



Stories in the Worst Way

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OUT OF BODY moves beyond the front lawn of domestic realism. These writers evoke everything from disquiet to whimsy, from the jarring to the soothing: variously urgent, kaleidoscopic, infantile, or elliptical.

Stories in the Worst Way Details

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From Reader Review Stories in the Worst Way for online ebook

Krok Zero says

The line on this guy Lutz is that he writes amazing sentences, which I find to be true--though I'd extend that to say he also writes amazing *clusters* of sentences, which may or may not assume the form of paragraphs. The counterline is that his stories are pretentious and nonsensical, which I also find to be true, at least part of the time.

Here's the thing: I recommend this book, but you can basically just flip to any random page and start reading sentences. There is an interchangeability not just between the stories but inside them individually. If you read it for traditional satisfactions like character and plot, you will be frustrated. (In fact, "stories" is a comically inappropriate term for whatever this book is.) For some readers, this will be a dealbreaker. Perfectly understandable. But if you love language and want to spend some time in the company of a writer who is basically having crazy tantric sex with language for 160 pages, then open your mind and dive in.

In that spirit, I thought I'd excise a few sentences and sentence clusters from the book, in lieu of the rest of a proper review. I wouldn't know how to begin dancing about Lutz's architecture, so it's best to get a taste for yourself. There's plenty more where these came from:

"One other spot I was in—the last—was the one at whose center I kept getting even worse at judging the distances between people. I fouled up every time. If I saw somebody declaring herself with a gesture, I intercepted as much as I could of whatever was on its way to whom it may have actually concerned. I helped myself to anything headed elsewhere. I carried on as if it were mine."

"Littlenesses, piled high, do not suddenly amount to anything immense."

"She appeared to be in her twenties and had arranged the freckly lengthiness of her body into a slouch that made her elbows and legs seem pointed privately, inquiringly, toward me. I started siding with her, beholding whatever she beheld—the fishbowl ashtray, the dishful of pastilles and drops, the plum-colored splotch she kept rubbing on her shin."

"There was a girl beside him, a tall leg-crosser with a haphazardry of orangish hair. They had notebooks open on their laps and were contentedly, curricularly, sifting through stacks of index cards."

"Nights, I watched her watch the babiness go out of her children. I think she was waiting for them to bleed together into a single, soft-boned disappointment. There were three of them, and they all had the same problems with time—not just with telling it, but with knowing that it had passed, knowing what it separated."

"She was hygienically delinquent. I wondered what my predecessors had made of the ashtrayish, perspiry nimbus she always hazed around herself."

"The kind of reading I was doing involved pushing the words around on the page, trying to bully them into doing what I wanted them to do. What I wanted them to do was tell me what to say when the phone rang at night and the unfamiliar, expectant, undebauched womanly voice of the misdialing caller asked, 'Who is this?'"

"My life was an ambitious program of self-centrifugalization."

"I had to content myself with learning something else, other things, instead. One of them was how, when taking a walk, you had to calculate what the walk was getting taken away from—what was getting subtracted from what. You had to determine what would be left when you got back."

"In the white squares between the black ziggurats of the crossword puzzle, I penciled, in heavy, ham-handed caps untraceable to me: COULD EVERYONE PLEASE BE A LITTLE LESS SPECIFIC? STARTING RIGHT NOW?"

Camille H says

These stories are neither shimmery nor elegant.

heather says

I have yet to recover from reading this book, in terms of wanting to rethink some of my own writing in light of how impressed I am by Lutz's prose. In one week, I read it, and gifted another copy as a birthday present (she loved it; she is, like me, a short-form fiction writer). Jesus, though. I feel like these rough-hewn short stories have had an indelible effect on my writing style and I find myself trying to mine my daily life for a Lutz story. I love this book in a way I can't articulate. I know another collection of his has been published recently and I am eager to devour it (and probably give it to some else for their birthday), though I'm leery that his work will give me a giant inferiority complex. His spare, unsettling prose is everything I wanted Charles Bukowski to be as a teenager. Thank you, Gary Lutz, for rescuing that projection of shrugged-off hypermasculinity and the ability to brandish the odd detail in depersonalized prose. You are a perverse and sparingly yet unnervingly eloquent contemporary Kafka.

Kevin says

My favorite book ever. Really. No one writes like Lutz. He is the master of the loaded sentence and this book is full of them. Lingering, strange, and sometimes piss-your-pants funny. I kept this book a secret for a long time because I didn't want others to know. When I finally let go of that notion, it seemed like the fans came flooding in. At least at Powell's, where we have sold hundreds of copies of this book.

Melanie says

I loved and hated being out of my depth here, with Gary Lutz and his seemingly gender less protagonists. There are 37 individual pieces, some as short as two paragraphs, all of these offer strange and wonderful impressions, shadows of thought, riddles to unravel.

Rarely was my keenness for narrative sated, but my imagination's larger hunger for ideas, theories and truths

had more than enough to chew over.

I do wish that I got more from the experience than I did, I prefer inspiration over admiration, but if you read other reviews, you'll see that many landed on inspiration. I just need more heart.

A few excerpts:

"I made the mistake of looking at our waitress, who was setting plates down in front of us. It was a mistake because sometimes when you look at someone, especially someone young, you get too good a look. You see the life heaved messily, meagerly, into the person. You get a sense of the slow-traveling trains of thought, the mean streaks and off-chances, everything that has had to be crossed out or memorized so far. The parts out front - the eyes; the teeth and tongue inside the open, moving mouth - look cheap and detachable, unset, just barely staying put.

What I am saying is that through all this, all through this, I was only loosely in the midst of myself, already lapsing my way into whoever this waitress was, organizing myself within the dark of the body she was sticking up for herself inside. "

From 'Claims', Page 70

"The afternoon was glassy and overdetailed. Meaning what? That I grew up on the spot? That years later it would take great effort and willpower to wave away the first available thumby, unsucked dick and wait instead - in line, if need be - for some cunted, varicosed smashup on which to hazard my desolating carnality? "

From 'Waking Hours', Page 17

"My first wife, my blood wife, had no background to speak of, no relations, customs, scenery. She arrived sharp-spined and already summed up. We ate out all them time and spoke lengthily, vocabulary, about whatever got set before us, especially the meat, with its dragged-out under-song of lifelong life. There was no end to the occasions on which the woman and I got along in public and in private. I remember a smell she had on just her arms, an endearment, something that she been born with or that had traveled a great distance to land on her."

From 'Devotions', Page 27

Jasmine says

This is a book about how confused the world is when you leave it to its own devices.

I would love to leave this review at that, but first it looks lazy and secondly next to a review whining about not being able to tell the gender of the characters is is sadly unconvincing. This book is absolutely fantastic just as a start. Not to say it isn't a difficult book to read. It is harder to read than Joyce and you can't tell the genders of the characters. but perhaps that doesn't actually matter. This book worked for me because when I read it I felt the same way that I do when I am awake. And I suppose that it is comforting to know that someone understands that feeling.

Sheldon Lee Compton says

Nine stories were very good and the rest were terrible.

Eric T. Voigt says

Six-and-a-quarter stars. This is important. Knowing that this kind of fiction exists in the world is important. Enjoying each sentence, being thrilled at the start, the end, and at every punctuationational checkpoint felt important. Time doesn't matter in these stories. Character doesn't matter. Or, more so, these things don't need to be fussed over. They exist whenever and for however long. The sickest ride I've taken. Required reading for Generation Bitch, and if there needs to be a course explaining why it's essential and then delving into its essential bits, if it can't be accepted at face value, well, I guess this is going to be a more intensive learning experience for y'all than it was for me. It was merely intense, for me. I was merely blown away.

MJ Nicholls says

Read up to p.116. Lutz's insanely well-wrought sentences are individually tantalising. These stories (the separate titles seem irrelevant—this whole collection could be woven together as one abstract novel) frustrate and exhilarate as Lutz surrenders to the musicality of the prose, leaving the reader to dive for the pearls of meaning and emotion that occasionally nestle inside, or conversely to bob along in pleasant waters of the eloquent nonsensical.

Ben Loory says

really hard to assign this book a star rating. on the one hand, it was a serious chore to read, all the stories blending into each other, and all done at exactly the same (one-note) emotional pitch, no range at all and all seemingly done just to impress me with what a pathetic loser the guy is. on the other hand, it was truly amazing in that he's definitely his own writer, doing his own thing, unlike anybody else... though that went out the window at the very moment the word "nabokov" entered my brain, somewhere around page 40. lutz's sentences are good ("yes, but the writing is great!") and he's got an SF-worthy imagination; he just doesn't seem to have any interest in having his stories *go* anywhere, reach any kind of change or revelation or understanding (let alone catharsis). everything ends as it begins... you could cut out half this book (words, sentences, paragraphs, stories) and i doubt anyone would notice. still, though, the guy cares and is obviously completely in charge of what he's doing, which is nice to see. this isn't a book that happened by accident. no interest in ever reading it again, though... just the idea makes me grind my teeth.

April says

The way this guy writes, the way he crafts with words, changed the way I verbally process the world. I've

never said this about an author nor will I say it about another.

hearusfalling says

Everything – my life – would be riding on what he would say, on the certainty that he would say something. (14)

This is it right here, life in parentheses, this is the tension Lutz's "protagonists" find themselves in, they're caught between "Everything" on one side and the overwhelming notions of certainty and inevitability on the other.

Admittedly this is pretty bleak stuff, Lutz is largely uncompromising. His characters often announce at the beginning of the stories how detached and alienated they are not just from the wider world but from their own bodies "She had nothing in common with her body anymore, was how she put it". Stories generally begin in this vein, a stark pronouncement from the narrator regarding their own dire circumstance and mindset, with the stories themselves being littered with similar statements.

Human moments, yes, but then detached and alien.

Take this para for example:

Sometimes the girl cried all night as I drove. I would have to pull over every few hours and get in the back seat and put my arms around her. By this point, she was pronouncedly hump-bosomed. Where her tiny breasts had once reposed, there was the cyclopean, orbiculate business of the coming child instead. (94)

It starts with a moment of compassion and intimacy written in regular prose that could be from just about any homely piece of fiction. But then there's a sudden shift into more a alien tone coupled with the arcane language "cyclopean, orbiculate", the word "business" is crucial and implies a level of chore and coldness to the proceedings of birth, leveling the warmth of the earlier sentiment. The story goes on to reveal that the narrator helps them with the birth in a typically obscene way and he admits that he "did his best to keep in touch with the kid and its mother" but that it quickly faded and that he repeated the process with another couple of women.

I had given consent for my life to keep being done to me (69)

"Human" moments are fleeting. Characters are detached from themselves and so how can they be meaningfully attached to others, they're often having life "done to them" as opposed to participating in life, the parentheses aren't merely passive lines or barriers, they seem to actively tighten and constrict.

Lutz stares through the idealistic view of life and refuses to blame a cynical entertainment network or some other cultural phenomenon for the existential ennui of contemporary times – it's worth noting that this book arrived in 96 when writers were keen to offer up banalities about TV on “why we feel this way” and for the most part never really got close to the realizations that Lutz reaches here. His proclamations are trying, unforgiving sure, but to stare them down is better than trying to sidestep them and accept answers that don't really get you anywhere.

There are convolutions in his work, an eeriness and a deliberate sense of disorientation, but then there are moments of ontological consideration that seem to offer clarity and a way forward, a means to live.

To get into the men's room, you went through a door and immediately – no more than two feet in – discovered a second door, heavier, unpainted; and before you could get the thing open, you had to make room by reopening, by a good half-foot, the one you had already pushed through.
(11)

Ken says

There is a great bit of wisdom uttered by Lee, the doomed narrator of Boris Vian's *I Spit On Your Graves*:

“It costs a lot to put out a book, and all the dressing is for a good purpose — it shows clearly too that most people don't care about getting good books: what they really want is to have read the book recommended by their club, the book of the moment, and they don't give a rap about the contents.”

It is a very spot-on sentiment and one that sadly pertains to Gary Lutz's *Stories in the Worst Way*. When it was originally released in 1996 Lutz's collection of challenging and off-kilter short stories were dismissed, denounced, or simply ignored. In spite of being a protégée of renowned editor Gordon Lish — who inspired the author to scrape and claw at his prose, boiling it down to thin razor while also developing an approach to the English language that can only be perceived as one author rewriting our entire syntax — Lutz's work was greeted as warmly as syphilis. When the collection was re-released in 2003 by 3rd Bed, it fared not much better. Perhaps greeted as warmly as gonorrhea.

The simple fact is that *Stories in the Worst Way* was not *that* book. It's intent was obvious: not to reward or connect with the reader, but to challenge. As Lutz himself stated, “if I had been assigned to review it, I probably would've panned it myself. It's not the kind of book that's asking for any wide welcome.”

Lutz's prose is not easy reading. Often, you have to go back, reread a sentence over and over again, chewing the prose until it finally digests itself into your brain. Of course using a vocabulary that seems to mine the dark recesses of Webster's dictionary also does not help the book's cause.

Take the following paragraph which is bound to throw fans of plain-spoken verbiage:

“Before the husband who kept leaving left for good, he accused me of two things: hirsutism and ‘self dependence.’ It is true that I had hair scribbled fine-pointedly over my arms and the backs of my hands and a few other places. It is also true that I liked to keep the marriage almost entirely to myself. There was more to get out of it that way.”

The effect created is that Lutz's prose is precise – cutting and biting – and sludgy, drawing you into the muck of his character's wayward lives. The cast is a collection of first-person misfits, malcontents, and outsiders. There is the office drone, who because of the efficiency of his work ethic, spends most of his time tormenting his co-workers in "Certain Riddances." ("At first whenever the pressure to respond was acute – maybe every other day – I would simply slide an anonymous, index-carded 'True' or 'False' into her mail slot."). Or the unfortunate high school teacher with a bad case of colitis in the aptly titled "Slops." ("After each class, I lumped my way to whichever men's room my notebook said was next. My life was an ambitious program of self-centrifugalization. I was casting myself out.") Or the eternal ex-husband recounting his past wives and the negative impact of their cohabitation in "Devotions." ("From time to time I show up in myself just long enough for people to know they are not in the room alone.")

As you dig through Lutz's stories, you cannot help but be in awe of the sheer force of his creativity, his ability to break literary conventions down and reconstruct it all in his own twisted form. He is the type of writer that makes you exclaim, "Crap, I wish I had written that line." "Sleeveless" is as close as you can get to a perfectly crafted short story. It is all of 174 words and yet it hits you square in the gut with the tale of a husband being forced to give up his wife.

However this leads to a dilemma. Namely that often, Lutz's bold experimentation doesn't work. It falls flat, failing miserably. His love of language often causes him to overwrite characters, giving them voices that are either too introspective or frankly too damn educated for their insinuated background. After reading through the 36 stories in the collection (some as short as a single page), you are often left with the impression that you've been reading about the same character the entire time, simply cut and paste into a new identity. "That Which Is Husbander Than Anything Prior" comes off as rehash of Slops (minus the obvious fecal problems and swapping out the gender). Or even worse, stories such as "The Preventer of Sorrows" or "Their Sizes Run Differently" are so introspective and disjointed that they make no impact, leaving the reader feeling as if they've just reviewed a psychoanalyst's report of a patient interview rather than a short story.

To be brutally honest, I don't think Lutz cares. He'd rather push the prose in order to create something unique, as opposed to something likeable or readable. And in some ways there is much to be admired in that.

Stories in the Worst Way is nowhere near perfect, but like its grotesque narrators, there is beauty within the flaws.

Christopher says

Each sentence surprises and, even better, undermines me. Each sentence makes poetry blush, that prose should so outstrip its ability to compress an entire world into a single line. (A reversed world at that.)

"He would enter a room, odor things differently, then come out with whatever it was."

"My ex-wife: I could tell that a lot of thought had gone into the things she had taken out of me."

Plotwise, not much going on here. But Lutz sets some amazing scenes. I like the gender-fuck (though there is a somewhat misogynist vibe to some of the scenarios, but no more so than in the culture at large), the sexual themes (often queer, often not). Lutz nails bureaucrat ennui well in advance of the recent cultural swerve (The Office TV show, that Ferris novel).

Ben says

The whole time I was reading *Stories in the Worst Way*, I felt like my hat was being blown off my head but it was somehow still there – like Indiana Jones’ hat. Better. Reading these stories is like riding the outside of a runaway tank in a wilderness of awesome explosions. I think it is my fave story collection since Jesus’ Son. Someday when I’m cool, I wanna teach a creative writing class called “It’s the 90s(!)” and Gary Lutz will be front and center along with Anne Carson, Denis Johnson, David Foster Wallace, Steve Malkmus, and Saved by the Bell.

Really, the collection works off a formula... these are branch of math-rock fiction. Set weird verb (esp verb a noun) to weirder direct object, calculate with indirection, return. Flatten characters into setting. Equate setting to a philosophical quandary. Meticulously plot, but don’t appear to. Or rather, graph. Cosine with a faux-fake nonchalance and iterate with ungendered sex. Compute.

TinHouseBooks says

Curtis Moore (Tin House Books, Editorial Intern): During a recent Powell’s trip, I perused a copy of *Stories in the Worst Way* after reading a recommendation on Kevin Sampsell’s blog. I got half a sentence in and realized I must have this book and every other Gary Lutz has written, is in the process of writing, or will write in the future. These characters are often wallowing in banality, but through his virtuosic command of paragraph, sentence, word, and punctuation, Lutz disassembles their living mediocrity so he can then construct halting, mesmerizing poetic prose. I read and feel unmoored from the daily, lost in language, and thrilled by each new turn Lutz makes my reading mind take in his labyrinth of syntax.

Jon Cone says

Lutz is a writer of lyric sentences. He composes one, then another, then another, then another, then another. Eventually, or finally, these sentences obtain to some kind of fever. The story which these sentences build then breaks. The story ends, abruptly or not, but it ends. Lutz was championed by Gordon Lish, which makes eminent sense, though he materially reminds me at certain moments of Harold Brodkey. (Brodkey was also championed by Gordon Lish at one point, but they had a falling out over some trivial matter, which happens.) Aspects these stories demonstrate: brevity, grotesque details, sadness, sexual thrumplings, an admixing of strange vocabularies and syntactical disruptions, narratives rooted in dream or nightmare, undiagnosable symptoms. And so on. This is a book poets would enjoy. Also paranoiacs. Or writers of the new grotesque. Or writers (and readers, let us not forget readers -- are there readers in this day and age who don’t first and foremost think of themselves as writers?) for whom the dark is more intriguing than the light. More effective than what I’ve expressed thus far would be to quote Lutz. Here are the opening lines from his story ‘Onesome’:

“To get even with myself on behalf of my wife , to see just how far I had been putting her out, I began to ingurgitate my own seed. I had to go through everything twice the first night, because it came out initially as

thin as drool and could not have possibly counted as punishment. The next time -- I had let an hour or so elapse -- some beads of it clung to a finger, and a big mucousy nebula spread itself in the bowl of my palm."

I don't mean to suggest the above is 'representative', though it is suggestive of Lutz's style. No matter what one might think of his stories, one can't help but marvel at his brilliantly employed sentences. *

* In this sense, and in this sense alone, he is equal to that other great writer of the lyric sentence: Barry Hannah.

Ben says

Lutz is a magician with verbs; creating new ones, using old ones in unexpected ways, etc. He tries mightily to do the same with adjectives and adverbs, which I found more often annoying than impressive, but still, there's probably not more than a handful of sentences in this book that you could find anywhere else.

As for plots, characters, emotional resonance, look elsewhere. Lutz isn't interested in that stuff. These are stories in the worst way, and in the loosest sense of the word - objects made of language. Lutz perhaps sums it up himself at one point: "...page after page of permutational wordliness that struck me as overpostponed progress toward a second, fuller language." Fine by me.

Greg says

Some of these stories are really good, and some there is just no point of reference to grab a hold of the story by. There is something very alienating about even the most welcoming stories here, a lot of times you have no idea of even the gender of the first person narrator, and you feel like you're reading something quite dirty, but it's impossible to really put your finger on what the dirtiness is.

And then there is the language. Lutz likes to use the big antiquated words that you have to look up in the *OED*, only to find out that the word doesn't make any sense in the context it's being used, but then you realize that a lot of the words he uses don't really make a whole lot of sense sometimes, but they look nice and they give the sentences a nice ring.

I enjoyed it, but the distance he seemed to put between himself and the reader kept me from finding the stories as awesome as they could have been.

Adam says

from DEVOTIONS:

"My first wife, my blood wife, had no background to speak of, no relations, customs, scenery. She arrived sharp-spined and already summed up. We ate out all them time and spoke lengthily, vocabulary, about whatever got set before us, especially the meat, with its dragged-out under-song of lifelong life. There was no end to the occasions on which the woman and I got along in public and in private. I remember a smell she had on just her arms, an endearment, something that she been born with or that had traveled a great distance to land on her."

from RECESSIONAL

"I imagined that they had started out as tidy, exact quotients of their mother and their father (an amply brainsick, runaway refrigerationist named Sandy) and the things the two parents said at the table--the household slang they had evolved for borborygmic high jinks and the like."

from CONTRACTIONS

"My husband's piss dripped out day and night, slavering through his underwear, blurring the crotch of every pair with a corona of orangey yellow. He had an enlarged prostate, and he kept a plastic ice-cream tub beside the nightstand. Every five minutes or so until he fell asleep, I would hear him, sodden and unfaucetable, bowing and curbing himself along the edge of the mattress, the tub in one hand, the other jiggling his penis against the inner rim until a driblet or two finally plipped surrenderingly against the plastic. Sometimes, after he had resettled himself in his zone of the bed, I would reach across and pat his slobbering penis. My hand would come away clammy, vinegared."

How Lutz uses the silly, 3D words (dripped, unfaucetable, jiggling, plipped) without tripping up the text is great. I know this isn't much of a review, but I'll just leave it at this: STORIES IN THE WORST WAY was really fun and moving.
