



Cosmo

Spencer Gordon

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Winner of the 2013 CBC Overlookie Bookie Award for Most Underrated Canadian Book

"These stories read like collaborations between Stephen King and TMZ with Borges and Nabokov on the edits. Each short story sounds with the thunder of a novel. Enthralling, dark, gut-busting stuff!"—Jeff Parker

Actor Matthew McConaughey descends into a surreal desert of the soul, an admirer of Miley Cyrus performs a three thousand-word sentence in defense of his passion, an aging porn star dons a dinosaur costume to film the sex scene of a lifetime, and Leonard Cohen shills for Subway: these mercurial and wildly varied stories explode the conventions of short fiction.

Spencer Gordon is the co-editor of the online journal The Puritan and the micro-press Ferno House. *Cosmo* is his first book.

Cosmo Details

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From Reader Review Cosmo for online ebook

Sophie Potter says

I found this a bit hit and miss, some stories were really engaging but others just weren't that interesting.

Michael Bryson says

Winner of the CBC's 2013 Overlookie Bookie Award for Most Underrated Canadian Book, Spencer Gordon's *Cosmo* (Coach House, 2012) is spritely, clever, funny, thoughtful, and restrained.

That last adjective may seem odd. It seems odd to me, given the wide ranging playfulness of this short story collection, but it's a thought that recurred as I made my way through the book.

Restrained, how? In emotion, surely. In perspective, perhaps. In aesthetic approach, maybe. In interests, not sure I would go that far.

Two of the stories begin with quotations from giants of American post-modernism: David Foster Wallace and Donald Barthelme. And the anxiety of influence is clear throughout. These stories seek to bend form, play games of the mind, articulate multiple layers of surface, foreground the artifice of the story itself, make the reader hyper aware of frames, and celebrate the swirl of language, carefully.

The carefully part is the restrained part. There is much intelligence here and much authorial control. The narratives are strong and assured. The paragraphs, short or long, are well manufactured.

Strangely (?), the book I read immediately before this one was *Not Knowing*, essays and interviews with Donald Barthelme. In one of the interviews Barthelme is asked to identify the biggest weakness in his writing. Or perhaps his biggest regret. Emotion, he says. He wished he'd included more emotion. And fewer jokes. He also asserts repeatedly that he is a "realist" because art articulates the tropics of the mind.

Having read these two books so closely back-to-back, it's impossible for me not to draw comparisons. I feel that *Cosmo* could have used more emotion, though also more jokes, and less restraint. Perhaps an "s" could have been added to the title. *Cosmos*. I realize these are purely subjective tastes, and suggestions, so I will try now to say something more objective.

As others have noted, "authenticity" is a recurrent concern in this collection. The first sentence of the first story: "This is authentic, Crystle thought." These five words are just lovely. The italics. The concise "thought." The begged question: what is? The inauthentic "Crystle," who turns out to be Miss U.S.A. aboard an American military vessel in South Asia on a medical-humanitarian mission to aid cleft-lipped children.

This is a fantastic set-up. The beauty queen, the U.S. military, the child victims of random cruel circumstance. It is real because it is real; such things happen; but it is also highly "made;" it is an organized event, a deliberate placing of idealized pageant contestants with the randomly displaced. In other words, exactly the kind of "media event" that takes place every day and which can only be called authentic after it's been filtered through tough-fibered layers of skepticism.

Gordon gives us this skepticism, but he also keeps the reader buoyed well above cynicism. There's that restraint again. Crystle is moved by the suffering children, even as she has panic attacks about her biggest fear: falling down on the runway mid-pageant. This is authentic? We should care?

Even as I admired the writing, I wasn't sure.

But it got me to thinking along the lines of what did Andy Warhol have to say about the Holocaust? I popped the two terms in Google and came up with this....: "Sculptor George Segal created this work entitled The Holocaust. The memorial is at the location of the Legion of Honor and overlooking the Bay at Lands End. Segal is considered an important figure in the Pop Art movement which includes Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol."

Barthelme repeatedly insists that he's not ignoring social realities, and that his work references, among other things, the Vietnam War, racial strife, poverty and other social conditions. It just doesn't foreground those things; it foregrounds the activities of the mind (while also acknowledging the place-in-time context).

Here's a couple of the quotations I liked from Barthelme:

"To quote Karl Kraus, 'A writer is someone who can make a riddle out of an answer.'" (1981)
"Art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult, but because it wishes to be art." (1987)

Cosmo lives up to both of these, and I salute it. It is difficult and a riddle; it is art.

Bravo.

<http://thenewcanlit.blogspot.ca/>

Vzenari says

Cosmo's stories are dominated by pop-culture. The title comes from the name of the van that Matthew McConaughey drives through the desert in one of the stories, but it could also stand for the magazine Cosmopolitan and its semigloss ads in support of youth, sex, consumerism and stardom. Leonard Cohen considers doing an ad for Subway, a boy tries to survive his horrible family life through his hero worship of professional wrestling, a faded porn star dresses up in a dinosaur costume for his last gig. I appreciated the audacity of some of these stories, and "Jobbers" (about the pro-wrestling) is excellent. I grew tired of the overwrought language, a kind of earnest yet unconvincing philosophizing that I come across in other contemporary writing.

Shane says

75 years from now this book will be force fed to high school students around the globe. They will hate it and the silly review questions added between stories (What do you think Miley Cyrus looked like? What clues to her appearance does the author leave through out the story?). 15 years after that the same kids, now grown up, will find a dusty copy of the book while passing time at their inlaws cottage. They don't want to read it because of the memories it brings forth (How do you think the author feels about wrestling? Do you think he

ever attended a live event?) but they will because there is nothing else to do and it is better than sitting in silence with Fred and Jean as Charlotte makes a quick trio to the store. As they flip from story to story they will begin to wonder if this is the same book they were force fed 15 years prior, marveling at how the stories take on new life when not attached to a grade. On the way back from the cottage they will buy a copy for themselves and the cycle will continue.

Kylie says

I really liked some of the stories but disliked others. Probably closer to 3.5/5.

Jenn says

This is a highly surreal, dark swirl of pop culture, emotions and modern society, sliding the scale from the deliciously, depressingly absurd - Leonard Cohen advertising Subway, a pornstar trying to perform when trapped inside a dinosaur suit - to the minute, sharply human moments that deliver a real punch to the chest - a mother waiting for her increasingly estranged son to sign onto instant messenger, a widower trying to smoke himself to death in his taped-up garage - and everything in-between. It'll be attention-grabbing stories like the one where Matthew McConaughy drives through the desert finding apparently dead clones of himself that get the most recognition, and rightly so, but Gordon also has an eye for the quieter, infinitely touching moments that take place out of the spotlight, like a sister trying to teach her younger brother to overcome fear, with dark, horrible results. Cosmo is both funny and desperately sad, a selection of surprising, thought-provoking and unusual stories that never stop pulling the rug from beneath your feet. Whether clambering inside the mind of a real-life shooter, writing a seemingly endless sentence about Miley Cyrus, or exploring the neuroses of a beauty queen, Gordon portrays frantic obsession, glorious despair and the barest tendrils of hope in beautiful prose, engrossing and fascinating, building fantastic structures of words only to topple them back down again. Possibly my favourite story in this collection, though, is *Frankie+Hilary+Romeo+Abigail+Helen: An Intermission*, a tangle of words and dates and events that should read like a Wikipedia article and instead takes you on a journey of tenuous links, missed opportunities and blind ambition that is utterly mesmerising. This whole book is mesmerising, actually; a series of transient, often heart-breaking moments that shouldn't link together but absolutely, gorgeously do.

Alessandra says

Cosmo is a very interesting collection of stories. I was surprised and pleased at the umbrella of content that Gordon captured. His stories were so vastly different, though they all had very topical subject matter. I should say that I had to be in a particular mood to read these stories though. Sometimes I ate them up, other times it took a few tries to get into Gordon's wordy style.

Either way, I'm happy I did. A single mother using the internet to snoop on her son. Leonard Coen waxing poetic on Subway restaurants. Miley Cyrus mania. Matthew freakin' McConaughey naked in the desert. Spencer Gordon goes places I didn't know a writer outside of TMZ could go.

Full Review:

<http://thebookstylist.wordpress.com/2...>

Marianne Robin-Tani says

More like observations or character studies than stories. Nothing really happened in the few I read.

Andrés Canella says

Spencer Gordon has a few contemporary short story gems in here with "Jobbers" being the top draw. Like many other anthologies, there is a lot of rough with said diamonds; with some feeling more like literary exercises than engaging stories or snippets. Despite some drawbacks, the overall theme of the anthology is fairly consistent: Gordon is concerned with pop culture and its various facets: celebrities, Miss America contests, pornography, wrestling (the fake kind), and the general malaise of 21st century urban society. At this, he is mostly successful.

Joyland Magazine says

You can read a story from this collection here: [http://www.joylandmagazine.com/stories...](http://www.joylandmagazine.com/stories/)

Domenica says

The stories in *Cosmo* are wildly funny, often zany, but always with a huge pumping heart at their center. When working with pop culture as literary material it's easy to fall into cynicism and irony, but harder to stir up a complex mix of absurdity, complicity, and empathy the way *Cosmo* does. Additionally, Spencer effortlessly writes from the perspective of a diverse cast of narrators, making white male authors of a certain age who only write white male characters of a certain age look like chumps. *Cosmo* contains multitudes.

Nathaniel Moore says

This is not your hot step-mother's marginalized CanLit short-story collection.

Kate says

The second story, *Jobbers*, is one of the best short stories I have ever read!

Manjot says

If I could I would give this book 10 stars instead of 5. Simply amazing.
