, or will allow. The characters are given little mannered protection to make us like them. Instead, the stories seem to trust that the characters' sometimes-ugly vulnerability will carry the day and that a reader's recognition of themselves in these vulnerable moments will coax up a pleasurable recognition of truth, along with—and in most cases longer-lasting and stronger than—the initial uncomfortable squirm.

Scott Elliott is the author of the novel *Coiled in the Heart* (2003). He teaches at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington.

# SCENES

## Spuyten Duyvil

an interview with **Tod Thilleman**



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### Would you briefly describe Spuyten Duyvil's history?

Spuyten Duyvil was started 20+ years ago by a collective of poets and writers living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Eventually, M. G. Stephens, the principal responsible for its perpetuation up through the nineties, moved to Europe and left a bunch of ISBN numbers behind. Those numbers became the backbone of a list of small titles that grew out of *Poetry New York* journal and its collection of poets. Those small titles led to larger fiction and poetry projects, and the title list grew.

### How would you characterize the fiction you publish?

We publish literary fiction, but we don't ascribe to any genres or categories. The fiction we are interested in has to be original in voice, style, and subject matter. But originality is overrated, as is voice, style, and subject matter. If an author has actually read poetry, and not just contemporary poetry, then his or her prose tends to verbalize the page with more *éclat*. We usually don't publish what might be categorized as "popular" fiction but look for work that delves into the complicated and complex lives and situations human beings get themselves into. And then out of. But simplicity has its virtues; simpletons could even be said to have a virtuous and more-than-interesting complexion when it comes to the literary. But writing is, beyond a doubt, a place where history comes to rest; judgment, as pleasure, lasts beyond a sentence

or two. We are especially interested in providing a platform for work that probably will not get published by the commercial houses, but work that is artistically crafted and will engage readers. But there is no such thing as commerciality anyway; there is, somewhat, a place for observation, whether it succumb to snark and die, or grows on one like a spitting octopus.

### Who is your audience, and in what ways are you trying to reach them?

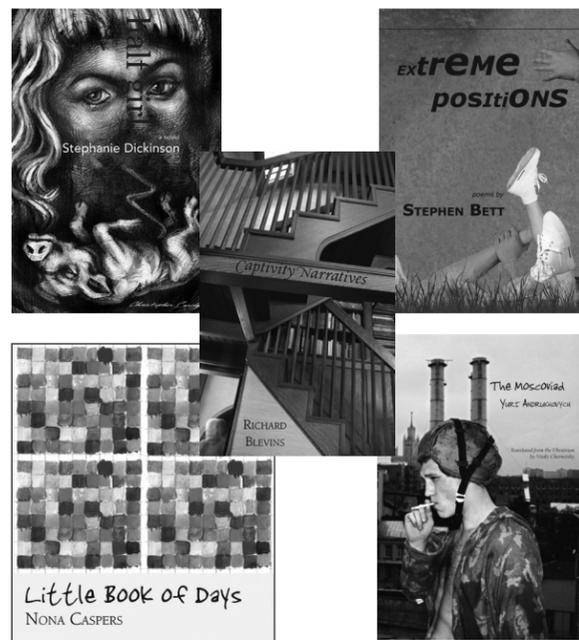
Our audience is wide. Our audience is narrow. We appeal to both academic-type writing as well as the general reader. We ask each author to think about who their audience is/will be, and from there, devise a plan to try to reach readers via postcards, emails, book reviews, websites, blogs, social networking sites. People do still exist; they just aren't that easily quantifiable anymore. If they were, a series of large ampersands dotted with ellipses would be their "market." We are constantly looking at and evaluating new ways to reach readers.

### What is your role in the publishing scene?

We try not to have any set role, other than to make as many worthy books available. Owning a printing press is tantamount to treason, these days. If we were to have a role, I'd say our role is to be inclusive, in opposition to what is thought of as the literary norm which is exo-ippo-blue-blood whitewash. Whatever that means.

### What's in the future for Spuyten Duyvil?

Just as technological options seem to be rapidly changing, what is in store for our future will follow those options made available. The future has nothing to do with where one wants to be, *à la* the advertising slogans, but rather where we WILL be, in spite of all things. Remember, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Just because we publish "imaginative" literature doesn't mean we won't take advantage of the first amendment. Should it last. But does the first amendment pertain to imagination anymore? Let's pack the court with a vocabulary.



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