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## Design Intelligent

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# BOOK REVIEWS

## DESIGN INTELLIGENT

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### HUSH

Dave Kress

MAMMOTH books

<http://www.mammothbooks.com>

534 pages; paper, \$19.95

Dave Kress's second novel, *Hush*, conjoins two predominant trends in contemporary American fiction. Like its large-press compatriots—including Marisha Pessl's *Special Topics in Calamity Physics* (2006), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), and Adam Levin's new sensation, *The Instructions* (2010)—Kress relates his tale in the voice of an offbeat and youngish (if not necessarily precocious) narrator. *Hush* also astutely takes on the Meaning-of-It-All-through-Unusual-Encounters-with-What-Might-Be-the-Divine, not unlike (again) Levin's *The Instructions*, Victor LaValle's *Big Machine* (2009), and Ron Currie, Jr.'s *Everything Matters!* (2009). In a sense, Currie serves as the best point of comparison, for as *Everything Matters!* reverses the process that Frederic Jameson described as “the waning of affect,” Kress also works backward from a near nihilistic worldview to an exuberant embrace of Creation. *Hush* excels beyond its peers, however, by constructing its own language so as to both describe and erect the sense of Being it reveals, sparring with weak theories of Intelligent Design by building a world where the design precedes and makes real its own immanent intelligence.

***If George Saunders were commissioned to write a biography of God, Hush might be the result.***

Though dressed in the habit of the sisters of “The Church of God the Silence”—that is, the eccentric monologue of its sometimes-daft narrator, Reanne Mone—Kress's story starts out with a surprisingly conventional storyline. Mone is a teenager whose life falls apart around her at the close of her high school years: her parents both die untimely deaths and her friends all drift off to their separate lives. One particular friend, Penelope (“Penny”) enacts the ultimate betrayal by maintaining a closeted interest in education, earning a scholarship to Yale, and leaving her friends behind in the backwater town of Awnry, Massachusetts. But just as Reanne's life couldn't get worse, living out of a K-Car and drinking her consciousness into submission, Penny returns to introduce Mone to a whole new attitude toward life and a dreamy, if aging, Clloyd Shoop. Reanne rebuilds her self-confidence through her relationship with the man she calls “that one Clloyd Shoop”; the devil-may-care Clloyd, meanwhile, cultivates a significant antagonism with Awnry's newest evangelical preacher, “that -1 Creon Clearly.” The spaghetti-Western tension builds to a showdown

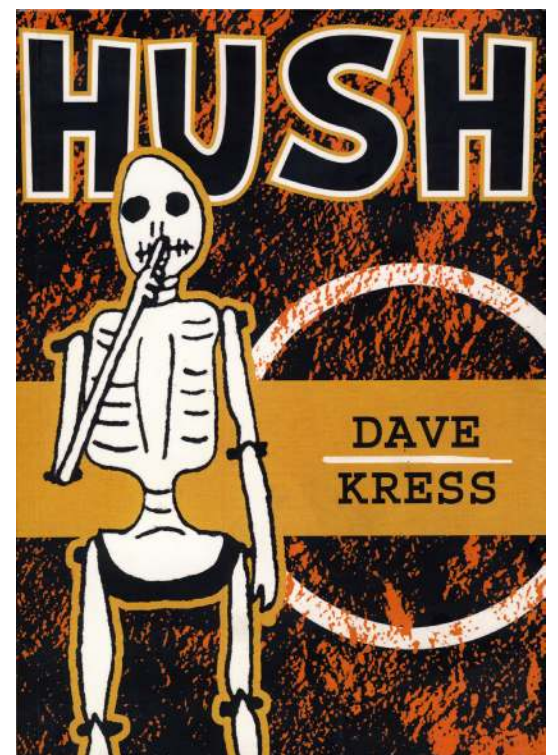
between rival factions at the town's bowling alley. One may be forgiven for mistaking a rough sketch of the early plotline for a John Hughes movie.

This familiarity, which the narrative openly acknowledges, is part of the point. Rather than beginning from a position of wonder, *Hush* starts out in a world over-determined by the clichés it systematically works to dismantle. Its overt self-reflexivity eschews conventional efforts at verisimilitude in favor of foregrounding the very real way language shapes—and reshapes—the forms of the world it works to describe. Though Mone's first-person voice often gets in its own way, it does so to the specific and pointed effect of obfuscating the events it represents, illustrating precisely how that language goes about covertly eliding the implicit hyphen before “presentation” in the word “re-presentation.” The result is a prose made up in large measure of idiosyncrasies and strange but consistent misprisions of idioms. But where similar experiments in lesser books often fail to attain to anything past surface play, here they're often hilarious, strikingly original, and deployed with a consistency of purpose that reintroduces wonder and joy to Mone's initially apathetic worldview. Take a description of a fateful storm, for instance:

If I write to you that it was the *opposite* of soothing (upsetting, aggravating, or even venomous—probably the best word here) and so far from the opposite of calming as to be living and/or approaching (that is, getting closer even as we are sitting here chatting) and finally coming to roost right here in Awnry (which is a town that I live in that is so far from calming that you might as well be traipsing around in so-called *outer space*—which only a very small number people have actually done, soda speak)—if I write or type unto that, will you ever get me?

Kress's voice here belongs to a venerable postmodern cult of inhabiting the persona of a non-normative—one might even say “bad”—writer with great skill and humor. Perhaps the best way to describe it would be to say that if George Saunders were commissioned to write a biography of God, *Hush* might be the result. Mone's ostensibly awkward musings are infused throughout with graceful texture: “As degrees dropped and minutes to go or left did in deeds get up and leave, a shiver rippled...” Moments like these come off at first like accidents of the narrator's struggles with the frailty of idioms (is there a difference between “to go” or “left” in this context?), but they also manifest the real triumph of the poetry of the improbable that suffuses Kress's careful rendering of Mone's voice.

*Hush* does ask for patience. The novel's first third serves to set up a plot that races to its conclusion, morphing from what looks like a coming-of-age novel into what might best be called an ontological thriller...thrilling by bringing one to “become intrigued by what the question of ‘what is *is*.’” The key to the successful construction of intrigue while advancing such an abstract theme of the “being of being” is also the novel's most astute metafictional commentary: *Hush*'s style works both to engage



the intellect while it also forestalls an affective connection with its narrator. If the function of writing is to both usher the reader along to the climax and resolution while simultaneously building tension by *delaying* that forward movement, Kress's narrator brilliantly thwarts progress by returning one's attention to language that seems too frail to do what his narrator wants it to do. When the emotional connection to Mone and Clloyd's relationship finally *does* come—a subtle development but, to use one of Reanne's favorite words, an “inexorable” one—the narrative strategy mirrors the novel's central theme: life does mean something, even if meaning doesn't issue from a transcendent realm, but rather from the material. The initially meandering diction crystallizes into a language that advances past postmodernism's explorations into indeterminacy: instead, Kress's meaning is contingent upon particulars that are nevertheless singular to *Hush*'s protagonist. To put it another way:, meaning follows from design. Whether or not existence indeed precedes essence (Jean-Paul Sartre), the Point-of-It-All nevertheless does exist as an emergent property of Mone's unique experiences in a world simultaneously inhabited and constructed by language.

*Hush*'s final revelation, given to Mone by Shoop, rewards finishing and rereading like few recent novels. Kress has found in Reanne's quirky vernacular a way to sustain his reader with ludic description, giving his language enough time to evolve into a system that makes the necessary circumlocution of the book's central “Big Problem” (that is, the very nature of “is-ness”) a riveting topos for a novel of ideas. And when it comes to one of the best conclusions to a book in recent memory, *Hush* is both funny and sad, unsettling and strangely yet undeniably inspiring.

*Christopher Leise teaches at Whitman College. His first book is a co-edited collection of essays entitled William Gaddis, “The Last of Something.” A second co-edited collection, Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide was published by the University of Delaware Press in 2011.*