



Agosto

Romina Paula

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Emilia si è trasferita a Buenos Aires già da parecchi anni e lì divide un appartamento con il fratello e il fidanzato. È innamorata, le piacciono la sua vita e il suo quartiere. Sembra felice. O forse no? Il dubbio s'insinua per colpa di una telefonata dei genitori di Andrea, una sua amica scomparsa cinque anni prima, che le chiedono di tornare a Esquel, suo paese natale in Patagonia, per partecipare a una cerimonia di commemorazione. Emilia parte, giunge a Esquel ma lì, ad attenderla alla stazione dei pullman, c'è la malinconia causata dal ricordo dell'amica scomparsa, da tutte le piccole sparizioni quotidiane che lei registra meticolosamente, da ciò che ormai appartiene al passato e non potrà mai più tornare: la famiglia, gli amici, l'ex fidanzato che si è rifatto una vita. Agosto è il racconto di un viaggio, non però il consueto viaggio iniziatico. Al contrario: in questo viaggio nulla inizia, nulla è sospinto verso il futuro, è il passato che ritorna per mettere in discussione un presente stabile ma insoddisfacente.

Agosto Details

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Jim Elkins says

Why it is Important That Novels Fail in Many Ways

This essay began as a review of Romina Paula's novel "August," but in the end what I had to say was very simple. Yet the book's themes are potentially complex (it's about suicide, abandonment, love, fidelity, and memory) and it struck me as odd that a complicated structure, like a novel, can seem to become a matter of simple problems. This essay is more about that problem than about Paula's novel. First I rehearse my difficulties with the novel, then I explain why it seems to be significant that novels often fail in many ways, even though reviews tend to focus just one or two themes.

A word about the word "failure." I am not talking, in this essay, about the author's intentions: many novels, hopefully most, succeed for their authors and readers. "Failure" is, I think, the ordinary condition of average art in any medium: it denotes the fact that the majority of novels aren't remembered for long, and don't participate in the conversations about what might count as ambitious or challenging novels in the 21st century. There's more on "failure," "average" art, and other subjects in this essay on visual art: ow.ly/iVrh30bxbds. I am interested in what can be done with the novel when it's written, and read, in full awareness of precedents from modernism to the present. "Fail" could be put in scare quotes as a reminder that it doesn't mean a novel isn't rewarding, entrancing, or moving--and it certainly doesn't mean a novel isn't successful--but rather that it does not respond to the last hundred years of novels, so it is not a part of the conversation about what novels can be.

I'd like to thank Andrei Molotiu, who read a first draft of this and pointed out that my lists of things that cause novels to "fail" sound prescriptive, as if I have a ready-made list of things novels should avoid. For me, it's nearly the opposite of that. I try to have no preconceived ideas about what a novel is, how it will present the world, what it imagines as a character, or the lack of one, how it works with language.

This is an anti-prescriptive position, or attitude: each novel proposes implicit norms, practices, and theories of form and content as it goes along, and a reader will notice when it diverges from those parameters. For example, a novel might depict a character as amnesiac, and then recount an episode in which she remembers things perfectly; that kind of diversion from an established condition requires an acknowledgment: the narrator needs to explain it, or the novel needs to provide a logic that makes sense of it. Otherwise readers will doubt first the character, then the narrator, and then the implied author. Most novels don't have that sort of obvious continuity problem, but all novels have unevennesses and inconsistencies. They are what I am responding to in Paula's novel: she proposes the novel is about suicide, but pays unaccountably uneven attention to that theme. In the second part of this essay, my lists of "failures" are meant in the same way: they are things novelists commonly establish and then lose track of, or lose control over. None of the items in my lists in the second part of this essay are necessarily problems: they become so when they are not acknowledged in the structure of the novels that create them. This means even a tremendously inconsistent novel, one that has most of the "failures" I list, can be successful: "Naked Lunch" is an example, because lack of consistency is built in to the structure. Conversely, very careful and consistent novels can be failures: Agatha Christie is a good example for me, because her books are perfectly uniformly logically constructed, with none of the "failures" I list here, and yet the results are not interesting as novels.

One last thing: the translation of "August" is exceptional, nearly flawless. Here is just one example from hundreds. "So I ask him, then, if he gets away a lot like this; do you get away a lot like this?" That semicolon is a wonderful solution to a difficult problem of voicing.

1. Criticism of "August"

The novel suffers most, for me, from an inability to imagine things other than the main story, which concerns a woman who struggles to decide how she feels about an ex-boyfriend she's encountered on a trip out of town. That narrative is well written, and wouldn't have raised any issues for me, if it weren't for the fact that she encounters her ex-boyfriend on a visit to Esquel (a town in the southwest of Argentina) where she had gone to stay with the parents of a friend of hers who has died by suicide. The parents exhume their daughter's body, have it cremated, and scatter the ashes, and she stays in her dead friend's room. The friend who has died is addressed throughout in the second person, which is an effective strategy at least in the English translation. This has potential, but five major subjects are missing:

- (a) We don't get a sense that the narrator understands how the parents feel, and therefore
- (b) We don't believe the author has had any close experience of parents who have lost a child.
- (c) We are barely told anything about the dead person's sister, who also visits.
- (d) Until late in the book, we know nearly nothing about the narrator's own mother, who abandoned her as a child, and who she thought was dead. (Even after we're told, we still don't see any reflection of the mother's actions on her daughter, the book's narrator, which is bizarre given that the entire book is about commitment.)
- (e) We are never told how to imagine the narrator's relationship with the woman who died. It's almost as if the person who died was just an idea, not a person the narrator actually knew.

These are the principal gaps in the narrator's imagination when it comes to the narrative about suicide. The implied author appears as a person who has known people who have died by suicide, but she does not seem to have experienced other people's reactions to suicide, and she does not seem to have thought much about what parents feel. She comes across as a teenager: the scenes of attraction, doubt, drinking, and travel are the most persuasive.

Given that the novel is about suicide, the narrator's lack of engagement with survivors (and herself, because she thought her mother had died by suicide), and the implied author's apparent obliviousness to her own lack of imagination about those characters, leaves implied gaps in the narrative. The logic of the novel calls for more meditations on suicide, in several different ways.

I can imagine a new chapter for each of the friend's parents, whose grief is nearly invisible in the book; more chapters on the narrator's own mother, who abandoned her; a chapter on the narrator's awareness of her similarity to her mother, which isn't developed and almost seems not to have been noticed by the narrator or the author; a chapter on the narrator's father, who comes across as absurdly affable and forgiving, given that his wife left him and their children; and above all, chapters on the friend who died: not in order to solve her absence, but to let us know the narrator has spent time thinking about it. All we hear about that is that she likes one of her former friend's CD's, her cat, and her leather jacket.

These criticisms are all matters of gaps in the narrator's and the implied author's imagination. It "fails" in this sense: it proposes subjects and ways of thinking about them, and then it diverges from those ways, without accounting for its reasons. The book is mainly a teenage-style love story, with several serious stories about suicide and abandonment standing in the wings.

2. Why it is important that novels "fail" in many ways

I think a reasonable starting point in considering the criticism of modern and contemporary novels is that a typical novel fails. If the novel is reviewed, the review will usually focus on one or two things that seemed to go wrong, but as readers know, that doesn't tally with the experience of reading.

Novels ordinarily fail continuously and repeatedly, dozens or hundreds of times over the course of a reading, and the variety of the sources of failure testifies to the richness and complexity of the genre. If novels failed

for just a couple of reasons -- as scientific theories can fail, for example, by being simply falsified -- they wouldn't be as challenging, and it wouldn't be as important to be as ambitious as possible both in reading and in writing them.

For example, it could be said that "August" doesn't quite cohere. The reason why lack of unity or coherence is a common verdict is not simply that unity is an elusive goal, but because there are so many sources of incoherence, so many ways that a novel can be at odds with itself, undermine itself. A writer can abuse a trusting reader, disabuse a generous one, undermine its own logics of time and narrative, stray from depictions of character, lose inertia, lose track of voice, tone, mood, affect, realism or naturalism, idiom, style. It is the proliferation of pitfalls that makes novels so interesting, not the single judgment--lack of coherence, in this case--that might emerge in a review. "Coherence," in this example, is a kind of covering term: a simplification brought on by a reader's exhaustion.

This may sound abstract, but it is only a way of putting a common reader's experience: when you begin a novel, after the initial pages (during which it's normal to suspend judgment, and try to attend to the author's intentions), it is common to encounter different kinds of infelicities one after another: obtrusive digressions or ellipses, surprising and apparently uncontrolled lacunae, shifts in tense, solecisms, inappropriate asides, unwarranted assumptions about the reader's interests or knowledge, unnoticed borrowings, clichés, uncontrolled shifts from tragedy to satire or comedy, a million sorts of awkwardnesses, a tone that lapses, unintentional narrative discontinuities, failures of depiction, lags and douleurs, unconvincing details. Unless you note these one after another, producing a kind of endless and unreadable microcriticism, they will begin to coalesce in your mind, and form into groups. (I am thinking of Empson here: specific flaws combine in the mind into nebulous combined criteria.)

As you move on toward the end of the book, even simplified lists of reservations may become too long to remember. At the same time, if the author is living and might read the review, it may seem unhelpful to articulate more than one or two principal problems with the book: novels are so deeply woven into their authors' ways of thinking that it seldom helps to review issues one by one. (Teachers in MFA writing programs have to wrestle with that sort of problem: readers and reviewers usually don't.) Only the most patient and skillful reviewers, like Adam Mars-Jones, can conjure more than a few of a novel's distinct problems, and even then it takes many pages to do so.

But just because reviews simplify and condense readers' reactions doesn't mean that those simplified judgments are adequate. What matters in novels is the number of ways they fail, the bewildering and entangled and multidimensional way that novels fail continuously, on every page. That matters because is the clearest evidence that modern and contemporary novels can actually in some meaningful way contain thought.

Chloe Caldwell says

What pacing, what rhythm, what lyrical prose. It takes a skilled writer to find humor and levity in a narrative like this, as it's a novel written from the narrator's POV to her deceased best friend, just 21 years old. Romina's voice is reminiscent of three of my underrated fave authors: Thérèse Bohman, Victor Lodato, and Miriam Toewes. I'm only annoyed that this is Romina's first book to be translated into English. I'm on the edge of my seat waiting to read her others. This novel is an urgent reminder that narrative is how we make sense of obliteration. Feminist Press is killin' it lately.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

This book is about grief, but the narrator is so honest and intimate that it's like reading a diary or letters to her lost friend, that casual sort of writing you only do with someone you already share a history with, that you don't have to explain yourself to. A lot of second person that I read as addressed to her friend and not to me as the reader. Plus 90s cultural references.

I ordered this on an impulse a few months ago but saved it for August because of the title and because August is Women in Translation month!

kasia says

A moody book about being sad and stuck and self-sabotaging. I was surprised at how much I relished it.

Sarah says

This is the first stream of consciousness book that I genuinely enjoyed which gave it 5 stars right there. The writing was intoxicating and so much of the book was unexpected in a tonal and thematic way. This book is a journey that made me want to go along with the ride.

I now want to read more Argentinian books. ♡?♡?

Madeline says

Written to a dead friend, this book reads like a letter, like a journal, like a poem. So heart-wrenching and beautiful and relatable. I found myself moved in a very-specific way that reminds me of the types of novels I devoured as a kid. Always containing letters and journals. About young women thinking and writing and reacting. About feeling out loud in a space that supports them. A book to come back to. Hoping more of Romina Paula's novels are translated soon!

Katie says

Briefly the book is about a woman returning to the small town she grew up in, and while staying in the room of her deceased best friend coming to terms with herself and her life. While this book straddles the line with one of my least favorite tenses (first person present) it is really one woman confessing to her dead friend all the ways life is messing her up, and ruminating on what to do about them.

I wasn't surprised to learn that Romina Paula is under 40. Everyone I know in our early to mid-30s either is or has recently struggled in some way with the various emotions and family landscapes that Paula explores in this work. I hope this book does well enough that some of her other works will be translated, I would love to see what one of her plays is like.

full review: www.faintingviolet.wordpress.com/2017...

Adriana says

Sin dudas Romina Paula es una genia construyendo minitas. Pero si bien puede ser como dice Julio que este libro sea una mejora respecto del primero, y es verdad que están re bien tratados un montón de temas clásicos, el viaje las cartas la muerte el pasado el futuro la identidad, ¿Vos Me Querés A Mí? me gustó mucho más, más jugado y más increíble.

Carola Escolar says

Monólogo interior, lo disfruté mucho, me lo respiré en dos días. A veces se torna molesto en su ser monólogo interior; como leer el diario de otro. O como leer el propio diario. Tal vez sea especialmente bueno para narcisistas como una.

Emilia says

HEAVY

Alice says

Muy buen libro! Me gusto mucho esa prosa acompasada que dice, que dice sin parar, compulsivamente. Y la forma en que lo dice. Largos pensamientos que fluyen, que se preguntan, que se contestan, que intimidan, que se gozan. Hay capítulos que son gloriosos. Una escritora diferente, original, novedosa. Creo que al final, los últimos capítulos no estuvieron a la altura general del libro. Pero, de todas maneras, es muy recomendable.

Macarena V. says

A finales de año, en otro continente y sin esperarlo, me ha llegado una de las mejores lecturas del 2018. He estado tan dentro de este libro y de la maravillosa capacidad de esta mujer para poner los sentimientos en palabras, con toda su ambigüedad, con el discurrir zigzageante del pensamiento, sin caer en recursos exagerados y pretenciosos; que he tenido que optar por poner asteriscos junto a los párrafos que más me gustaban con tal de no emborronar de tinta al subrayar todo el libro.

El hecho de haberlo leído en su país de origen, comprendiendo el lenguaje, la ciudad, rodeada de su contexto... le suma un punto de magia a mi impresión. Pero eso no quita que recomiende abiertamente a todos que os metáis en la cabeza de esta autora porque, definitivamente, merece la pena.

Teresa says

This book was really good, but because I identified with the protagonist so much I (to some extent) felt uncomfortable with the book. I felt uncomfortable because the book was honest about facets of my own emotional life that I would not feel comfortable talking about or exposing. The protagonist is very insecure and ambivalent about her life choices. Her college career, her boyfriend, her apartment, her city.. all these things she feels deeply ambivalent towards. I can identify with that 100%, but that ambivalence is something I personally don't have the easiest time facing head on.

this book reads really quickly because it's only 200 pages. i was glad I could finish it in one evening because of my discomfort.

I would say this book is amazing. But not easy. Somehow it reminds me of how I feel when I go to a therapy session. During reading this book I felt a similar anxiety to one that I have felt in therapy -- anxiety induced by talking out loud about the truth of one's life.

I recommend this for women in their 20s or 30s. also, the cover is so gorgeous. and it has a unique texture to it.. it feels almost rubberized? it was definitely the fanciest feeling paperback i've ever encountered. A+ to the book maker. :)

Sara says

To every Gen X writer who fell back on irony because the stories of twenty-somethings “just weren’t very interesting”, here are 199 pages of evidence (footnote free!) that you should have tried harder. This is a masterpiece, and I am very sad now that I don’t read Spanish because I would snap up the rest of Paula’s work in a heartbeat.

Brenda says

Agosto es una excelente novela. Ya lo dije y lo repito, Romina Paula sabe escribir. Maneja las palabras sin ademanes grandilocuentes, de manera sencilla pero contundente. La profundidad que logra en el relato de las situaciones (aún cuando casi no hay diálogo, esos diálogos brillantes a los que nos tiene acostumbrados dramáticamente) pone más de una vez la piel de gallina. Nada pasa, todo pasa. El pensamiento interno, las dudas, las mezclas. Imperdible tránsito para quien quiera emprender el viaje. Ahora sí, una vez que se empieza, imposible parar.
