MISREADINGS: We Loved Our Lives More Than We Ever Knew | Lorrie Moore | A Gate at the Stairs

Let me start with a confession. Lorrie Moore was a bandaid after my bedtime attempts and failures on reading and understanding Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch,* which absurdly became strings after strings of words I found ungraspable. So one night, accepting the truth it isn’t time yet to read her, I picked the highly acclaimed (as if Tartt isn’t) Lorrie Moore.

Before I read her, she was that writer your writer friends or acquaintances have read (she’s my personal Haruki Murakami) and as a self-consolation you adorned your own shelves with her spines without actually reading a single work of hers (I don’t own a single fiction of Haruki Murakami, by the way) except perhaps through the words of the omniscient and highly coveted Michiko Kakutani blurb: “An enchanting novel. It touches and dazzles and entertains. Often uproariously funny. It also uncovers new gifts of lyricism and tenderness. Lorrie Moore has fully come into her own.” that come with all the ellipsis and sics where the uncertain awkward silence and perhaps harshness really fall into.

I have *A Gate by the Stairs,* gathering layers of dust at my parents’ place in Tuburan. I bought it probably three or four years ago. Because as I said, her name sounded familiar enough for me to spend money on it. But I had other priorities, reading and otherwise. I picked her up at Bookworm, since the worn-out edges of the hardbound copy made me long for my own wordly kingdom back home.

It was 2AM. And I thought it was impossible for me to giggle and chuckle at 2AM unless it had something to do with a man, a stranger who found temporary comfort on my bed. If it was, the giggles and chuckles were languages of filling in, closing the awkward gaps that come with two strangers in bed. Because comfortable silence---sorry, Harry Style---is not overrated when the limbs involved are twined, twinned by love. The genuinity and sincerity of my past-midnight laughter made her one of my top fictionists in the past three years. And the hours I spent rationalizing, questioning, agreeing with the insights I gleaned from the book.

Another confession: the past three years, I avoided white western writers. It was a sort of political stand. They are read; they are the dominant voices. And while I enjoyed most of them, there was a part of me who clamored representation of my own realities, plights, and sorrows. I desired stories of brown-skinned people. While we can always argue the worth of a text doesn’t end at representation because not all books written, regardless of the skin colors of their creators, are well-written and worth reading.

The time I spent reading the dominant writers should have been spent reading literature from other parts of this wounded world. That’s how I found Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Mohsin Hamid. Monica Ali. Viet Thanh Nguyen. Samrat Upadhyay. Eka Kurniawan. Are they good? Damn. Fuck. They are fucking great, not because they are writers from different perspectives, but because they know their craft. Especially Mohsin Hamid. Adichie. Ali. More people should read them. I should probably rant, rave, converse with these rad humans when I’m not too busy entertaining strangers in my bed. Kidding. Oh, not really. Oh yes, I am.

Lorrie Moore had me at page 12. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/28/books/excerpt-gate-at-the-stairs.html?pagewanted=all> Hardbound. First edition. And I found a typo somewhere. :P

"Oh, for the love of God, look at these poor dogs," she said. We stood there, watching. The dogs next door were being kept in the yard by an invisible electric fence. One of them, a German Shepherd, understood the fence but the other one, a little terrier, did not. The German Shepherd would get a game of chase going around the yard, and lead the terrier right to the electrified border and then stop short, leaving the terrier to barrel on ahead into the electricity. The stunned terrier would then come racing back, shrieking with pain. This amused the German Shepherd, who continued to do this, and the shocked terrier, desperate for play, would forget, and get started again, and barrel on into the electricity again, yowling. "This has been going on for a month," said Sarah.

"Reminds me of dating," I said, and Sarah spun her head, to size me up again. I could see now that she was at least two inches taller than I was; I could peer up her nostrils, the weave of tiny hairs like the crisscross of branches seen from the base of a tree. She smiled, which pushed her cheeks out and made the blush beneath them look shadowy and wrong. Heat flew to my face. Dating? What did I know of it? My roommate Murph had done all the dating and had essentially abandoned me, so that she could now sleep every night with this new guy she'd met. She had bequeathed me her vibrator, a strange swirling buzzing thing that when switched to high gyrated in the air like someone's bored, thick finger going whoop - dee- doo. Whose penis could this possibly resemble? Someone who had worked in a circus perhaps. Maybe Burt Lancaster's in Trapeze. I kept the thing on the kitchen counter where Murph had left it for me and occasionally I used it to stir my chocolate milk.

The freshness of her metaphors jumped out from the page and left me roaring. And if you are a young writer drowning in self-doubt and drowning in the lack of writer-worth (like me), the freshness of her symbolisms would punch hard in the gut. How come I never thought of this dating metaphor: naïve young terrier rushing through the invisible electrical fence. Again and again. Yes, I was that terrier.

Oh, I who had already reconciled my inadeptness with directions and my ardent interest on the politics of geography, consoled myself with the truth: because you have never seen an electric fence and a terrier and shepherd on a perfectly mowed lawn, Jona. The whole image was so \***cough\*** white privilege, which was actually a huge theme in the book, alongside with racism, post 9/11 America, and the recklessness of love or lust. And of course, it has to be mentioned, it is as coming of age narrative as you want it to be.

No, the book, despite its humor and linguistic acrobatics, is not a light read. It is America (or part of it) according to the funny, well-read, and awkward 20-year-old, midwestern Tassie Keltjin who takes classes on Sufism, consumes literature like I have never personally experienced, plays bass in her terrible, creaky apartment in a university town Troy, used to play cello, nannies Mary renamed Mary-Emma, fucks a pseudo-Brazilian turned jihadist and mistakes it for love. While back home in Dellacrosse, she pokes fun of the eccentricities and oddballness of her own parents. She is particularly “close” to her younger brother.

Tassie is human, humane, and has too many references on arts and music that if you don’t know Rothko or read Rumi, you would not get some of her jokes or images. She is likeable. Witty. White. Young.

**“The people in this house, I felt, and I included myself, were like characters each from a different grim and gruesome fairy tale. None of us was in the same story. We were all grotesques, and self-riveted, but in separate narratives, and so our interactions seemed weird and richly meaningless, like the characters in a Tennessee Williams play, with their bursting unimportant, but spell-bindingly mad speeches. ”**

**― Lorrie Moore, A Gate at the Stairs**

And what I found most likeable about her is her trying to find her own place in contradicting, paradoxical narratives between the city where she studies and works and the countryside where she comes from. Now, this particular reality of hers sounds and feels so familiar, familial even, nevermind that my own farmer papa doesn’t have a tractor or mama has not installed mirrors in her garden to make it appear bigger or let alone tend a garden. The countryside folks and the city people she feels familiar enough that the whiteness of the narrative took a backseat and almost became an afterthought. Just like Chang Rae-Lee’s Jerry Battle, in everything I see and experience, I tend to (I don’t know if it’s good or not, maybe not) consider race and gender as a factor. Was I treated like that because I’m Asian? Brown-skinned? A woman?

At first I though the story would be of Mary-Emma---an African-American two-year-old girl Sarah and Edward adopted---through Tassie’s eyes. But it was Tassie’s story. Sarah’s and Edward’s. Her parents’. Her brother’s. Mary-Emma’s. A tragicomedy of the frailty and gentleness of humankind.

And what made me consume the book in no time was the sheer beauty of Lorrie Moore’s words. Damn, she has her own way of describing places, moments, people. Be it the birches that resembled Tassie’s mom’s barely smoked cigarettes. Or how she described the tragic awkwardness of Bonnie (the birth mother of Mary; there is a political difference between birth and biological so I learned from the book) who expected to be the center of the attention. Or how she described the penis of the pseudo-Brazilian. On how she described marriage as a performance. On how she described the grief of a father losing his kid.

And the insights. The most important takeaway when you read long-form fiction. What do you glean from it? What makes you, the reader after swimming and diving through pages after pages of words, surface with a new wisdom or a different perspective on life, on love, on lust, on greed, on privilege, on sorrow, on everything that the humans in the narrative, fictional as they may seem, have contributed in the molding of the human that you are now. Emotionally. Intellectually. Humanly. Humanely.

Some years ago, I had an altar of “when you’re broken” reading list. They comprise of Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient,* Alice Munro’s *The Progress of Love*, and Andre Aciman’s *Call Me By Your Name.* And the staple Mary Oliver’s “In Blackwater Woods,” Jack Gilbert’s “Failing and Flying,” Derek Walcott’s “Love After Love,” and the pseudo-poem of Jorge Luis Borges’ “After A While You Learn.” I read them. Again. And again. Cried. And cried. Soothed myself. Healed myself through their words again. Cried again. Read them again. This predictable yet painful cycle of breaking and mending. Each pain is different. Each healing is different.

While I initially considered *A Gate at the Stairs* a bandaid like the strangers in bed (knowing a bandaid is too small, too temporary for a barely healing big wound that I keep on picking), a quarter through it, and I know it to myself and I owe it to the genius that is Lorrie Moore that the novel is a reading marvel. A marvel that is too encompassing, too human, too humane to be a bandaid.

And since I already spent hours writing this musing/rant/diary leakage of my heartaches and sex life, I would leave this entry open with some of the insights I got from Loorie Moore that enriched me, one way or another.

P.S. Most of the humans who found this entry are here to check out the intentionally half-naked photo of me reading.

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“Love is the answer, said the songs, and that's OK. It was OK, I supposed, as an answer. But no more than that. It was not a solution; it wasn't really even an answer, just a reply.”

“When you find out who you are, you will no longer be innocent. That will be sad for others to see. All that knowledge will show on your face and change it. But sad only for others, not for yourself. You will feel you have a kind of wisdom, very mistaken, but a mistake of some power to you and so you will sadly treasure it and grow it.”

― Lorrie Moore, A Gate at the Stairs

“Perhaps we had at last reached that stage of intimacy that destroys intimacy. ”

― Lorrie Moore, A Gate at the Stairs

“Things between us were dissolving like an ice cub in a glass: the smaller it got, the faster it disappeared. ”

― Lorrie Moore, A Gate at the Stairs

“Blasts from the past were like the rooms one entered and re-entered in dreams: they would not stay nailed down. When you returned to them, they had changed - they suddenly had more space or a tilt or a door that had not been there before. New people were milling around, the floors undulated, and the sun shone newly, strangely in the windows, or through the now blasted-open ceiling, or else it shone not at all, as if having fled the sky.”

― Lorrie Moore, A Gate at the Stairs

“Love is a fever," she said. "And when you come out of it you'll discover whether you've been lucky - or not.”

― Lorrie Moore, A Gate at the Stairs

“This was love, I supposed, and eventually I would come to know it. Someday it would choose me and I would come to know its spell, for long stretches and short, two times, maybe three, and then quite probably it would choose me never again.”

― Lorrie Moore, A Gate at the Stairs

“But family life sometimes had a vortex, like weather. It could be like a tornado in a quiet zigzag: get close enough and you might see within it a spinning eighteen-wheeler and a woman.”

― Lorrie Moore, A Gate at the Stairs

“Life was unendurable, and yet everywhere it was endured.”

― Lorrie Moore, A Gate at the Stairs

“You can exclude the excluded middle, but when you ride through, on your way to a lonely and more certain place, out the window you'll see everyone you've ever known living there.”

― Lorrie Moore, A Gate at the Stairs

“A lie to the faithless is merely a conversation in their language. ”

― Lorrie Moore, A Gate at the Stairs

“Tragedies, I was coming to realize through my daily studies in humanities both in and out of the classroom, were a luxury. They were constructions of an affluent society, full of sorrow and truth but without moral function. Stories of the vanquishing of the spirit expressed and underscored a certain societal spirit to spare. The weakening of the soul, the story of the downfall and the failed overcoming - trains missed, letters not received, pride flaring, the demolition of one's own offspring, who were then served up in stews - this was awe-inspiring, wounding entertainment told uselessly and in comfort at tables full of love and money. Where life was meagerer, where the tables were only half full, the comic triumph of the poor was the useful demi-lie. Jokes were needed. And then the baby feel down the stairs. This could be funny! Especially in a place and time where worse things happened. It wasn't that suffering was a sweepstakes, but it certainly was relative. For understanding and for perspective, suffering required a butcher's weighing. And to ease the suffering of the listener, things had better be funny. Though they weren't always. And this is how, sometimes, stories failed us: Not that funny. Or worse, not funny in the least.”

― Lorrie Moore, A Gate at the Stairs

“I guessed that only at the last possible minute did the soul in a determined fashion flee the dying flesh. Who could blame it for its reluctance? We loved our lives more than we ever knew, and at the end felt the bounty of them, as one would say in church, felt even the richness of their missed opportunities, or just understood that they were more than we had realized during the living of them and a lot to give up.”