

Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied

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What is the book about? And is it for real or just made up? Those are two central, if somewhat naive questions to ask about a book like this. To address the first. The narrator of the book is both pursuing and being pursued by his estranged wife during a classical cross-country trip across the States, including some distractions such as a brief affair with some non-descript woman whom he accompanies with her small child on a car-trip from Pennsylvania to St-Louis, as well as an aborted trip to meet a brother working as a lumberjack in snowy Oregon. His wife manages to have him mugged by proxies down in Arizona, and when they meet up in California she tries to kill him by shooting, but predictably fails. Then they have some kind of reconciliation (for what time?) and meet up with the old director John Ford, who reminiscences with the kind of wisdom you expect from an old sage, who has taken leave of active life, yet not yet lost the ability to reflect on it. As a director he is on the outlook for stories, and the story of this book, as briefly recalled above, is fed him. Thus the book closes in on itself in classical post-modernistic manner.

Is it all true? Did this really happen to the author, who is to be identified with the narrator? There are of course many similarities. The narrator is like the author an Austrian. He is also about the same age as the author was at the time. But does this quench matters? The knowledgeable reader would be in possession of more biographical details of the authors life, and hence be able to point at further corroborations. But is all of this not a mere red herring, a game played by the author, and only to be taken literally by the child? And does it really matter? If it does not matter, what matters really in the book?

The book is really about the encounter between the sophisticated European and the vulgar immensity of the States and how this grates on the sensibilities of the former. The method is that of the collage. A variety of concrete observations are put together, just like a painting consists of newspaper clippings, pieces of textiles or scraps of porcelain, all glued on and joined by regular brushwork. The technique is not unlike that of Max Frisch, who has the masterly ability to evoke a feeling of place by just some seemingly random remarks. The endless monotony of driving along highways in the Mid-West, the sand blowing in Arizona, the wet snow in Oregon. The anonymity of hotel rooms, the obsessive takings of Polaroid pictures (the instant gratification before the advent of the digital), the convenient sexual gratification. In the end, however, the book gives a feeling of emptiness and dissatisfaction, with a touch of disgust. And this might also be the ultimate intention.

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