

Pulse

J.Barnes

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A collection of short stories, some of them connected, most isolated, and predominantly set on modern times. The two exceptions to the latter somehow comes across as a bit pointless, the charm of those exercises, if any, is the contemporary British touch.

Three of the stories are related, giving snippets of conversations at successive parties, all of them hosted by Phil and Joanne. This is a fun exercise, the rapid fire of pointless conversation doing its Brownian motion in an associative soup. There are a lot of sly references to sex, as well as contemporary political gossip such as the emergence of Obama. As to the 9/11 being masterminded by the Bush administration this is dismissed on the grounds that it all worked without a hitch, and hence could not have been the work of Bush and his cohorts. Quite funny. One can even imagine the author thinking up this rejoinder searching and straining for a way to use it. Or Bush making Reagan look good, as well as the former may have been simple, but not simple-minded, something that sounds quite profound, but is not.

Most of the other stories are about man in their early thirties looking for love and relationships. At that age you are still young, but not much longer, and there is a certain urgency. Previous relationships have for some reasons never been so successful, there has always been a sense of missing some crucial clues, new ones seem always to be on the verge of collapse. The major characters tend to be rather similar. No alpha-males by a long shot. Shy, considerate and slightly pedantic, with habits and hobbies tending towards the obsessive. Could it be autobiographical? Or a way of the author to get engaged in characters rather distant from himself?

Some interesting issues are brought up. Such as if your parents have had a happy marriage does that mean they you will have difficulty having one, being oppressed by the example set? If so parents do their children a favor (and their grandchildren a disfavor), if they have a miserable marriage?

Are such stories seriously meant, or are they to be thought of as the discarded debris of more ambitious projects? Sometimes one wonders.

November 29 (December 3), 2012 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se ■