



Omensetter's Luck

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Greeted as a masterpiece when it was first published in 1966, *Omensetter's Luck* is the quirky, impressionistic, and breathtakingly original story of an ordinary community galvanized by the presence of an extraordinary man. Set in a small Ohio town in the 1890s, it chronicles - through the voices of various participants and observers - the confrontation between Brackett Omensetter, a man of preternatural goodness, and the Reverend Jethro Furber, a preacher crazed with a propensity for violent thoughts. *Omensetter's Luck* meticulously brings to life a specific time and place as it illuminates timeless questions about life, love, good, and evil.

Omensetter's Luck Details

Date : Published April 1st 1997 by Penguin Classics (first published 1966)

ISBN : 9780141180106

Author : William H. Gass

Format : Paperback 315 pages

Genre : Fiction, Literature, American, Novels, Classics, Literary Fiction

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From Reader Review Omensetter's Luck for online ebook

MJ Nicholls says

In his afterword, Gass kibitzes about the strange route to finally scorch *Omensetter's Luck* into print. His original MS was filched by a creepy colleague (a possible candidate for the punning Culp in *The Tunnel*) and rewritten tirelessly over the unhappy fifties and sixties, with the occasional interlude for prawn-poisoning and *Accent* success. Eventually the novel appeared in 1966 with help from his friends, falling to earth like a particularly tetchy meteorite. Comparisons to Faulkner, Joyce and Stein are slung about like so many dead cats at a dead cat convention, and while Gass is clearly working within a strictly modernist mode, the comparisons confine this masterful prose to the redundancy of similarity—sure, Furber's internal monologue has the meandering drear of Dedalus on the beach, and parts of his narration drift into Steinian opacity—but the way Gass builds the rage, tension, madness and fly-on-the-wall horror of this novel is unique to his own dark vision. The Furber story, at over 225pp, is where Gass truly grinds his barbed-wire prose into the page, building up this bent cleric's downfall with symphonic dialogue and monologue, until the most lucid and devastating stretch of the 70-or-so pages that wind up the novel with an extended scene that drips with futility and hopelessness and black humour. If not quite as musical or accomplished as *The Tunnel*, this debut novel still hurts and hates a lot. Hard.

Bruce says

A strange and gripping work, William H. Gass's *Omensetter's Luck* opens with a short and arresting chapter told from the perspective of a minor character, Israbestis Tott, continuing in the second chapter to tell the story of Henry Pimber, who will be dead by the time the bulk of the novel gets going, the final three-fourths of the book being a vast interior monologue by Gilean, Ohio's preacher, Jethro Furber, a crabbed Iago-like personage filled with bile, poetry, and sexual fantasies, the crux of the narrative being Furber's transformation and redemption as he interacts with Brackett Omensetter, a sort of natural innocent who arrives in Bilean unexpectedly with his pregnant wife and two daughters, Omensetter unintentionally shaking the previously hidden roles and relationships of a sleepy river town in the early 1900's, sending events careening out of control, a cue ball at the break. Gass's language and metaphors are startling, creative, and arresting, and the novel could be read with delight and fascination for the language alone. It is not an easy read, the stream-of-consciousness style being sometimes dense and tangential, but Gass has a richness of imagination and mastery of execution that are rare and wonderful, creating a haunting and magnificent novel of remarkable psychological sensitivity and philosophical depth.

Jenn(ifer) says

... Words were superior; they maintained a superior control; they touched without your touching; they were at once the bait, the hook, the line, the pole, and the water in between.

I've always admired the craftsmanship that goes into building a piece of fine furniture or sewing a handmade garment or painstakingly painting a piece of china. I guess you could say William Gass is a craftsman of a different kind, a craftsman of words. It's remarkable to me how this man took 26 simple letters and created with them this masterpiece of (post)modern fiction. I've done a little homework and discovered a bit about Gass's writing process – how he writes sort of moment-to-moment, sentence-by-sentence without really

knowing in advance how a thing will turn out. Interestingly, from what I've read, the original manuscript for *Omensetter's Luck* (his only copy) was stolen, requiring Gass to begin anew. And apparently, the character Reverend Jethro Furber did not appear in the initial manuscript, and even in the rewriting, Furber was to be a minor character. But I guess Furber refused to be stifled, and we are all lucky for it.

I've said that I found Reverend Jethro Furber to be the most despicable villain I've ever encountered. I take that back. What we find about Furber along the way, as his character develops, is that he, like everyone else, is just a man. He's a calculating, cunning, hideous, heinous, hedonistic, hoodwinking human being. Maybe we expect more from him as a "man of God," which is why his behavior is so startling, so disconcerting...

While the characters are interesting and the story is compelling, the real reason to read this novel is the writing! It's the clanging, banging, rhythmic sentences; the artistry of words. It's the kind of book that should be read ALOUD! The complexity of form, the demands made on the reader – the perplexity of it all: these are the things I search for. Creativity, bravery, honesty – give me these above plot, above everything else. Make me work for my reward. *MAKE* me start over. *DEMAND* my full attention. I expect nothing less from a great writer. And Mr. Gass is certainly one of the greats.

Aubrey says

Word, word, what is a word,
Can it be seen, can it be heard,
down with the fish, up with the bird,
floating obscene, flying absurd?

A [word] is a [word] is a [word].

-Gertrude Stein

Obscene.

A man who uses a great many words to express his meaning is like a bad marksman who, instead of aiming a single stone at an object, takes up a handful and throws at it in hopes he may hit.

-Samuel Johnson, lexicographer

Absurd.

Do you see where I'm getting?
Am I not being clear?
I was doing quite well,
Dancing 'round here.

Perhaps a dance
is not what you need,

too much distraction,
not enough creed.

Well then here. How about
we go nice and slow. Let down from the jig
and let the words flow. We're still running on, but at a more
set level, carrying and clearing for a path more theoretical,
to the words. Rhythm is all very well, but the pure experience can only get you so far. The dance is done, the
seconds blanked with enthusiasm are now filling up again with small thoughts and phrases.

(Word, word, what is a word.)

A word is a chunk, a breath, a shape that flies far for all that it embodies. The inherent history and meaning
in each of these small creatures should drop it like a stone from the mouth, sink the head down in the mind.
And yet, simply release them into the air, and they speed out far quicker than belief can tell.
They take root even faster. The moving, the still, the kind, the cruel, the extruding force and the intrusive
gaze, all minds run lurid when words delve deep into their soft and tender flesh.

Oftentimes, the roots grow deep, and the growths run strange.
Shocking, the actions that can sprout from such frenzied throes of so small a thing.

Furious Logorrhea - A Recipe

Ingredients

1. *One Human Being (A for Short)*
2. ***The Word of God*** (*Any Word Will Do*)
3. *Knowledge of Sin*
4. *Guilt*
5. *Fear of Living*
6. *Love of Logos*
7. *One Congregation*
8. *One Human Being, Full of Joy and Love for Living, sans **The Word of God** (B for Short)*

Steps

1. *Emotional/Physical Isolation of A*
2. ***Add The Word of God***
3. *Ferment, mixing in additional Knowledge of Sin, Guilt, Fear of Living, and Love of Logos as needed.*
4. *Add One Congregation. Pause Step 1 when interaction is guaranteed to result in Rage and Contempt.*
Remove products to keep a steady reaction.
5. *Steep until optimal mix of Yearning and Loathing is desired.*
6. *Add B.*

Words can be wrapped and remembered as friends, unwrapped into points to spit yourself upon. Words
cradle you when living is futile, and keep life from you at arms length. Words are careful in their
constructions about you, careful enough to leave you with nothing but a sense of wasted time. Words feed
you your past when it is spent, and starve you of the present. Many words spat out at an object will pattern it
into paper, much as an X-ray clings to the bones and ghosts them outside the body. Unlike X-rays, there is no
'safe' amount of words.

Words and Life are infections, ultimately fatal. Fortunately for the record of human existence, they don't like

each other very much. It makes for an entertaining show.

Word, word, what is a word,
Can it be seen, can it be heard,
down with the fish, up with the bird,
floating obscene, flying absurd?

A word is a beaut, a word is a praise,
a word can holler and call out your name,
when you are sad, or left by yourself,
words can be such a wonderful game.

A word is a noose, a word is a knife,
a word breaks the living faster than thought,
when you are careless and surrounded by few,
the power of words you'll soon have forgot.

A word is your devil, a word is your guide,
a word is your womb, and in it you hide.

Sentimental Surrealist says

In lieu of a traditional review, let me offer some advice to the prospective reader on getting through the Reverend Jethro Furber (who is, of course, the real main character here)'s Change of Heart...

1. Don't worry; it all coalesces, and not just thematically but into a plot as well. The first seventy-five pages, which are the most difficult part of the monolog, do more to set up themes, foreshadow future conflicts, and analyze the Reverend's motivations than they do move the story forward in a cause-and-effect sense. That's not to say you can skip them, because the monolog is a tour de force, but understand that it both requires and rewards your patience.
2. Don't try to speed-read your way through all 225 pages of it. I understand why this might be tempting, but this section demands (and, in my opinion, rewards) intensive attention. So set it aside and reflect on it. Let your mind wander away from it and then come back. Take breaks and allow it to sink in.
3. Accept that you're not going to understand everything that Gass throws at you. It might not all follow logically, but there's a beautiful linguistic flow to it.
4. Have fun with it. Laugh, because there's a lot to laugh at. Pick out puns. Look for alliteration. Treat it more as a poem than as prose, which is really how the segment operates.

More to come later, in all likelihood, and this rating could go up, depending on a) the quality of Gass' other work and b) how much this novel stays with me. In the meantime, just thought I'd put that out there.

Mala says

In one way Gilean was more punished than Egypt, he thought, since Egypt was never visited by a plague of lies.

In his first novel, William Gass traverses the Faulkner-Hawthorne territory, with faltering steps in the beginning but by the middle of it; *Omensetter's Luck* assumes **all the tragic intensity and fatalism of a biblical tale**.

So what do we have here— small town= small minds; but no, those folks in riverside Gilean, Ohio were doing well enough till one man's bitterness turned the whole town into a cesspool of intolerance & distrust with tragic consequences.

Omensetter's Luck is a dazzling premise on the **Demonisation of the Other** – a person whose sole crime is that he looks, thinks and behaves differently:

I think I recognize the nature of his magic. For whatever Omensetter does he does without desire in the ordinary sense, with a kind of abandon, a stony mindlessness that makes me always think of Eden. The thought is blasphemous, I realize. And this of course is the clue, for more than any man I've ever known, Omensetter seems beyond the reach of God. He's truly out of touch. Furber paced a moment with his arms symbolically flexed. Sin's nothing but exile. It occurs when God withdraws. Should exile seem so blessed and free? He strode forward vigorously. Should everything seem fine beyond the fence, while we . . . (...) We must conclude he is the worst. He is the worst."

At first, the townsfolk are fascinated by this new arrival, by his strange run of "luck," then they resent him & finally due to incriminating circumstances, they hound him.

Reverend Jethro Furber gives a face to the right-wing loonies- in a sly dig, Gass shows this man of cloth to be a hypocrite, a bundle of contradictions :*Faithless he'd professed a faith. Faithlessly, he'd preached. Indeed, he'd labored on the Devil's side as if the Lord Himself had begged it of him, and in the line of duty proved that bigotry needs no beliefs, for on behalf of Heaven he'd been intolerant with dispassion, puritanical for pleasure, and zealous out of boredom. Touch me nor, he'd always cried; do not burden me with love.* His is a religion of hate: *He had in mind to preach a series, each one a wind of hell, a circle of the hawk, a coil of snake*—all show, no substance- in love with his rhetoric- with the sound of words rather than their meaning—given a choice he would rather be the toast of Cleveland high society than languish here in the boondocks— that seething frustration has to find a scapegoat & who better to pick on than an outsider?

In spying on Omensetter & his wife's naked frolicks in the brook, an evocation of an Eden-like innocence; Furber has seen something in reality that even his depraved fantasies wouldn't be able to match— the irony is that Furber is trying to paint Omensetter as a satan-in-disguise while he himself is all out to destroy their little piece of heaven. Innocence gets corrupted when Omensetter himself becomes conscious of his *luck*:

If Brackett Omensetter had ever had the secret of how to live, he hadn't known it. Now the difference was-he knew. Everyone at last had managed to tell him, and now like everybody else he was wondering what it was.

Gass employs irony at various levels, one of the most significant of them is the title in that what the Gilean folks regard as Omensetter's luck is, at heart, a simple person's natural acceptance of design & purpose in God's world, a glimmer of life and hope behind the signs, a state of Grace. It's a poor man's cheerful submission to his fate- making do with whatever they can & Gass cautions against a romantic view of Omensetter's ways- "an emotional view— which wrongly identifies the good of man with a life without responsibility, anxiety, or guilt— and without reason. To the degree Omensetter represents this sort of

promise, he is evil." Gass had conceived of Omensetter as an "illusory Christ"—his ways are not that of a Redeemer as Henry Pimber learnt to his disappointment.

In one of the most telling scenes in this book, when Furber accompanies Chamlay to Omensetter's house, the stark poverty & desolation of the household, is like a slap on Furber's face— as Lucy plaintively replies: *Oh we've never had much luck*. The wife always knows!
I'd prefer its poignancy to the Reverend's rhetorical flourishes anyway.

And that brings me to Rev. Jethro Furber's interior monologues & speeches to his congregation in particular—they usually find Gass in a very indulgent mood, giving many of his ideas & stylistic tics to this character. In one of them, Furber quotes from The Book of Genesis, & therein lies the central conflict of this book— God created this world by dividing things— light from darkness, firmament from the sea, etc— through this division, things define themselves— how is Furber's darkness to survive if Omensetter's light turns dim! This is how Roger Chillingworth crumbled to pieces once Arthur Dimmesdale owed up to his sin. It takes light to know darkness & vice versa & it's Gass' acute knowledge of the human heart that it's through his nemesis Rev. Furber that we get to know Omensetter best & further in knowing Omensetter; Furber comes to a true knowledge of himself. **The book thus becomes a metaphysical probe into the mystery of good and evil, and a debate into the nature of life and death itself.**

Omensetter's Luck is a deeply layered book & Gass took a lot of care in laying its musical structure (view spoiler)

, still, to me, its towering achievement is the highly complex characterisation of Reverend Jethro Furber—of "piety gone insane."

An Iago-like scheming villain, he is, however, not an unmitigated one— as a highly-strung child, he was shielded from outside influences & left to read Bible. His fevered imagination fed on the violent & lustful imagery of the Old Testament— a social misfit from the beginning, his repressed sexuality expresses itself in borderline psychotic behaviour— *Though mankind was his hobby—so he'd often said—he knew nothing of men.* And : *..when I was a little boy and learning letters — A ..., B ..., C ..., love was never taught to me, I couldn't spell it, the O was always missing, or the V, so I wrote love like live, or lure, or late, or law, or liar.* The unravelling of his mind in these pages is something to be experienced! Gass has called Furber the hero of his book— here is an antagonist who turns protagonist— Omensetter is actually no match for his madness.

A character & dialogue-driven rather than plot-driven work in that the SoC rendered impressionistic prose propels the action & here is where Gass falters— e.g. the parallel thought tracks that go on in Furber's disturbed mind when he is interacting with people & especially when he tries to brainwash Mat Watson against Omensetter— all those endless mention of animal names would drive any reader to despair.

I kept thinking perhaps there's something profound going on here which I'm unable to get but no Herr Gass was just testing out the musicality of prose at the expense of narrative flow. And it happens again & again. It frustrated me so much that I ended up writing a 2.5 & then a 3-stars review in my notes but deleted them as I reached the book's climax— the long, emotionally draining scene, played out at Omensetter's house, saved this book for me— in other words, my vote is for the message not the medium —& in terms of a William Gass book; that's saying a lot.

In his Blue book, Gass castigated writers who "plait flowers in their hero's pubic hair," ironically, here his

logorrheic prose flows as uncontrollably as Rev.Furber's nocturnal emissions down his thighs- that's a "penis in repose" for ya! Dee dum dee dum.

True, in Jethro Furber, Gass has given us an unforgettable character but where his speeches are concerned, another dialogue-driven book- Djuna Barnes' Nightwood did it waaay lot better- Furber, learn rage & madness from Dr. Matthew O'Connor!

And before you call me a philistine, here is what Gass himself wrote to his editor, David Segal :
Well, the book is seriously flawed. The middle is gross. It tries too much. There is too much narrative compromise. But large forms lack great emotional force because they take so long to complete. You can accumulate effect, but only easily remembered effect. The magnificent closes of FW or Uly. are only partly dependent upon the bodies of the books they finish. A work can have a bent back and get by, but it dare not have very many bad sentences in it.(...) Unfortunately this book was not written to have readers. It was written to not have readers, while still deserving them. This is the position I prefer, and I suspect encourages me to my best work,(...) From hopelessness–new hope."

Onwards to *The Tunnel*, then!

In a way, despite being polar opposites; both Omensetter and Furber are alike– both are misfits in their society, both victims of their own personalities- one cause of irresponsible naivete & the other cause of the inability to connect with others.

Despite that, the real tragedy in this book seems to be this:

Imagine growing up in a world where only generals and geniuses, empires and companies, had histories, not your own town or grandfather, house or Samantha—none of the things you'd loved.

Israbestis Tott is the only relic left from Gilean's past, the repository of its memories– & in his telling one senses the pettiness of human conflicts against the vastness of time & memory- how futile are mankind's trouble– full of sound & fury, & in the end, signifying nothing.

* * *

Trivia: In the year 1966, Coover's *The Origin of the Brunists* beat out Omensetter's *Luck* for the Faulkner award for the best first novel– a reviewer carped that a "good-enough novel" won instead of "a masterpiece"– those who have read both, would know better. Surprisingly, both the books deal with the "fierce" aspect of religion.

Nick Craske says

A revelatory sense of wonder awaits anyone who is yet to discover and read this fine novel. On finishing the story I sat in awe; head buzzing with rich and vivid imagery and sounds; the rhythms of speech; the sing-song lilts and verbal ticks of each individual character. Gass's writing is truer and more real than anything I have read. It's a brave book in style and structure —giving over the core of the book to the feverish, and often disorientating, inner thoughts and visions of a disturbed man, Jethro Furber; the town's new preacher— but this literary style and technique resolves to great emotional and narrative rewards. Furber's inner world is feverish kaleidoscope of Kafka'esque visions and words. This intensity is necessary for the final act to deliver it's emotional range. It works. It's the pure raw joy of literature and reading.

The plot is exquisitely drawn and entirely projected through character and dialog. It's an astonishing read. I'm personally left with that precious and rare feeling of discovering a writer I will cherish forever. Genius.

I could imagine Paul Thomas Anderson adapting this for film, like *OIL!* or *The Master*. It has a density and tone to match his style of story telling and character development.

William H. Gass, I'm discovering, is also an acclaimed essayist, so next up are his collected essays and his magnum opus *The Tunnel*.

William2.1 says

This book satisfies on a word by word basis. By that I mean, that every word is a mini-thrill all by itself. The running flow of the narrative is near miraculous.

Tony says

It was like this....

A fox got trapped in Brackett Omensetter's well. They could see his eyes looking up. *His eyes are like emeralds, they said. That's because they're borrowed from the fire at the center of the earth and they see like signals through the dark.* Omensetter's landlord, Henry Pimber, came for the rent, nagged to do so by his wife. He looked down the well, seeing the *dim points of red, and his heart contracted at the sight of their malice.* Omensetter would have let the fox there. *You can see how bad the well wanted him.* But Pimber got his gun and shot the fox. One pellet ricocheted and struck him on the arm. He didn't tend to the wound and lockjaw set in. The preacher, Jethro Furber, chanted something like prayers around him to no effect. And Doctor Orbutt was nowhere close. Omensetter came and made a red beet poultice. Saved Henry's life but stained Mrs. Pimber's counter. Henry was saved but changed. When Pimber came again for the rent, Omensetter held it in his hand and took Pimber for a walk, to the highest point nearby.

Such are the ways of stylistic epiphanies. Pimber would return there, alone, and with a one-way ticket.

What was Omensetter's luck? *That Omensetter had a secret no one doubted now. Gossip was continuous, opinion split, the atmosphere political. One would have thought it France.* His luck became a commonplace to the people of Gilean, Ohio. And a philosophical annoyance to Jethro Furber.

Furber is disturbed. Hell, the church kicked him out of *Cleveland!* He's in his last posting here at Gilean. His mind jumps: filthy limericks, delusional couplings and an obsession with the enigma that was Omensetter. And Gass takes us there, very *Sound and Fury*-ish. So, be warned there.

There. You see the wisp of plot, the philosophical and metaphorical tension, the experimental inventiveness. But that's not what it was like.

It was like this....

Necessity flew birds as easily as the wind drove these leaves, and they never felt the curvature which drew the arc of their pursuit. Nor would a fox cry beauty before he chewed.

and it was like this....

There was Mrs. Henry Pimber, her untidy hair, dull eyes, her fallen breasts and shoulders, exclaiming grief and guilt at his demise, while every gesture was a figure in a tableau of desire; there was the Reverend Jethro Furber, a blackening flame, and Mrs. Valient Hatstat, rings spotted on her fingers, a small white scar like an unwiped white of egg lying in the corner of her mouth; there was Doctor Truxton Orcutt of the rotting teeth and juice-stained beard, who looked like a house with a rusting eave; there was Mrs. Rosa Knox, sofa-

fleshed and fountain-spoken, with an intermittent titter that shook her breasts, and also Israbestis Tott, together beggar, hurdy-gurdy, cup, chain, monkey; and there was Mrs. Gladys Chamlay, the scratched rod, nose like a jungle-bird's, teeth like a beast's; Miss Samantha Tott, so tall she had to stoop in the sun she thought; and all those others, with their husbands or their brothers, invisible, behind them, making sounds to celebrate the death of the tea-weak Henry Pimber; while Mr. Matthew Watson, neither praying, speaking, crying, or exclaiming, uncomfortable in a corner, surreptitiously scratched a rash through his trousers.

and...

A leaf would now and then detach itself and sail into the valley. Henry tried to speak but Omensetter led. The wind flowed around him as a rock, and Henry didn't feel his voice was strong enough to salmon such a current.

salmon such a current.

Yes, do that. It was like this: the reader must be a verb.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

"I Know Not Whence...Nor Whither, Willy-Nilly Blowing"

William H. Gass positions words on the page, one after the other. Soon, a sentence takes shape, then a paragraph, then a chapter, then a section, then a novel in its entirety.

The words are not necessarily directional from the outset. A sentence goes in the direction dictated by each additional word. They don't necessarily follow a preordained sequence or work towards a goal:

"I know not whence, like water willy-nilly flowing...

Nor whither, willy-nilly blowing..."

Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

Like Omensetter, Gass (our very own Willy-Nilly) is prepared to try his luck, tempt fate, go with the flow, see what happens.

"The Moving Finger Writes and, Having Writ, Moves On"

There is no necessary plot as such. The novel emerges from the natural flow:

"You do not tell a story; your fiction will do that when your fiction is finished."

Gass is the vehicle for these words to get onto the page. His is the hand that moves or the finger that writes:

"The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,

Moves on..."

Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

His words are poetry. They are made to be spoken, to feel your tongue and lips and teeth move around them,

they are made to be heard, even if you only listen to your own voice, whether inwardly in the imagination or outwardly alive and aloud.

The Movement of Language

Gass is interested in the "movement of language", as well as the language of movement.

These words sound, they move around, they jostle for favour. Together they constitute or compose music:

"What you make is music, and because your sounds are carriers of concepts, you make conceptual music, too."

Having achieved their task, the words move to the back, unchanged, permanent, irrevocable:

*"Nor all thy Piety nor Wit,
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it."*
Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

The words are passed, gone, irrecoverable, at least until, in the manner of Proust, they insinuate their way into the memory of the reader and insist on being recalled.

Only, in the unique case of "Omensetter's Luck", this is not strictly correct. Gass' initial draft of the novel was stolen, and he had to reconstruct it from memory. Ironically, he felt it improved in the process.

Still, "Omensetter's Luck" is for me an example of what Gass said about Italo Calvino's "Invisible Cities":

"[it] is one of the purer works of the imagination. It is prose elevated to poetry without the least sign of strain."

Omensetter and His Luck

While the novel is named after Omensetter, or at least his luck, I wouldn't say that he is the chief protagonist.

He is a relative innocent, an ingénue, a naïf, almost a simpleton, someone who is content to see what fortune has in store for him.

In the words of Israbestis Tott, town gossip, when he arrived:

"He had everything he owned piled up in the wagon with this cradle tied to the top of it, and nothing covered. That was the kind of fellow Brackett Omensetter was. He knew it wasn't going to rain again. He counted on his luck."

He is passive rather than active, he is not an agent who dictates the direction of his own life or that of his family. He declines to rescue a fox that is trapped in a well, he fails to obtain medical assistance for his own sick baby. If either were to die, he would justify it as God's will:

"The Sky Rolls Impotently On As Thou or I"
Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

In a way, he succumbs to determinism. He bears no burden of decision or responsibility. His plight, his blessing and his curse, is "to lose the heaviness of life".

This approach to life might be understandable if you only have to deal with nature. Perhaps we are powerless in its path. The problems start when you join a community or broader society.

The Love and Sorrows of Henry Pimber

Henry Pimber, who soon becomes Omensetter's landlord, thinks he is "a foolish, dirty, careless man".

Yet, others describe him as a "natural-born politician; he's what they call the magnetic kind". Their faith is borne out when Omensetter apparently heals an affliction that Henry suffers (metaphorically, like the fox, "Pimber's down our well"), after which "Henry's own salvation was the central thing".

This salvation implicitly challenges the authority of the local Doctor Orcutt and the faith in and of Reverend Jethro Furber.

The Reverend Jethro Furber's Change of Heart

Gass devotes three-quarters of his novel to Furber, the real protagonist, despicable as he is. He is trained in rhetoric and has the town under his control, until Omensetter's arrival.

Gass uses a stream of consciousness technique to show us what is really happening in the mind of this man of the cloth. He is both lascivious and lyrical in an almost Old Testament fashion, "shaping his lips for strong sounds".

He obsesses about the "glabrous cleft" of a young girl's private parts and the "lower lips of fatty Ruth". Espying an older woman with large breasts, he imagines himself partaking in a "tipple from her mountainous nipple". Yet he sits in judgement, as God's proxy, over the "lewd speech and slovenly habits" of the townfolk, "[preaching] against frivolity with heat."

He counsels the congregation against "indecent propositions", all the time contemplating indecent propositions. It seems as if Furber is the most vulnerable to "the way of all flesh".

Gass signals that Furber might undergo a change of heart with the title to this section. I won't discuss whether or how this occurs. The plot detail is not important, but it is desirable that readers experience how he uses language to achieve what little overt plot he utilises to serve his literary purpose.

These Are a Few of My Favourite Things

It remains to let you sample Gass' writing. Below are some examples of his prose that I have arbitrarily chosen and versified.

I hope you can sense and enjoy the movement of language:

*"Every bush would blossom
Each twig sharply thrown
And every paltry post embark
For consciousness as huge"*

*"Well the rose is too common
And the phallus too foolish."*

*"There was hair and nose and napkin cloth
And painted trim along the stair."*

*"She was like an after-image still
A scar of light
A sailor's deep tattoo."*

*"How could man beget
Unless his flesh would rise
And what was there in innocence
To move the simplest muscle
In a gesture of desire."*

*"He's a bit better
And a bit luckier
Maybe
Than most of us."*

*"They would wallow safely
In the worst sensations
Conceive the most obscene devices
Place him, their preacher
In vulgar postures
Ravish him on ornate altars
Or on the floors of pews."*

*"The penis in repose
Professor
With that little hat of skin
Why, it's a lovely childlike thing
And each man's gentle babyhood
Is in it."*

*"He had fathered every folly, every sin
No goat knew gluttony like this
No cat had felt his pride
No crow his avarice."*

*"Note how sweetly
I pronounce her
Musically wigwag
My ringalingling tongue."*

*"You may call our soul our best
But this, our body, is our love."*

Hadrian says

Abandoned church near Somerset, Ohio.

This is a strange and almost mystic book, and invites as much dissection and study as some more holy writ.

The story mainly concerns two characters. The first is Brackett Omensetter, "inhuman as a tree", a bearded man-child with almost supernaturally kind and simple personality and 'luck' behind him. The second is Jethro Furber, a tight-lipped man of god whose only companions are dead men and his own warped mind, fixed between doggerel and theology. He spits out poems about ass-cracks and St. Augustine within the span of two pages. These two characters are placed in the arena of a tedious little town in Ohio. There they collide with each other, and Furber's little mind unravels. His bawdy lyrics become stretched out, his mind reverts to an animal form.

The book is so dense in allusions, wordplay, and stream-of-consciousness that it is only with great effort I can discern such things as a 'plot'. Omensetter himself does not make too much of an appearance, as a bulk of the story is in Furber's own mind. This book is not easy. It is damnably frustrating. It even has the luxury of being stupid-looking at first glance.

If I might use the reviewer's cliché and make a comparison to other books, this is somewhere between a few of the run-on chapters of *Ulysses*, Faulkner's Southern Gothic essence, Flannery O'Connor's morality, and the poop jokes of William Gaddis. This book is sensitive to the needs of the mind and soul, and dives deep into the questions of philosophy, and repression, and the human spirit. It should be read aloud. Not just the monologues or the furious imaginings of the priest, but the descriptions as well.

To read and re-read.

He had fathered every folly, every sin. No goat knew gluttony like his, no cat had felt his pride, no crow his avarice. He had said the psalm against envy, the psalm against anger, the psalm against sloth and the loss of hope, but they were no defense. He had wanted women. He had imagined them in every posture. He had wanted men. There was no perversity he had not thought to practice with them. Further, he had wanted little girls. He had wanted boys. He had wanted most of all himself. He had stolen. He had blasphemed. He had cheated. He had lied—his single skill. He had been cruel and contemptuous, malicious and willful. He'd lacked courage, piety, loyalty, hope. Without moderation or charity, without relish or enthusiasm, he'd led a wanton, heedless, selfish life. In meanness, in darkness and squalor of spirit, he had passed his time. Faithless he'd professed a faith. Faithlessly, he'd preached. Indeed, he'd labored on the Devil's side as if the Lord Himself had begged it of him, and in the line of duty proved that bigotry needs no beliefs, for on behalf of Heaven he'd been intolerant with dispassion, puritanical for pleasure, and zealous out of boredom. Touch me not, he'd always cried; do not burden me with love. Even now he made himself a monster, overblew his vices so his charge would lack conviction. Was that not, admittedly, the maneuver of a monster? So often clever. Note how sweetly I pronounce her, musically wig-wag my ringalingling tongue. May I not admire my skill like any harlot? Am I not quite honestly dishonest? So in all his mirrors, fair and square, he threw his errors. All this, of course, God knew. God knew, as he addressed Him—mewling, kneeling—his holy cloth and posture were disguise; that did not believe. Then what did he deserve? Wasn't it punishment enough that he perpetually disgrace his feelings? Had he sinned so much that innocence should suffer this from him?

Greg says

According to some interviews and things like that *Omensetter's Luck* was DFW's favorite books. My own track record with reading DFW-recommended books is hit and miss, sometimes they seem to work out and

other times (as in the case of a Curtis White novel) I am just left feeling blah and unimpressed. This book falls into the second category.

Parts of the book are really great and some of the writing is phenomenal but I felt that the whole subject matter of the book just didn't do too much for me. I find this a little weird because normally I'm all about religion / belief and disbelief and all of that jazz in books. And looking back on the novel I do see some interesting things going on in the novel, but the overall execution of the work felt a little lacking to me. It's possible that William Gass just isn't for me. This is my second attempt at reading him and I found the experience of this novel to be less painful than reading the gigantic *The Tunnel* but again I feel a little baffled about why I didn't like his books. On paper (I mean theoretical paper, not paper-paper, which is the medium I read my books on thank you!) I should love William Gass. He writes about topics I normally enjoy. He falls into the 'difficult' camp of Pynchon, Gaddis, DFW that I drool over like a incontinent fanboy, and I should welcome the challenges his texts offer. I can't put my finger on why he doesn't do it for me though. I can't say that it's the style he writes in, it's very similar to the way William Gaddis structured *JR*, except that it's easier to follow since usually you are just dealing with the focus on one character and not an ever shifting narrative thread (except for possibly the first short chapter of the book, which I enjoyed more than the rest of the novel). I won't bore anyone reading this with my stream of conscious attempts at figuring out why Gass doesn't do it for me, he just doesn't for some reason.

One quick note though, on the back of the edition I have the copy says that the book is "written in an exquisitely shaped prose that marvelously echoes the accents of regional speech". I don't think he does this nor is it the point of the book. The book is the creation of a mythical mid-western small town in the 1890's. There are moments where he does capture what I imagine could be the backwoods speech of his characters, but much of the novel is the interior monologue of the town's preacher, which is filled with dirty limericks, sordid sexual fantasies and thoughts on cleaner subjects that feel achingly modern and not at all 'authentic' (whatever that might mean). Actually, too much of what makes up these thoughts is borderline infantile and seems to me to be witty in an overly intentionally shocking way. Sort of the same way that sometimes Thomas Pynchon can get when he really gets going with his songs and some of the weirder S/M Nazi sections of *Gravity's Rainbow*. I sometimes feel like authors like John Barth, the Barthelme's, and Robert Coover can get this way too, and it makes me think that it's similar to a little kid getting a kick out of saying a dirty word. I picture certain readers of these books as chucking, actually guffawing to themselves while thinking something like, 'oh ho! look at the dirty dirty thing the man in the tweed coat just wrote in this sinfully delicious piece of literature!' while rubbing the patches on their own tweed coat down to the threads in a paroxysm of glee.

I wouldn't recommend this book to anyone I know. If they wanted to read this kind of literature there are people out there who I think do it better, but for those who like to punish themselves in their reading this wouldn't be the worst you could find, and there are moments of greatness here but there is also just too many parts that seem like literary masturbation.

Fionnuala says

Israbestis Tott is like a well, full to the brim with stories.

He draws up stories daily, hourly, first lines spilling from his lips by the minute:

In the mornings, Matt was like a bell...

Omensetter was a wide and happy man...

Furber never listened. He declaimed...

Henry Pimber lay with lockjaw in his bed...

There is the story of Kick's cat, the story of the man who went to pieces, the story of the high and iron fence.

There is the story of the Hen Woods burning, the story of the hunt for Hog Bellman, the story of the cut-rate tonsillectomy.

But no one wants to hear Tott's stories, they are *an odd lot*, he can't *even auction them off*.

So Tott tells them to himself as he rambles about his old haunts or while lying on his bed when he is too tired to ramble.

And depending on how he tells them, the stories are different, because Tott knows, and we know, that there are almost as many ways to tell a story as there are stories told, and that every time it gets a telling, the story becomes a new and different story while always remaining more or less the same story.

Take the story of Henry Pimber and Jethro Furber, for example:

tell the story from Henry's side, it is the story of the fox, the well and the great white oak;

tell it from Jethro's point of view, it is the story of the stalking stiff-legged jackdaw, clacking futilely;

tell it through the bulk of Omensetter, it becomes another story, a bitter story, an ancient story.

There could have been ten, a hundred, stories in this book. We know they are there waiting to be drawn from the well; we see them glint and shimmer at the bottom. But Tott decides to give us only three - Henry's, Furber's, and wrapping itself around them both, the story of Omensetter. So the three become one: the end of innocence story, the leave-taking story, the very first story.

I like *the pale geometry of the windows* in the dark church-like space William Gass has created in this book. I like the quality of the light that pours in, sometimes clear and bright, sometimes hazy and murky. I follow the dust motes as they float erratically, erotically, making shapes and breaking apart, ditties and couplets, Shakespeare and the Old Testament, all caught up in a very unmerry but mirthful dance while Joyce, *underneath, the blood about its business*, looks on from the side aisle.

William Gass, I am happy to have met you at last.

Stephen P says

If you are like me, one who loves the sounds of words, how they sing, sentences that embed in the mind with their craft, this is a book to relish. Phrase after phrase to read out loud, to listen. This is not completely accurate, the story spoke itself out loud to me as I read. It spoke in its voice. This was the voice, it seemed to me, of the work not of the author. All I was required to do was read and listen. Something similar generally happens but it is in the end my voice reading the work in my mind, the reader's voice. As Omensetter's Luck progressed my voice vanished. I believe I could have taken a break, gotten some popcorn and the novel's voice would have continued on without me.

The artistry of this language unfurled itself against the largest rock-shorn questions which could be found; death, pain, resurrection, belief, veracity, history, and whether to live. There are no signs announcing such is being done. Even when bejeweled with the brilliance of metaphor we are too occupied living the unfolding story which is leaping and shifting through time, residing within the complexities of characters, to notice any trace.

Gass's opening section, The Triumph Of Israbestis Tott, is remarkable for all that it accomplishes in inviting us into the story and foretelling what is to come. Elderly, he is attending the auctioning off of Missus Lucy Pimber's possessions following her death. He does not recognize those who peopled this small country town

in the late 1880's with him. They are dead or ailing. As one of the last survivors of the time he is left with the mantel of inscribing its history. Even Israbestis can see his accounts are stories passed down by the the malleable craft of storytelling. Stories change over time, bend to the flourishes of need and gratification.

This story is one where a stranger comes to a town, settled in its ways so that time can be passed relatively unperturbed. His easy manner, non-participation in the rituals and cliches performed to establish the agreed upon blanket of security dimming their fears, results in much gossip and speculation. We know about him mainly through others, about his unexplained luck, everything effortlessly working out and confounding the established beliefs and rules. They do not consider the reasoned possibility that when someone goes through a lucky streak their confidence builds, they relax, and are more like to perform at a level above their normal set of skills, at least until reality sets back in. As we know from our current lives, through the conversation of history over time, whether it is the growing murmurs of religion, sport, or..., humanity has shown the need to make the ordinary extraordinary, to seek the miraculous and conjure the iconic. It is hope that is sought throughout these words, not as a delicacy or dessert but as an earthbound need to gather what is needed to survive. Since the materials left to us are words, letters ordered at discretion, the results are stories passed on into revered legend which builds and expands and becomes an integral part of lore. The underside of this, since at some level we know stories, are simply lettered words, how they expand, and how often they divert into tributaries that seemingly are discovered at the moment of need, is doubt. Doubt is what is to be snuffed out if fear is to be minimized, comfort and security maximized. Yet doubt is closer to the reality that the world has to offer

This is why my favorite character was the Reverend Jethro Furber. Presented as an inner volcano readying to explode in contradicting beliefs, at times paralyzing, he was for me the only character who was at least aware of the complexities of his inner contradictions and doubts. While on the surface someone to scoff at, someone who suffered and may also have served as a precautionary tale, was the most courageous.

In my hands I was reading a book, a story, it too made of letters and words, which for me was offering the tougher existence of facing and pursuing doubt, not counting on and settling for the vagaries of history, belief, the muteness of cliches. This story in my hands was in my account an anti-story. It told of the possible future dangers of itself, though in its charmed fashion.

What happened to the lost 5th star, then? After page 150 when I was reading I was completely under the spell of the book. However when I was away from the book-those nasty calls back into the flatness of life-I was not called back to the book. That usually doesn't happen. Typically I have to fend off the return to the book to get responsibilities done and out of the way. At first I thought it was that the prose had become the writer's and was now too good, too polished, too smooth, a gloss with no sharp edges. After a good deal of thought I realized it was a passivity which crept into the writing. After finishing the novel and reading Gass's Afterword, he complains of a personal passivity. I gave myself the much earned accolades for depth of insight, self enlightenment, the humility of my gifts.

In the middle of the night I woke, proclaimed, "Oh shit," and went back to sleep. Now later in this next day I sit here with you and my laptop. Not easy but I think I was wrong. Being wrong happened three years ago and three years before that so I think I am establishing a pattern. Gass is a much smarter guy than I will ever be, and a stellar craftsman hard to find his equal. His style-shift into a gradual thinning passivity was conforming the style to the growing passivity of the town's people, our ritualized and cliched characters. We are forced due to the style to read and experience it as such.

How perceptive of me in the end to realize this. I can build on it. Over time create for me an icon of me. It's possible to lower the frequency of my being wrong to every four years. I can revere me. I can...damn it's easier to make an icon of someone else. Besides I've got some laundry to do. Oh, and I have to find and post that missing star.

AC says

This is very difficult for me to rate. The first two short parts are magnificent. The long middle third is mostly taken up with the long, rambling stream-of-consciousness logorrhea of Jethro Furber -- a very complex character, in the final analysis, but which is difficult to follow and unravel (though the general outlines are clear enough). The final section brings together all the threads of plot and character and language... and yet, I couldn't help but feel that the magnificent potential of Omensetter's remarkable personality and the brilliance of the opening passages were never fully taken up again. Perhaps readers with a more intimate connection to small town mid-America and (late 19th cen.) Americana will find a greater resonance in this than I did.... I may be too far from it culturally to fully appreciate what Gass was doing here....

In general, probably a masterpiece -- certainly, a writer's writer -- but one that I didn't enjoy reading nearly as much as I had hoped or expected to.

Paul Bryant says

THE REV. P BRYANT'S CHANGE OF HEART

Oh the brows that furrowed like broiling cauliflowers – name the names... who first were they?

Garima, M J Nicholls and bashful Ian Graye too, who kept his heart enclosed in heelskin normally, also from Nick Craske- which were a match for the beads...chatoyant...like Christ's eyes...and from Hadrian and his lovely daughters April Meows Often With Scratching and Jennifer while later on as the night wore on and the watchmen wearied and ginger cookies served and the mumbo jumbo didn't stir them unless it was the stain of beets and three more long paragraphs with a beautiful line somewhere in the middle

O William Gass
Such a pain in the ass
His difficult prose
Gets right up my nose

Indifferent as Jesus' dad's backside. Palmyra. Ninevah. Corinth. Devonshire Road. He jerked his head he arched his back he scratched his ventricles he shrieked aloud when he saw he had another 125 pages left

O O Omensetter
Will you ever get much better?

O O Reverend P
When the oysters all leave the sea

And anyway, here's a nice riddle
I thought thy brow was high but it turns out to be middle

Yay, thou miserable gainsayer. Gnaw your own innards. Thou'rnt good enough to be the seat on mine own privy shouldst not thou payest thy five star homage. Three is it? Three? Ugh. Ugh. Not a single pig's bladder. The penis in repose – shall we not say it is much like a badger in a snowdrift? No, not at all! Grr! Hmm! Now I intend to put my finger up my nose! Or your nose! Or somebody's nose!

O mistress Mary
May I fumble your wambles?
Nay, you are so hairy
I'd rather use a candle

Madeleine says

This book is elegant madness. Beauty given meaning both because and in spite of life's brutality. Chaos in 300 pages of one gorgeously rendered sentence chasing another and another and another down the spiral of ebbing sanity and diminishing credibility.

The Writer is God. Don't you ever forget that, as this has always been the case. Much in the fashion of a lonely deity or (at the risk of redundancy) a scientific force dividing What a Thing Is in half to create What a Thing Isn't But the Opposing Thing Is, the Writer creates something from nothing, wringing words from a blank page, finding meaning in babbling, rambling nonsense. What greater accomplishment is there to coax a stunning monument to all the stuff of life into existence on the uninvitingly barren terrain where a gaping void once stretched its unyielding maw?

The bulk of this novel is built on the crumbling foundation of a man who leeches off the ugliest parts of religion and his resulting slow decay, both of the mind and the soul. This is also where the most stunning moments of primitive wonder transform *Omensetter's Luck* from a mere battle of wills, a hackneyed rehash of the ongoing confrontation of good and evil, to something much less -- and also much, much more -- than a black-and-white yarn spinning in the same prescribed direction as its many tired predecessors.

Religion, despite its modern familiarity as a weapon of hate, a favorite manipulative tactic of politicians, a tool of regress, is ideally a mode of sympathetic understanding that relies on the belief in prevailing goodness, of doing unto others, of embracing the bigger-picture benefit of turning the other cheek or biting one's tongue when plucking both eyes from the offending face would be all the more -- though momentarily and devastatingly -- gratifying. It's denying the flesh to feed the soul. Here, a full century before it's almost the expected perversion of a benign idea, Reverend Furber, paying no mind to the hypocrisy he wields in flagrant embrace of the deadliest sins, clings fast to the biblical literalism that only makes sense to a deranged and poisoned mind. It is his stubborn refusal to see the world through the less judgmental eyes of a man not bound by dogmatic rigidity -- say, the sort of man who attributes the blessings of his life to sheer, dumb luck instead of self-congratulatory though self-defeatingly empty faith -- that is his fatal flaw.

(When one's declining physical health or dissolving mental acuity reach the preset point of no return, does it become impossible to tell the dreams of the younger self from the life actually lived? What happens when

personal fantasies begin to outnumber actual events that were shared by many, anchoring one soul to the greater landscape of communal experience? Are one's external and internal memories meant to bleed into each other to ease the inevitable transition of the experience of the conscious self back to the unconscious cycle of nature?)

Opposing forces will always be at odds but that battle is often a stalemate in neutral. There isn't always a winner -- in fact, in a traditional sense, there is more often two comparable losers -- because stasis is the natural way of things: When two objects are as equally matched as they are intended to be, order is maintained and the interlocking but always-warring pieces connecting that one integral duality to those upon which the rest of the A-and-also-B world relies, the cycle of existence remains in constant, indifferent motion.

Paul says

A wonderful postmodern novel set in Gilean, Ohio in the 1890s. Brackett Omensetter arrives in the town with his family. He appears to be at one with the world; I've seen the word congruity used to describe his relationship with the world. His wagon is open and rain seems inevitable, but does not come. He moves into a property which is flooded regularly, but while Omensetter is there the land floods around his property, but he remains dry. He disturbs the locals; his landlord, Henry Pimber seems to become envious of Omensetter. The local preacher, Jethro Furber (the central voice in the book) is in some senses Omensetter's opposite pole. Furber is, in my opinion, one of the great literary creations and as you spend a good deal of the novel inside his head, you get to know him quite well.

The novel opens with Israbestis Tott (don't you live those names) looking back; then Henry Pimber; soon to be deceased; has his say. The bulk of the novel belongs to Furber. It must be said that they are all, to a man, unreliable narrators. They describe Omensetter's arrival, his effect on the community and especially on Furber, his healing of Henry with a makeshift poultice, Henry's disappearance, Furber's successful attempt to turn people against Omensetter, Henry's death and the loss of Omensetter's luck. The whole is written in magnificently constructed prose; to put in quotes here would be difficult without putting in most of the book, but here is how Brackett Omensetter is introduced:

“Brackett Omensetter was a wide and happy man. He could whistle like the cardinal whistles in the deep snow, or whirr like the shy ‘white rising from its cover, or be the lark a-chuckle at the sky. He knew the earth. He put his hands in water. He smelled the clean fir smell. He listened to the bees. And he laughed his deep, loud, wide happy laugh whenever he could – which was often long and joyfully.”

Earth, air and water; Omensetter is a bit of a conundrum; he is on the surface seen as good, moral and a symbol of innocence. Almost a force of nature with his “luck”. However there are a couple of interesting incidents. When the fox is stuck in the well it is Henry Pimber's instinct to free him. Omensetter refuses to release the fox, saying it is natural to leave him there to starve if fate doesn't help him out. It never occurs to Omensetter that he might be an instrument of fate. The same situation applies when at the end of the book Omensetter refuses to fetch a doctor to his baby son, who has diphtheria. Omensetter, unlike the rest of the community, does not attend Church on Sunday, preferring to walk with his family. Goodness does not seem to me to be the right word for Omensetter. There is perhaps the beginning of the idea that although this is all about good and evil, life and death, love and hate; these concepts cannot be represented separately. Innocence is ultimately corrupt.

Then we come to Furber. Jethro Furber is a tormented, crazed, sex obsessed, unbelieving preacher. His interior monologue is scatological, blasphemous, colourful and full of rhymes and doggerel. Many of these are the sort of playground rhymes that we all learnt at school; but funny for all that. As Omensetter's life begins to fall apart, Furber moves towards redemption. Furber's language and metaphors are startling: “The

words popped from their rounded cheeks like half-eaten figs”; that from the first page I opened and the first sentence I looked at.

Furber does eventually express his unbelief from the pulpit;

“We are here – yes- yet we do not belong. This, my friends is the source of all religious feeling. On this truth everything depends. We are here yet we do not belong; and though we need comfort and hope and strength to sustain us, anything that draws us nearer to this life and puts us in desire of it is deeply wrong and greatly deceives us.

I ask you now to ask yourselves one simple foolish question – to say: was I born for this? – and I ask you please to face it honestly and answer yea if you can or nay if you must.

For this?

You rise in the morning, you stretch, you scratch your chest.

For this?

All night, while you snored, the moon burned as it burned for Jesus or for Caesar.

You wash, you dress.

For this?

So you were meant for this? You’ve your eyes, your human consciousness for this?”

It is a magnificent tour de force throughout. I do feel I understand something about Furber. In my younger days I was an Anglican priest (Episcopalian in the US); I had been brought up Pentecostal, moved away from fundamentalism at university and became an Anglican. By my late 20s I gradually came to the conclusion I no longer believed in God or the Church; and I was a priest. My house, job and wage all tied up in it. I could have done what many clergy do; decided God was immanent (within) rather than transcendent and the language was symbol and metaphor with no life everlasting (just be nice to each other). The tension created madness in Furber and I recognize that stress and the anguish; I left the church as I could not contemplate living and preaching what I did not believe. Furber ends up defending Omensetter after trying to destroy him and goes on to have a breakdown.

The whole book is a delight; it is hard work at times, but well worth the effort; it considers the very basic and important human questions and deals with them in a unique and poetic way. A great American novel.

Garima says

..when I was a little boy and learning letters — A ..., B ..., C ..., love was never taught to me, I couldn't spell it, the O was always missing, or the V, so I wrote love like live, or lure, or late, or law, or liar.

Omensetter’s Luck is an ode to words. While in most of the fiction writing, the characters, the plot, the beginning, the middle & the end, all gives rise to the words, it’s the other way round in case of this book, and William Howard Gass is a wordsmith and a tough task master. It’s a complex novel to begin with and the question ‘what the hell is going on?’ becomes one repetitive voice in the head of a reader. The re-reading of various passages is inevitable, their understanding, however, is questionable. Therefore this book demands an attentive reading, wherein it’s advisable not to overlook even a single punctuation mark.

Divided into 3 parts, the first part, *The Triumph of Israbestis Tott* deals with Israbestis tott, the ‘gossiper’ of the town whose sole pleasure in his old age is to tell the stories and his fixation with finding the listeners for his stories.

I know these stories. Most of them are mine, my mouth gave each of them its shape, but I've no teeth to chew my long sweet youth again.

Are those stories reliable is a different question altogether. This part mainly works as a preface to the rest of the book with introducing us to various characters with a blurred outline of their lives.

The second part, *The Love and Sorrow of Henry Pimber*, marks the introduction of Brackett 'Wide and Happy' Omensetter and his arrival along with his family in Gilean, Ohio. How the relationship of Henry and Brackett unfolds beyond the limits of tenant-landlord standards, for better or for worse is depicted here. The 'luck' in Omensetter's Luck is also highlighted in a more incisive way in this section which gives us an idea as to how it affected lives of both Omensetter and the other town folks, especially that of Henry.

The third and final part *The Reverend, Jethro Furber's Change of Heart* is the longest and the most difficult portion of the book. Furber is a town Preacher, and one deranged, despicable and dirrrty old man. *God I'm. Don't say old though, it smacks of affection. See? With stream of consciousness narrative mode and with little or no bifurcation between dialogue and thoughts it renders the reading frustrating. The key is to read slowly and accept the fact that not everything is meant to be understood but simply to enjoy like someone said in this book: The words are high and fine beyond my understanding but I like their sound.*

Furber is a strong literary character and the star of this book. His mind is his abode and he feeds upon his words. He breaks into rhymes without any reason, makes various biblical references in a metaphorical fashion and grows repulsive of Omensetter and his inhuman ways. He devises various lies against him but eventually he experience a 'change of heart'. This section provides us a brilliant insight into Gass's ingenious talent with his words and also the extent of his philosophical knowledge.

So, where's Omensetter in all this? He's mostly in thoughts of other characters and less in action. He's the 'talk of the town' but hardly participates in speech himself. Or in the words of Gass, "*.. he is basically a person without language. He is a wall everybody bounces a ball off.*" And what about this 'luck' of his? This book is basically symbolic of Adam and Eve's myth and how the 'knowledge' of Brackett about his 'luck' resulted in his 'fall'.

If Brackett Omensetter had ever had the secret of how to live, he hadn't known it. Now the difference was-he knew. Everyone at last had managed to tell him, and now like everybody else he was wondering what it was.

Omensetter is reckless and simply 'live' his life. He never bothers to stop and observe his life and that what makes everything lucky for him.

He stored his pay in a sock which hung from his bench, went about oblivious of either time or weather, habitually permitted things which he'd collected like a schoolboy to slip through holes in his trousers. He kept worms under saucers, stones in cans, poked the dirt all the time with twigs, and fed squirrels navy beans and sometimes noodles from his hands. Broken tools bemused him; he often ate lunch with his eyes shut; and, needless to say, he laughed a lot. He let his hair grow; he only intermittently shaved; who knew if he washed; and when he went to pee, he simply let his pants drop.

And maybe that's how it is. When a human is free from all the human ways, free from any examination or judgment is when one can find paradise on earth, else it's always a living hell. A message which needs reminding again and again, and when it's communicated through the magical words within the magical sentences Gass forms, we better learn it. Everyone should read Gass, that's all I want to convey in a nutshell.

Jr Bacdayan says

Aesthetically speaking, William H. Gass's novel set in rural Ohio is utterly close to perfection. But in a certain sense, art, if it is to be called a masterpiece should do more than just be perfect in form. It should, as bare as the word is, connect. I absolutely admire the prose, the wordplay, the little poems, and the revolving flow of consciousness in the novel. However, as fine as the form is, I experienced this feeling of disconnect. I was amused, of course, by both the wittiness and the baseness of certain ideas expounded mostly by the Reverend Jethro Furber. But in light of this, I couldn't shake the feeling that I didn't care. I was a cold spectator, something like a wealthy Roman inside the Coliseum, watching Christians getting mauled by lions for sport. Surely, I should feel a smidgen of mercy for these people, but sadly I did not. Is it a question of morality or craftsmanship? Did Mister Gass sacrifice the connection for artistry? Is the bridge ruined because of its design? I do not know if this was intended, but sadly for me this is the case. It is altogether similar with Nabokov where he sacrificed morality for the aesthetic, and people applauded him for it. Not immediately, mind you, but through time. But can the same happen with connection and the aesthetic? Is art relevant if it is devoid of emotion? This I take to be foolishness. Art cannot be independent of emotion, and emotion if it should be stirred, comes from connection. So then, is something so beautiful considered art? If it is extrinsically the epitome of art but intrinsically farthest from it, what is it? Art in figure, but not in essence? Omensetter's luck, if it were human would be a beautiful person, supremely intelligent, devoid of emotion, deeply introversive. A robot, a cyborg, a monster? It is something you can admire, but never love. Am I saying that this work is foolishness? No, far from it. I appreciate this work and consider myself better for reading it. But I wonder why such beauty can have such little meaning. I smile, I congratulate the book for its witticisms, but I also ask myself why I feel nothing. Not when someone died, not when a particularly sly limerick is served, not when the book ended. I closed it, thought it was good, then took a nap. I considered the meaning, but what I was afraid of was the lack of response on my part. Of course, this could all be a shortcoming from the reader, from me. But then again, I understood it perfectly, and consider myself to be more emotional than the average reader. I should have no problems then. I can attest that it is more difficult than the average book, partly because of the unheralded rotation between consciousness and partly the prophetic biblical implications of a twisted mind. Of course, one does not admit one's errors plainly, but then, this is my review, and this my thoughts. But, these personal musings, if you did read them, are somewhat similar to the contents of this novel. My rather personal take on things, is but a prelude to what you will encounter if you do plan on trekking this work. The title as stated mentions the lively Omensetter, but the machinery of this novel rotates because of Reverend Jethro Furber. One reason why I felt the pang of disconnect could have been because of him. His deeply personal musings, little sermonettes fill the majority of the pages. An emptier, demented, and darker character, I have never encountered in literature. Alas, he gives the book the biblical touch, the inane ingredient that makes you move on. His insanity leads to hilarity. Furber is the life of the book, but in a sense he also is the death. His ponderings can alienate you due to the personal meaning that an outsider could not care for. Furber, the death and the life; ironic, like his Maker. Jethro would have been pleased. Consequently, there are sacrilegious bits scattered here and there, but no worries. For what is holier than art? It may not illicit any emotion, nevertheless the beauty is present.

"Omensetter's luck. Likely. To lose the heaviness of life."

If William H. Gass's intention was for the reader to lose the heaviness of life, to experience Omensetter's luck, however briefly, then he must have succeeded. For I felt no emotion when I read it, now I do wonder if I felt a bit lighter. How lucky.