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Love Done Wrong

Allison Epstein

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(Review)

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employed to focus our attention on how our attention follows patterns of basic corporeal perception, and how this has a basis itself in “animal perception.” The word “animalist” becomes a term for those from Lucretius to Temple Grandin who have worked with such awareness. Derrida’s surprising later work on the “animal” and the “beast” is engaged to poke holes in the old “we are the animal with language” division of the world. Bakhtin is brought in to emphasize the dialogical aspect of literary language, often crossing such divides. Even more from each of these thinkers might have been effectively used to show how the animal crops up again within the enclave of the language using species, but each is used to demonstrate a good point.

The elaborately detailed readings of animalist thinkers and literary writers basing their work in perception may not be everyone’s cup of tea, but among them are gems of analysis and appreciation. Neither objectivity nor subjectivity, science nor humanism, is given the upper hand in showing how “concepts are perception-derived.” John Muir’s mix of “Christianity and Mountaneity” exemplifies one kind of cross-over. Alice Notley’s phantasmagoria in *The Descent of Alette* (1992) is used to display another. Grandin’s struggle with her own autistic thinking and how to fit it into the world

of science shows another. Wesling’s findings, from his close readings on up to his big ideas, extend our sense of reading and writing into our animal mind-body.

His “Afterword: Alphabet for Animalists” is fun and intelligent too. Its composition evokes Roland Barthes’ fragmentary style as it makes use of notes not incorporated in the body of the argument but illuminating aspects of it. These are nuggets for further thinking in the field the humanities can become (as “the animalities”?). Any one of the more than fifty entries in the afterword could become the basis for a full study, even a pithy quote like the one from John Granger, “The fang of the sentence is coiled in Grammar.” Questions about the “inner life” of animals are left aside in the main body of the argument for our human animals inside, but they are evocatively raised in the afterword. In one entry, the topic of “zoosemiotics” is brought to light. In another, the concept of literary language as bounded by literature is challenged. In another from Granger’s emails, the human/animal divide is challenged in such a way as to result in the assertion that “then the human being wouldn’t have to be a human being, if it ever could, although it is an animal.” Wesling doesn’t try to take us that far from where we have been, but he does join Derrida in

raising the question of whether “the human” has some intrinsic meaning or not really.

This book gives us new fresh space, with an ongoing history, to investigate human consciousness and its application in the high endeavors of literary language. Though the book succumbs to some hero-worship and hyper-detailing, as a search for origins and liberation, it opens many more doors than it closes. It is the proper next step in Donald Wesling’s thinking, after contributions on literati and literary devices and the social embeddedness of literature, and we should read and be grateful. And then we should get out and do some more work of our own as “animalists.”

The Reverend Dr. Thomas C. Marshall retired from Cabrillo Community College and is now active in the writing scene from San Diego as a performance poet. He helped edit the provocative anthology The End of the World Project (2019) that recently appeared from Moria Books. His own essays and poems have appeared in numerous US and Canadian magazines over the last half century.

LOVE DONE WRONG

Allison Epstein

THEIR HOUSES

Meredith Sue Willis

West Virginia University Press
<https://wvupressonline.com/node/760>
252 Pages; Print, \$19.99

The line between love and obsession is a dangerously thin one. We can be driven to protect the ones we love or to change them, to support them or possess them, all without suspecting any impure motives on our part. *Their Houses*, the latest novel by Meredith Sue Willis, provides a sincere and moving look at the difficulties of love, belonging, and family — with a dash of survivalist thriller-comedy to keep readers on their toes.

Their Houses is told through the voices of six narrators: sisters Grace and Dinah, Grace’s doctor husband David, Dinah’s born-again husband Ray, Dinah’s daughter Aleda, and the sisters’ childhood friend Richie. Richie, though the only non-relative in the sextet, is the catalyst pushing all six stories forward. Faced with crushing loneliness and an ever-advancing ALS diagnosis, Richie copes by plotting to move Dinah’s family onto his West Virginia survivalist compound so she can serve as his caretaker. Since childhood, Dinah has been a talisman for Richie, an objectified stand-in for the eternal feminine that he will possess any way he can: “He didn’t care if she lived in another house, if she had sex with her husband. He didn’t care if she kept having babies. He believed he could sleep if Dinah was nearby.” Here, love crashes across the line into obsession; a move the characters struggle to see, but the reader cannot ignore.

Beyond Richie’s possessive pining, the novel weaves together multiple interpersonal subplots that nest neatly and skillfully into one another. Grace and Dinah’s risky childhood lays the groundwork for Dinah’s evangelical rebirth.

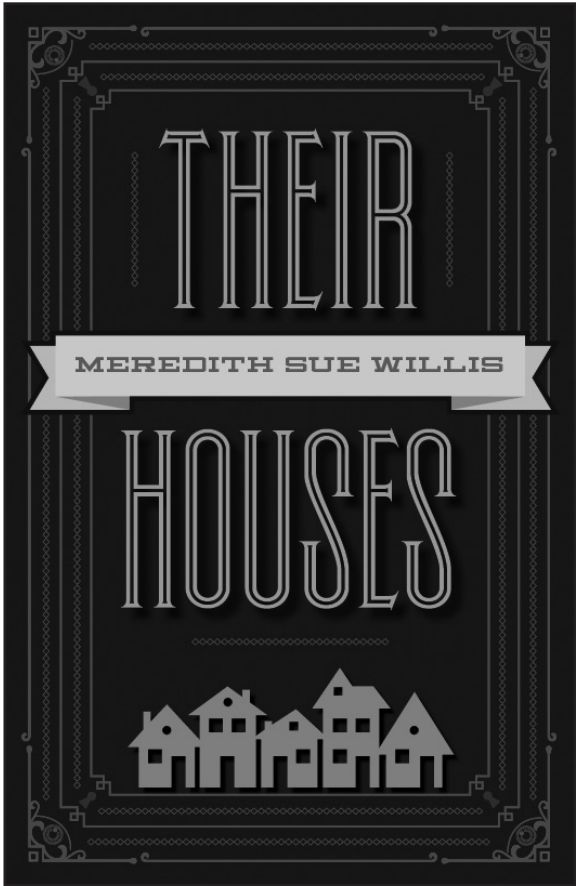
In the same way, Grace’s struggle with depression meshes into her marriage to David, a Jewish atheist doctor and rationalist. Thematic complexity builds throughout this web of subplots, incorporating mental and physical illness, addiction, religion, sexual desire, grief and loss, motherhood, small-town politics, and more. Despite this multitude of thematic concerns, the novel maintains a strong sense of cohesion — a tall order, and an impressive effect.

Part of this is thanks to the novel’s skillful handling of its six narrators. Whereas other multi-perspective novels provide the jerky start-stop feeling that frustrates many readers, *Their Houses* manages to keep the plot moving seamlessly forward. This is especially true toward the last third of the novel. When Richie’s twisted plot ramps up and the novel transitions from family drama to Bond-like action sequence, the viewpoints continue to switch without shifting scene or action. This

Their Houses treats religion sympathetically without being afraid to criticize its failings.

allows the device to work in its most effective sense: a means for providing different interior experiences of the same high-stakes moment, rather than as a contrived transition mechanism.

In addition to skilled narration and thematic complexity, *Their Houses* deftly handles the dynamics of religion in a small West Virginia town by blending comedy with sincerity. Ray’s gung-ho evangelicalism is on occasion played for laughs, especially in his unexpected Doomsday preaching over a chili dinner: “‘Buckets of blood pouring out the doors of the great slaughterhouse! Oh save us, Jesus!’” The fact that Ray turned to fire-and-brimstone preaching after transporting explosives for the anti-government Mountain Militia further undercuts the message, toying with the notion of religious hypocrisy.



However, the novel is willing to engage with religion beyond gentle mockery. Ray may be overly enthusiastic when professing “the saving grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” but his enthusiasm is never seen as anything but genuine. He is a steadfast father to all his children and stepchildren; he “shed his smiles equally on the skinny brown-haired twins and little Benjamin when he came along, and Aleda who was not even his own.” Though Dinah has been forced to alter her life to follow Ray’s teachings, this is not presented as repression or a loss. Instead, Ray offers comfort and steadiness after Dinah’s traumatic childhood. She responds warmly and affectionately to him, wanting “to crawl through the phone deep into his arms and chest” after a stressful phone call. Their

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relationship is certainly not without its troubles, but nor is it the ultra-patriarchal trope of the West Virginia evangelical. *Their Houses* treats religion sympathetically without being afraid to criticize its failings — a difficult line to walk, but enormously satisfying when done successfully.

Just as the novel subverts trope with Ray, it attempts to do so with Richie. The broken man holding a torch for an uninterested woman has been part of literature for hundreds of years, but the novel avoids romanticizing its broken loner. Richie is manifestly pathetic. His motives are petty. His words are shallow. He quotes Ayn Rand as Ray quotes the Gospel. He enters the scene wearing “sunglasses, indoors, and a large floppy hat, like a movie star incognito or maybe he had a skin condition.” Taken all together, he is not a brooding Brontë hero but a pleading, underhand, profoundly troubled man who does not know when to stop.

Their Houses makes no apologies for its topicality — for example, the Mountain Militia’s botched attack on an FBI fingerprinting center calls to mind not a few citizen militias of recent years. This sense of current events makes its refusal to romanticize Richie necessary. In the glow of the #MeToo movement, Richie could be read as a repudiation of the emotionally abusive heroes of romantic novels gone by. Unrequited love, when pursued single-mindedly, is stalking, not romance, and *Their Houses* does not pretend otherwise.

This said, the novel doubles back on its condemnation of Richie’s behavior. If there is a critique to be made of *Their Houses*, it is the static quality of Richie’s character, when juxtaposed with the increased generosity in his narrative presentation. Richie does not seem to have changed in respect to his obsession by the end of the novel. He maintains frequent communication with Dinah, and he even considers recruiting her daughter Aleda to help him with assisted suicide down the line. While other narrators have made visible strides toward overcoming their demons, Richie ends where he began: behaving inappropriately to women and slavishly striving to make Dinah happy: “of course he agreed to whatever Dinah wanted.” The novel seems to suggest that Richie’s ALS justifies his predatory behavior toward Dinah, as seen in her phone conversation with Ray:

She said, “It’s so sad, Raymond.
All this nonsense, and Richie just wanted
to get someone to take care of him.”
“We can think about it, if you
want to.”
“No! I’m not moving up here.”
“Maybe he’ll come down to us,”
said Raymond.

Dinah seems to view manipulation and stalking as the sad, inevitable aftereffects of chronic illness.

This occasionally reads as blanket forgiveness for Richie’s behavior, which makes inner peace at the end of the novel feel unearned. Of course, morally questionable people do not always get the endings they deserve, but the novel seems to suggest that Richie has suffered enough through ALS, and a well-meaning woman really ought to ease his burden for a time. This created a small feeling of discomfort at the end of what is, on the whole, an exceptionally thoughtful novel.

Their Houses gives its readers many of the best elements one could want from a novel: flawed characters portrayed generously, well-balanced plots, and a clear, conversational narrative voice that guides the reader along. With an entertaining blend of high-action farce and moving interpersonal drama, *Their Houses* both entertains in the moment and lingers after the last page.

Allison Epstein is pursuing her MFA in fiction at Northwestern University. Her writing has been published in outlets including Hypertrophic, the Rathalla Review, Pantheon, the Huffington Post, and others.

MISTRESS OF DISTRACTION

Barbara Henning

WOBBLE

Rae Armantrout

Wesleyan University Press
https://www.hfsbooks.com
160 Pages; Print, \$11.99

eagerly splayed,
still practicing

the old faith
as I do—

these words,
pushed to the fore,

posing

At the end of the poem, I’m wondering about the relationship between the tree and poet and on the meaning of “old faith” and “posing.” As poets, aren’t our words and lines a type of posturing? And as we age and continue writing, some of us, like Armantrout, keep the old faith, keep writing and meditating on the meaning of life through language art. The tree’s limbs splay open, minute-by-minute continuing throughout its life to adjust for balance and to allow sunlight and water to merge with its body. As it stands in the middle of a field so beautiful, all by itself, knotted and aged, I imagine the poet standing there, too, perhaps her arms stretched under the sun, absorbing the beauty of the tree and the sun.

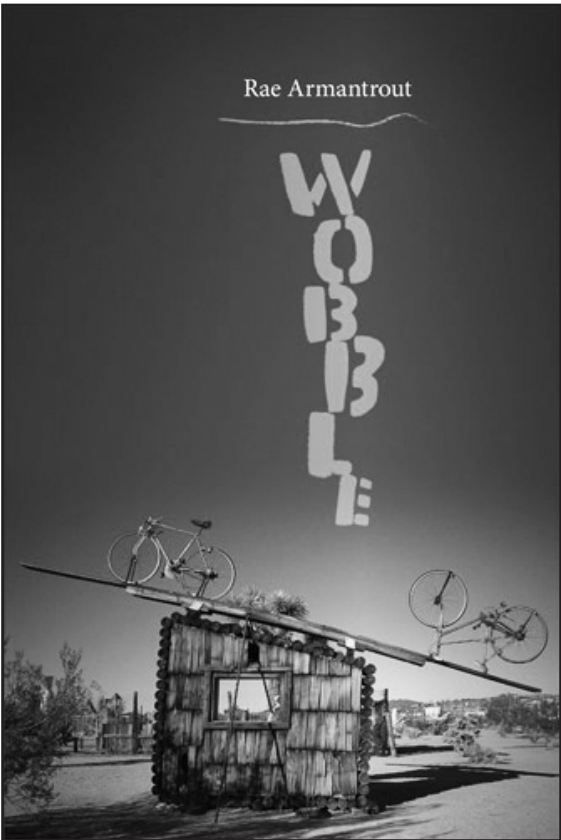
As a “mistress of distraction’s indirection,” Armantrout often angles from one idea, metaphor, or image to another, inviting us to analyze the relationship. In her poetic world, metaphor and analogy never make a tight fit. Just when I think I have figured it out, meaning slips away.

In “Arch,” she addresses a seahorse and compares it to an arched eyebrow. Immediately I am underwater drifting with this calm sea animal:

Like an arched eyebrow
traveling alone, you drift,

seahorse,

a forgotten, persistent



question.

Despite your skeptical
attitude, it’s true

that your numbers are crashing.

If an arched eyebrow indicates a person who isn’t approachable and who needs more space (as internet beauticians explain), that’s an unusual but apt view of a lone seahorse in a vast ocean. She reminds us that the animal is an endangered species even though ironically it consumes “up to 3,000 baby shrimp / per day!” A quick internet search and I learn that seahorses are widely consumed as a result of traditional Chinese medicine, for such problems as wheezing, impotence, and labor induction.

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In the second stanza with “as I do—,” we begin to see the tree’s body and life as related to her own body and writing practice.

As you were limbs
aloft and