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Disappointed by her inattentive husband/reader, Babs engages in an exuberant display of the physical charms of language to entice an illicit new lover: a man named Gelvin in one sense, but more importantly, the reader of this "essay-novella" which, in the years since its first appearance in 1968 as a supplement to TriQuarterly, has attained the status of a postmodernist classic.

Like Laurence Sterne and Lewis Carroll before him, Gass uses a variety of visual devices: photographs, comic-strip balloons, different typefaces, parallel story lines (sometimes three or four to the page), even coffee stains. As Larry McCaffery has pointed out, "the lonesome lady of the book's title, who is gradually revealed to be lady language herself, creates an elaborate series of devices which she hopes will draw attention to her slighted charms [and] force the reader to confront what she literally is: a physically exciting literary text."

Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife Details

Date : Published December 1st 1989 by Dalkey Archive Press (first published 1968)

ISBN : 9781564782120

Author : William H. Gass

Format : Paperback 64 pages

Genre : Fiction, Literature, American, Art

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From Reader Review Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife for online ebook

Jonathan says

Some beautiful, musical sentences, as always. Some fun and interesting typographical mischief, and some thoughtful musing on the whole text/body conundrum. Also my hardback first edition smelled amazing.

Most importantly of all, however, is the fact that I have now read all of the Genius Gass' fictional output during the last five months. I can confidently say he is one of the true greats, and possibly the most technically proficient creator of prose alive.

How would I rank them, you ask? Thusly:

- The Tunnel
- Cartesian Sonata
- Omensetter's luck
- Heart of the heart of the country
- Middle c
- Willie

And ne're a one would fall below a four-star love-in.

George says

"Do not drink rainwater directly after copulation, because the beverage weakens the kidneys."

That was an interesting read. Flippity flippity, back and forth, back and forth.

Gass sure knows how to use words to make pretty sentences

*****I liked it.

Coffee stains and boobs.

MJ Nicholls says

One of the funniest curios from 60s postmodernism, this typopathic novel has the bitchingest range of stretchy fonts and the craziest kerning of any apparently serious work still in print. An attempt to link “penetrating” a woman’s body to “penetrating” the body of a text, or something like that, it’s more an excuse to splice sexy nude shots of a dusky model with outrageously dated textual effects and high modernist gibberish. All right, William Gass would never accept that explanation, but hey, this was the sexy sixties—surely some of that avant-garde fairydust touched the recent writer of *Omensetter’s Luck*? Some of the textual effects, thought radical in Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark*, are used here in a more condensed form in this part dense literary novella, part *Playboy* special. (And yes, they appear to have airbrushed out the model’s navel on the cover, sexist pigs). A fun oddity for formfreaks.

Oliver Bateman says

I was prepared to write this off as tricky PoMo bullshit--Beckett without the heart, Barth without the punch. But in the last 15 or so pages, Gass redeems this bizarre little volume from the realm of the forgotten literary curio. "When he leaves he'll forget something. They always do. It's supposed to mean they want to come back, but I can't believe that, for I never see them again...and they always leave the most worthless things, too. They're so forlorn when they finish, as though they'd lost a little of their life while counting it--their dime on the way to the store. They fumble up their buttons, zip their zips, and if they'd paid me something, say a five spot, they could smile upon my smiles or say goodbye perhaps; but no, it's free, they're done, the holy office over, and they turn their back on me. I'm what they've left, their turds in the toilet" is worth the price of admission by itself (has anyone ever put it better, how gross that moment when it all ends actually is?). But there's more: "Sometimes an actress, shut up in her dressing room, loses herself in her role and emerges a queen; but I moult my dress and panties on the stage and only wish it were another, not myself, that I discover." And so on/so forth. I'm slotting it among the 20 or so best books I've read in the past five years.

Laurent says

Het plezier van de taal getransponeerd op een vrouwenlichaam: de tekst wordt het naar liefde verlangende lijf van Willy Masters eenzame eega, die op haar beurt de oneindig duistere geheimen van de vrouwelijke geest aan haar sluwe minnaar probeert diets te maken door met taal te spelen en hem ingenieuze Molly Bloom-achtige interieure monologen naar het hoofd te slingeren. Bij momenten verbluffend, soms duizelingwekkend, steeds speels. Indertijd controversiële klassieker van het Amerikaanse postmodernisme, gelardeerd met paginagrote naaktfoto's en gezet in een visueel erg rijke typografie.

James says

This novella was composed as an experiment. Therefore, it has some moments of brilliance mixed in with a lot of flailing. I read this along with the Dalkey Archive casebook (minus the Tristram Shandy comparison material, which I haven't read), and I found that material useful for helping me interpret what Gass was

trying to get at. In final analysis, I found myself enjoying the photos of the dusky model rather more than the sections with four narratives blaring on the page at once. Does that make me a heel? Likely. Does it make me a shallow reader? Probably. Was it worth the time and effort to read this short Postmodernist outburst? Definitely.

Jody Sperling says

Reading Gass is like walking straight out of high school algebra into graduate calculus: if the calculus was taught by your future wife.

Bob Shadel says

weird phantasmagoric hilarious move through around under over the text...

Llopin says

Well, what can you say about this? Gass intended this "novel" to be a statement/manifesto. Once you get past the wife/text parallelism, which is very witty, it feels as if Gass' potential were wasted. There's some funny parts, some cute fragments, but as a whole it just isn't all that enthralling. Still, it's a peculiar enough read for those interested on fiction wankery. It's good to see Gass' concept of metaphor assaulting the reader in such a way (honestly, if I knew nothing of the author I'd probably think this to be half-assed), and there's a slight reminiscence of Barthes' "Pleasure of Text" (written after this was published), but on a whole it's evident Gass is attempting an experiment and mostly failing at it. For instance, the attempts to create a parallel between sounds and music, or, at least, between utterances of words; or those based on visuals, remain dubious. So, overall, I think Gass achieves a genuine height in displaying how penetrating a vagina is close to reading a book, but that's about it. And let's not try to put into practice a feminist perspective - that could turn out to be catastrophic.

Here's a quote from the author himself (extracted from his Paris Review interview), explaining what's wrong about this book: "Too many of my ideas turned out to be only ideas -- situations where the reader says, 'Oh yeah, I get the idea', but that's all there is to get, the idea. I don't give a shit for ideas -- which in fiction represent inadequately embodied projects -- I care only for affective effects."

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

Imagination Imagining Itself Imagine

Dear me...yes, Professor...oh, you're still here...**I HAVE AN IDEA FOR A NOVEL**...well, you're the head of department...*I think you'll like it*...will it sell?...**THE MAN OF IMAGINATION IS GENERALLY A MAN OF HIS TIME**...you're the poet-professor...*it's experimental and expansive*...is it better than your poetry?...**I AM A PRO**...this is not poetry...*poetry, what's that?*...very amusing...**LET ME WARN YOU,**

LET ME INSIST...the words which speak, they are the body of the speaker...*she felt the terror of terminology*...analyse your reluctance...**WHAT'S SHE LOOK LIKE?**...our girl, the fat girl...*could you love me?*...I could love your big tits...**IT WAS A HOLLOW VICTORY**...I wash my undies in the toilet...*perhaps there's nothing open where you are*...I am naturally impatient and you drive me mad...**CATAFALQUE**...I used to write the scripts myself...*you the world, and I the language*...is that snow love?...**REHEARSE THIS CAREFULLY**...I'm not human like you...*wherever I am, I'm lonely*...I'm an image...**I TOOK MY CLOTHES OFF ON THE STAGE**...I am that lady language chose to make her playhouse of...*a cliché of course*...I lie here naked, on my back...**WHAT SHOULD I CALL YOU, HUNTRESS?**...let us have a language worthy of our world...*rich and well-born nouns*...sluttish verbs...**THE PENIS IS THE VERY INSTRUMENT AND EMBLEM OF THE IMAGINATION**...metaphor must be its god...*believe me, pity me*...what are you reading dear?...**HERE BE DRAGONS**...there is in every act of imagination a disdain of utility...*facts do not move me*...ever wonder why they call saliva the sweet wine of love...**YOU'VE BEEN HAD, FROM START TO FINISH**...I knew a fellow once, entirely imaginary...*he lives*...now that I've got you alone down here, amongst the footnotes...**YOU HAVE FALLEN INTO ART - RETURN TO LIFE.**

An author's experiment might sometimes suffice as a reader's proof.

M. Hornbuckle says

This is a postmodern eroticism at its best. I give it four stars instead of five only because postmodern eroticism, even at its best, is fairly limited form. In this short work, first published in 1968, Gass explores the pleasure of text as a metaphor for erotic pleasure, or perhaps it's the other way around--eroticism as a metaphor for the pleasure of reading.

For example, near the end, the narrator addresses the reader directly and says "Really, did you read this far? puzzle your head? turn the pages this and that, around about? ... But, honestly, you skipped a lot. Is that any way to make love to a lady, a lonely one at that[?]" Okay, you caught me. I did skim over a few passages, but I tried to follow it as best I could for the most part.

Gass evokes all the great adultresses of literature--Madame Bovary, Lady Chatterly, Molly Bloom--sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. If you like experimental writing and erotica, it's a must read.

Marc Nash says

A literary version of Magritte's "Ceci N'est Pas Une Pipe" or "The Treachery Of Images" about how a painting of a pipe is not an actual pipe, but a painting of the sign/symbol of a pipe. Here Gass conflates a text about a woman and her sexuality with the artefact of a book and the fact that you the reader are reading a text about a woman and her body, but such a body doesn't actually exist (except in your mind).

It starts off with really interesting and evocative imagery but then as it goes on, with up to 4 different narratives on a page it runs out of juice a bit and loses that fifth star for me. Very 60s, has it dated in our current century? I don't think it has, though some will not enjoy its experimentalism.

Josiah Morgan says

Gass, the genius, goes so far further than himself linguistically that he returns to a somewhat fundamentally, well, 'base,' base.

Christine says

I'm not sure I would have liked this book so much had I a later edition. Ordering from the internet, I got a copy from the New York Public Library on 53rd Street. The hardcover initially cost \$3.95 and late fees were 10 cents a day. Only one person ever checked it out, and this was September 4, 1979, eight years after it was published. This radical version consists of both newspaper-quality paper and heavy stock glossy paper, sandwiched between black lightweight cardstock. The effect suggests a handmade book-arts project. I've seen the paperback and the photos aren't nearly as cool--the contrast is turned up just enough that a lot of the detail was lost. The nudes in the 1971 are full of the kind of detail that make the models human--wrinkles, shadows, skin tones despite black and white. If all this doesn't convince you, consider the image on the cover. The old version depicts a woman sucking her tummy in, but a small pot of fat and a semieven bellybutton. The newer version--OH MY FUCKING GOD--they actually Photoshopped her bellybutton out in order to make the woman less fat. Not only is this a blatantly offensive design choice (suggesting women need to be less fat to sell a book), but it betrays the nature of the book.

The nature of the book: Without William Gass, Poe's brother might not have sold his insane little tome. As you turn the pages, you'll see all kinds of fonts, as well as signs that most often resonate with the text but not always. You'll see interrupted voices, changing voices, differing tones. You'll see pages manipulated using a photocopy machine to achieve curve, increasing or decreasing font size for effect, an occasional callout that only sometimes and only vaguely explain the text (if at all)--callouts like, "I salute you, with great affection and regard, for the last time," aside the main body text, "The Germans had to slay the stack out with a bulgar serb of croat they had hungarian a pole--back and forth, up and down, round and round, over and over--until there wasn't a bit of greece roumanian." This dissonance is charming, but preferable in small doses rather than in one great cover-to-cover read. Bits of more coherent text give the reader a break, but this is the kind of book you have to chew on for a while and get used to slowly. Like when you travel to another country and you get used to the food slowly, apathetically at first, then with deepening affection. One day you're back in your country, thinking, Wish I had some of that strange lovely food.

Jason says

One might be excused for trying to see this extremely short and breathtakingly layered (more literally than is the custom) book as a woman's body to be caressed and explored, while her soul remains mystifying and abstruse. That we are being addressed directly, at least at times, by the titular Lonesome wife and that there are pictures throughout of a tantalizing nude and solitary woman, may seem to support this. Willie Master's Lonesome Wife is more metaphor than metonymy. But we will not find a full consummation at the level of skin, and we should not be content to be merely mystified by what would seem to support mystification. Indeed, in the stunning final pages we are engaged very directly. This is a book about creating. About making poetry (in the form here of prose), which is another word for art. It is about creation. And each act of creation is like the whole of creation itself. There is nothing outside it, around it, in the same room or even town as it, to support it. It can ultimately only be consoled by itself. It is as solitary as Willie Master's wife. Gass is copping to a core of codependency. This is creation that needs to be loved (and which seeks to love,

even in violence). And it presents a body and spirit worthy of being loved (though there seems to be the implicit awareness that it may for the most part merely be used as a common whore). The poet creates for the poet and for the reader, and does so from an aching place. Much of it can be fun. Much of it can come from putrefaction and bile. Much of it can tantalize like a very lewd hussy, or like a polished ornament we may wish to despoil. This little book arrives at a very specific point in the history of American letters. But is also speaks to any time that will listen. It is practically dying to be heard, and as far away as conceivably possible. And it is in no way incidental that it goes as far as it can to the edge of the possible, doing its very best to at the same time not lose us (though some may not wish to follow it).

David Layton says

Published during the height of the metafiction craze (1968), Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife is like many such metafictional texts: clever, less deep than the author thinks, and over-praised. The premise of the text is the supposed stream of consciousness of the wife, who could be an Angela, or an Olga, or have some other name. The text is a kind of update of the Penelope chapter of Joyce's Ulysses in which the wife's free flow of ideas ranges across several domains of thought while she is possibly masturbating, and if not then certainly thinking about sex. The updating arrives in several different ways. One is the husband, who is only sometimes Willie Masters, is not the gentle buffoon that Leopold Bloom is, but is possibly cruel or indifferent, but certainly not loving. An additional update is that the wife may be a serial adulterer and certainly imagines herself so, but she could also be a prostitute, and at the very least is encouraged by her husband in her extramarital activities. However, Gass is not leaving the story at the level of stream of consciousness. He wants the reader to know that this technique is just that - a technique, a mere artistry. Gass does this by drawing repeated equivalencies between the wife-character and the book. Is Willie Masters' lonesome wife the character or the book she is in? Willie, of course, is short for William and the author is ostensible "master" of the text, so is the novel the author's "real" wife? Gass further borrows from and extends Joyce's techniques by using multiple typefaces and literary genres within the same story. The extension is that Gass brings these strands together on the same page, so that competing elements of the text spill across and interfere with each other, forcing the reader to choose what to read when and how to fit it into the visual puzzle that these competing fragments form. The reader is to understand that the book is not just the imaginary world encoded in the words, but the object housing those words, a thing manufactured, to be treated tactilely, as one perhaps touches a lover. Throughout runs the drumbeat insistence - this is just art. "You've been had from start to finish" the book says late in the story, and near the very end the reader is warned off the danger of "falling into art." Thus, this novel perfectly exemplifies the antagonistic relationship that artistic writers of the twentieth century so often took toward the readers of their works. The reader is to be treated as an enemy. The reader is made out as a fool for believing that he/she could derive anything so mundane as "meaning" from a story. The reader's pitiable demands on the author for realism, relevance, even artistic integrity are derided and belittled. The reader, according to the writer, abuses the wife/book with the demands that she perform like a hooker or a player in a cheap burlesque. But, were readers of artistic fiction at the very least ever as naïve as Gass and other academic metafictionists make them out to be? Did such readers ever really mistake art for reality? Better metafiction, such as those by Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges, invite readers to play the game of fiction rather than brusquely shove the reader away. Thus, this novel is indeed clever in its puzzle-piece connections of semantics, teleology, and phenomenology, but the effort is devoted to making a point that isn't really one.

Nate says

Review #23 of "Year of the Review All Read Books"

My first impression was finding on Goodreads that it was listed as 62 pages and thinking there was no way it was even that long. But it was because I physically counted the pages, pictures included, and I did this because there's no page count on the bottom of the page. There's a line in the book in which Babs equates her age with the number of pages in the book--but would that have been for the original TriQuarterly printing, or for this one? Or is it one of those neat little writing tricks that still works no matter the different enumerations of pages.

Now then what's the point? the point is that you'll never be able to take me seriously: nymph, drawled, pussywillow, clientle, Frank.

The book is a work of jazz. The main thrust is obvious, the parallels of a woman and a book being shared among multiple men and readers, but the large majority of the text is an author exercising in digressions ranging in the visual text itself, the musicality and rhythm of the language, to lingo-philosophical meditations and about a dozen other tricks.

Much of the reading is pleasurable in the same manner of Joyce of Ulysses. But compared to that mammoth, this is a quick fling, befittingly so. For such a conceptual novel, Gass on many occasions has a great gift for sensory experience: describing physical bodies, fat folds, flatulence, even one image of a "lifetime of shit in a bath tub."

The book is both a progenitor of the Danielewskis and DFWs as much as it was an echo or spirit dressing itself in the corpse of Joyce. And yet praising this beautiful prose and fancy literary techniques is like praising the body of the whore, shouldn't I be striving to praise something deeper? Or is it even possible with how little time she gives me despite the fact that she bemoans my leaving--sorry Babs you could have gone on longer, I probably would have paid more too. I've found that the book works a little too well as the whore, because it was fun while it lasted, but I did not fall in love. Maybe there wasn't enough there, maybe it was a practiced art on the whore's behalf, or maybe I just have different standards, but hey, I can at least knock this one off my bucket list.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Ask Professor Gass :: how a word looks, how a word moves and dances, how a word feels, how it *smells* and tastes like deep Islay malt. Ask too about the sound which those words sing. What a word means? Yes words mean, too, but that is not all. Words are things and they belong to our world in more dimensionality than mere meaning, pointing, indicating. Words live on lips, wriggle in writing upon creamy white pages. Look *at* them not through them. They are not transparent. They are dense with being.

Gass's words are described as baroque but we should go further back through art history to the medieval ages and think on their highest artistic achievement, the stained glass windows which gave life to the sepulchers which are their stone cathedrals. Those rosy-glassed windows were not for the eye to go through, but *to*. The window was for itself; for us it is just itself. The eye lands upon its panes, not yonder upon something not it. Just so does the eye and the ear and the panoply of senses land upon Gass's words. Through them comes to us a certain light; not a thing enlightened for us, but the light itself. This contortion of things which are not words and are not stained glass is art itself; not to bring things closer to us, but to create for us the very thing we witness. Gass's words do not *mean*, or they do not only mean, they are not only signs which might efface themselves, but are the very stuff of how we might imagine imagination imagining ourselves.

David says

Nice typography and interesting interrupted storytelling but come-on give me something to hold on to. Brilliant call to arms for language lovers on the last page - plenty of 60s bile and spit.

Andrew Sare says

I can only imagine trying to cheap out and read this as an e-book (if such an e-text exists). Like *Infinite Jest* or even more like *Pale Fire*, the footnotes, digressions and lit tricks whip you around to try to throw you off, and without being able to flip, fold and mirror starchy paper this would likely turn into virus on your e-reader or at the very least just show you a bunch of question marks - maybe with a few (WTF)s thrown in for good measure. Some textual effects are dated, but they're still fun and provide ample challenge to the reader. How you read this book is sort of a choose your own adventure experience - it depends on what rabbit holes you are drawn into, which you pass over, and which you go back to.

Some time after reading *Infinite Jest* I had an idea that I thought was somewhat original at the time, to have a novel incorporate a bongo series of footnotes and endnotes, and footnotes and endnotes of foot notes and endnotes, where the text can be read in multiple ways and where the reader could be looped into infinitely circling notes and concepts. I later discovered reading *Pale Fire* that this concept wasn't so original after all, and Willie Master's *Lonesome Wife* plays in the same waters.

Oh, and the prose in this is absolutely top notch too. That doesn't hurt it.
