PROJECT MUSE®

Grim Innovation

Deb Olin Unferth



American Book Review, Volume 32, Number 4, May/June 2011, p. 16 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2011.0092*

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/447516

[3.234.177.119] Project MUSE (2024-03-29 02:51 GMT)

GRIM INNOVATION

Deb Olin Unferth

IN THE HOUSE

Lynn K. Kilpatrick

FC2
http://fc2.org
136 pages; paper, $13.50

Lynn K. Kilpatrick's interest in formalism in her terrific debut book of stories, *In the House*, puts her in good company, but also at risk: formal works are often charged with being distant and cold, with sacrificing passion for play. The argument goes that the reader can't form an emotional attachment to the characters because she is so busy studying and appreciating the intellectual structure that has been erected around them. And yes, some formal works do strike me that way. Strict Oulipo sometimes bores me, though I may like the idea of whatever restriction is being imposed. But the formal wall can work the opposite way too—it can reveal the narrator indirectly, slyly shine a dim light on the narrator's flaws, point us toward an emotional reason for the barricade: the narrator's insecurity or nervousness perhaps, or her wariness or distrust, her dishonesty. The formal conceit can bring a dark or comic depth to the characters. Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) and Lydia Davis's stories come to mind. Lynn Kilpatrick's *In the House* works this way as well.

In the House *falls into the great tradition of grim innovative books by women about moder day, middle-class domesticity.*

The title piece doesn't so much tell a story as give us a glossary, a list of rooms, each paired with an element of fiction and followed by a few lines of prose that work as a brief encyclopedic entry and that also tell us the "story."

kitchen: *conflict*

> There's a secret he's keeping. On the counter, a butcher block with a chef's knife, a bread knife, sharpener. In the refrigerator, three kinds of beer and half a dozen mustards…. He knows how to make a coffee cake from scratch and what to use to inspire sneezing, coughing, burning eyes, an ailment that looks like the flu, how to induce a miscarriage, how to seduce and tease.

Here, the narrator is eluding to some pretty suspicious scenarios involving sharp implements, illness, and betrayal, and, as the piece goes on, many more small evidences of crime and discord emerge—accidents, struggles, arguments, and screams. All these are suggested by images and are unlinked to events. In fact, no single ugly event or conflict seems to inspire the story, kick it off. Instead, a general feeling of drama and downright creepiness descends over the house. The glossary format lends a universal feel, as if the narrator might be hinting that this story could be used as more of a reference book or handbook of domesticity.

This technique Kilpatrick uses, of looking at a scenario and discovering all the ways she can divide it up, of putting objects and characters into categories, of filling her stories with subheadings and labels and definitions, is one she returns to again and again. This continuous urge to divide and name has a clinical feel, and in several stories, it begins to feel like a humorous nervous tic, as though the narrator must impose this on this world, use categorization as a control mechanism. Shying away from strict cause-and-effect narrative, Kilpatrick instead suggests that an event *may* have occurred, something like the following *may* have happened, and what if it did?



Perhaps my favorite set of stories in Kilpatrick's eerie book is a series of frightening dioramas she scatters throughout the pages. She calls them "Windows." Each one describes a unique miniature artificial interior of the sort made in crafts projects, complete with characters made out of plastic or Popsicle sticks, rooms erected of cardboard.

> A miniature couple, small, smaller than you might think. I know you are imagining humans the size of Barbie, but really, that's not small enough. Think of Army men, in their small fatigues, with binoculars and guns…. The woman stands, hands at her sides. She observes the man, the modeling clay landscape, the sky that opens like a shoebox. She seems to want for nothing. Though she is plastic, and entirely red, she seems content. Almost happy.

What a weird world! It works like a skeleton on which to hang a possible story, but no story is hung there. Yet the "Windows" build in suspense, only by intimating a story, the idea of a story in this frightening fake environment, of someone being "almost happy." The second after you consider the "window," you laugh because you realize the window simply describes the creation of fiction—constructed characters, painted landscape, imagined dreams or lack of. And then you laugh again because the window (*and* fiction), in fact, describes nothing but the creation of one's own life—your fashioned self, the landscape you find yourself in, the feelings you aren't sure you actually have.

In the House falls into that great tradition of grim innovative books by women about modern day, middle-class domesticity. I'm speaking of classics, such as Harryette Mullen's *S*PeRM**K*T* (1992) and Diane Williams's *Excitability* (1998), as well as Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), or, more recently, Danielle Dutton's *S P R A W L* (2010). In fact, the two or three stories in *In the House* that feel more directly personal, "Bitter on the Tongue," for one, are the weaker ones in the collection. The beauty comes when the narrator's vulnerability pokes through, when we feel the authorial voice trying to blow tinsel in our eyes or grab fistfuls of leaves to cover the camera lens, or throw blankets over her characters and, therefore, herself.

Deb Olin Unferth's next book, a memoir, Revolution: The Year I Fell in Love and Went to Join the War, *will appear in 2011.*