

The Last Novel
David Markson
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by Jeff Bursey

The underappreciated US writer Gilbert Sorrentino wrote:

The critic is either subsumed in his criticism, the latter becoming, relentlessly and imperceptibly, a kind of natural effusion of the collective intelligence; or he is forever identified as “the one who said that...” and reviled for such rank stupidity. Either way, he is denied his reality, becoming in the first instance a public idea that everybody held all the time, and in the second, an idiot whose pronouncements are contemptible when they are not hilarious.

David Markson in his latest work agrees with Sorrentino as he instructs and test reviewers, and other readers.

“Novelist’s personal genre. In which part of the experiment is to continue keeping him offstage to the greatest extent possible—while compelling the attentive reader to perhaps catch his breath when things achieve an ending nonetheless.” Aware of how pompous that may sound, and how difficult the task is, Markson immediately follows with: “Conclusions are the weak point of most authors. George Eliot said.” *The Last Novel* is constituted of notes and quotations, which seem random, but they reveal their depth through repetition and elaboration. Certain threads—painting (“If more than ten percent of the population likes a painting it should be burned. Said Shaw.”), music (“That scoundrel Brahms. What a giftless bastard! Tchaikovsky’s diary says.”), and art (“People who actually believe that Christo’s tangerine-colored bedsheets fluttering about in New York’s Central Park had something even remotely to do with art.”)—are of intense interest to the Novelist.

However, a thread that is more consuming combines his loneliness (“Nobody comes. Nobody calls.”) with the deaths of historical figures (“Karl Marx died sitting at his desk. Antonin Artaud, sitting up at the foot of his bed.”) and friends. Personal remarks by Novelist stand out because they’re touching—“Dialing the deceased, in the likelihood that no one would have yet disconnected their answering machines—and contemplating their voices one eerie final time”—or for their sheer ludicrousness: “The presumably apocryphal tale about a production of Othello by touring actors in the nineteenth-century American West—near the last lines of which a cowboy in the audience shot Iago dead on the spot.”

The Last Novel is the capstone to *Reader’s Block* (1996), *This Is Not a Novel* (2001) and *Vanishing Point* (2004). Like those novels, it can be read on its own. The narrator remarks: “Wondering if there is any viable way to convince critics never to use the word tetralogy without also adding that each volume can be readily read by itself?” Markson’s long career—which one hopes the title does not indicate is winding up—has given him the experience to devise a DIY review that removes his novel from the hands of Sorrentino’s idiot.

Novelist is “Old. Tired. Sick. Alone. Broke. All of which obviously means that this is the last book Novelist is going to write.” Liberty “gives Novelist carte blanche to do anything here

he damned well pleases.” What will be the reaction? “Listen, I bought your latest book. But I quit after about six pages. That’s all there is, those little things?” Those who receive his novels free and are paid to review them are even more obtuse. “Reviewers who protest that Novelist has lately appeared to be writing the same book over and over. Like their grandly perspicacious uncles—who grouched that Monet had done those damnable water lilies nine dozen times already also.”

Those who are less well-read have responded to the veracity of “those little things,” and Markson rebuts them sharply: “Reviewers who have accused Novelist of inventing some of his anecdotes and/or quotations—without the elemental responsibility to do the checking that would verify every one of them.” That’s a just charge that can’t be refuted.

“For no reason whatsoever, Novelist has just flung his cat out one of his four-flights-up front windows.” This is startling, as well as puzzling. A few pages later all is revealed: “Novelist does not own a cat, and thus most certainly could not have thrown one out a window.” (Not quite; not having his own cat doesn’t preclude Novelist from throwing some other cat out a window.) “Nonetheless he would lay odds that more than one hopscotching reviewer will be reading carelessly enough here to never notice these two sentences and announce that he did so.” That’s a neat trick to get a reviewer re-reading—or more precisely, reading in the first place. (Yet Markson himself has been lured by the tendency to read quickly. As he said in an interview with *Bookslut* in 2005, “all those intellectual bits and pieces in my later books, I’ve had to do a lot of browsing to hunt them out. At times it’s almost gotten me into a habit of skimming instead of seriously reading. It’s something I have to fight, repeatedly.”)

“Taking no more account of the wind that comes out of their mouths than that which they expel from their lower parts. Leonardo described his response to critics as.” Despite this quotation, Markson might have appreciated Catherine Texier’s opinion in the *New York Times* that *The Last Novel* is a “tour de force” that “manages to keep us enthralled... and even moved to tears at the end.” By the close we are more conscious of Novelist’s deepening crisis, and to the emotional resonance of the work. Novelist talks of his economic state, his isolation, the lack of recognition, and the unhappy results of a bone scan. We are brought, with elegance and style, with dry wit and orneriness, to elegy.

But what do I know? In *Vanishing Point* Markson smartly updated a biblical characterization: “Now Barrabas was a book reviewer.”

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