

Seeing Austin in a Rear-View Mirror

That Demon Life: A Novel by Lowell Mick White. (Arlington, VA: Gival Press, 2009. 182 pp. \$20 paper)

When I moved to Austin to attend college, these are the first words I heard out of the mouth of a “true” Austinite: “I wish you people would quit moving here. You’re ruining my Austin.” Still a kid in many ways, I couldn’t understand why anyone would want to dissuade others from settling in this fantastic city. Nearly a decade later, I understand. I want people to quit ruining the Austin I know, and I’ve lived here long enough to know that I don’t even know the “real” Austin. However, reading Lowell Mick White’s novel, *That Demon Life*, convinces me of two things: Austin will always be changing, and Austin will always be the same. White’s novel captures much of the freedom and fun of the old Austin while also entertaining readers with a recognizable Austin—one that has evolved even in the last decade.

White, who recently published an Austin-inspired short story collection, *Long Time Ago Good* (Slough, 2009), writes about a city both familiar as the “real” Austin and a newer, burgeoning one because he has the experience to do so. He lived in Austin for 25 years and worked various jobs—cab driver, shade tree salesman, and an Internal Revenue Service bureaucrat. Readers will recognize these experiences in the novel.

That Demon Life begins with a quote by J. Frank Dobie: “Nobody actually ever does anything but drink and drink and drink to boredom...and screw and screw and screw to death.” The quote captures White’s novel—and perhaps some parts of Austin—very well. The narrative catalogues the experiences of Linda Smallwood, a depressed, bored, and lonely attorney living in downtown Austin. The Justice Store, where Linda considers working—and which might be a stand-in for any of those chain legal offices advertised during local daytime programming—has convenient locations on North and South Lamar, and East Seventh Street. The bar she frequents, The Little Wagon, has the feel of any one of the popular hole-in-the-wall places around Lake Austin Boulevard. In essence, White knows Austin, and White can write Austin.

However, readers unfamiliar with Austin will also find *That Demon Life* very entertaining. Although Linda is depressed and bored, hilarity ensues from the start of the novel. After a night of drinking and smoking, “a dull night of crisis,” Linda finds that one of her parakeets—“That One Bird” or “That Other Bird”—has died. Her reaction is not of sadness for the bird but rather of disinterest and annoyance: “Well...this sucks.” It’s clear that although the protagonist isn’t cheerful, readers are in for a humorous ride. Linda’s reaction to men and sex will also amuse readers:

Linda shook her head. Sex. It was an uncomfortable mystery. Since their teen years Linda had marveled at Paige’s relaxed physicality and lack

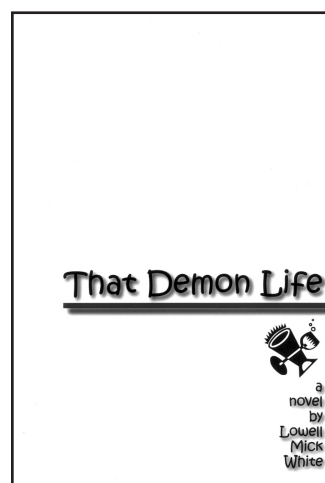
of inhibition. For Paige, sex wasn’t too different than throwing a javelin or leaping a hurdle. Linda, though, couldn’t achieve that level of ease unless she was seriously drunk, with maybe a Quaalude or a Valium or a Xanax thrown in—and, even then, it wasn’t exactly a whole lot of fun.

Blackmail is key to the story, as Linda is determined to even the score between herself and Richard Cantu, a snotty, Travis County judge who has threatened Linda’s career. Throughout the week, her now-married, ex-fiancé Gilbert; sassy, hedonistic friend Paige; a criminal-cab-driver-turned-personal-chauffeur Quincy; and other hilarious characters all get involved in the plot to destroy Cantu—and are perhaps even more involved than Linda. The result is a comical turn of fortune for both Linda and Cantu.

The novel is not without its flaws. Although White tells a good story, the novel may be betrayed by its cover. Colorful characters and action abound throughout the tale, yet the cover is a blank, white background with a comic-like title font. Awkward clipart, a wine glass, and a beer pilsner appear below the title and suffer from a poor design. Readers should also be aware that what appears to be the publisher’s decision to break up the narrative with icons—wine glasses and human forms—actually marks

the breaks in White’s writing process: he wrote this novel during slow periods while working as a cab driver. Although it may be interesting for readers to see these original pauses, the icons are distracting. Though effective when placed between two separate scenes, they often interrupt a singular scene, and at one point they break an exchange of dialogue. There are also a few misused words in the story—“relict” and “discrete,” for example—which are bothersome.

Nevertheless, the novel works on many levels, and *That Demon Life* is an entertaining read. White, who in 1998 was awarded the Dobie-Paisano Fellowship by the University of Texas at Austin and the Texas Institute of Letters, is finishing a Ph.D. at Texas A&M University with a specialization in regional literature. He teaches creative writing there as well. With his interests in the region and Austin, he’s sure to produce more fiction about the city, both the “real” Austin and the ever-changing one.



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