



# Speedboat

*Renata Adler , Guy Trebay (Afterword)*

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**Speedboat** Renata Adler , Guy Trebay (Afterword)  
Winner of the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award.

When *Speedboat* burst on the scene in the late '70s it was like nothing readers had encountered before. It seemed to disregard the rules of the novel, but it wore its unconventionality with ease. Reading it was a pleasure of a new, unexpected kind. Above all, there was its voice, ambivalent, curious, wry, the voice of Jen Fain, a journalist negotiating the fraught landscape of contemporary urban America. Party guests, taxi drivers, brownstone dwellers, professors, journalists, presidents, and debutantes fill these dispatches from the world as Jen finds it.

A touchstone over the years for writers as different as David Foster Wallace and Elizabeth Hardwick, *Speedboat* returns to enthrall a new generation of readers.

## Speedboat Details

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Author : Renata Adler , Guy Trebay (Afterword)

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# From Reader Review Speedboat for online ebook

## Declan says

We all carry a storehouse of stories in our head. Given the chance, and the right circumstances, we will begin to tell some of them. Each will reveal something about us. We can't stop transmitting messages no matter how hard we try to conceal what we imagine to be our true self. It's all there, waiting to be deciphered. Transmission beginnings the moment we open our mouth and speak. This all becomes horribly acute if we are with someone we are trying to impress; sitting opposite some lovely person and dragging out the old stories again. Here we go: "Oh, that reminds me of the time I..." I, I, I. Oh the self-recriminations later! Why did I spend so much time talking about myself? And those stupid stories I've told so many times. I'm fed up with them, she was fed up with them. I'M SO BLOODY BORING.

Reading 'Speedboat' is like sitting opposite someone who wants to tell you all the stories they can think of about themselves; all of their views on language, on countries they've visited, on politics and many other subjects. It should be the most boring book of all time, but it isn't. It is actually an engrossing, fascinating book, but why, or how, it works, is a mystery. There is a narrative thread, sewn together with invisible thread. A few characters appear, or are referred to, repeatedly, but not with any conventional sense of convincing authenticity. They seem a bit square, they certainly aren't rounded. Sometimes the form of language used could be poem:

"Pinnies from field hockey. Heels down. Bad hop. Sorry. My fault. So sorry. Provide for the common defence. Meanders slip my mind. And of college there is so little, although that little does flare, like the Jesuit poet's embers, gash-gold vermilion, when I remember it at all."

So, there is a very beguiling use of words. There is caustic wit too, like this about book reviewers hyperbole:

" 'Nerve-shattering', 'eye-popping', 'bone-crunching' - the responsive critic was a crushed, impaled, electrocuted man. 'Searing' was lukewarm. Anything merely spraining or tooth-extracting would have been only a minor masterpiece"

There are stories about flying lessons, examples of overheard conversations, even a story about a speedboat, all set out without any obvious order; random as memory; free of association. The stories, it turns out, never become tedious.

I went on a very long date with Renata Adler and she told me as many stories as she could think of. I didn't say very much (though she probably still guessed that there was a great disparity in our income levels) but she was great company and I'd really like to meet her again. Next time I might even try out a few of my own stories. Like the one about the time I was in Belfast and...

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## Abby says

One warm spring Saturday evening in 1968 or 1969, I was walking east on West 57th Street near Ninth Avenue as a middle-aged man and a teen-age girl wearing a party dress – it was graduation-party season –

were walking toward me. As we passed each other, the man, who I took to be her father, said to the girl, “There’s one.” The girl turned and looked at me curiously over her shoulder as I, stunned, was doing the same. All these years later, I still wonder, one what?

*”At six one morning, Will went out in jeans and a frayed sweater to buy a quart of milk. A tourist bus went by. The megaphone was directed at him. “There’s one,” it said. That was in the 1960’s. Ever since, he’s wondered. There’s one what?”*

Was I enthralled by “Speedboat” because it felt so familiar? Its narrator is a young woman making her way in New York City in the 1960’s and 1970’s, as was I and as was Renata Adler. Jen Fain is a journalist (as was Adler), a graduate of good schools who travels to both ordinary and exotic places and meets both ordinary and eccentric people. She has a sharp eye, a good ear and a dry, dead-pan knack for highlighting the absurdities of sophisticated urban life.

“Speedboat” was considered groundbreaking when it was published in 1976. It has no conventional plot. It is a series of anecdotes and vignettes – some only a paragraph, none longer than a couple of pages, many humorous – that are matter-of-factly reported and never explained or examined for meaning. Its fragmentary (but not structure-less) narrative reflects Jen’s life as it is lived, as a collection of incidents, conversations and observations, with characters who make a brief appearance and are then gone. Who among us, after all, has lived a life with a well-developed narrative arc?

Despite being a fan of Adler’s non-fiction, I avoided “Speedboat” for more than thirty years, thinking for no good reason that the novel was probably dense and difficult. It isn’t. It’s entertaining and revelatory of the way we live. I was hooked on page one. Adler wrote only one other novel, “Pitch Dark,” about another young woman journalist. I’ll be reading that one as soon as I get my hands on it. Both books were out of print for years and were reissued last year by New York Review Books Classics. Is it weird to have a crush on a publishing house?

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## Nick Craske says

Ever consciously stood motionless amongst a frenetic city scene, detached from the moment? Stood watching, in suspended time, and listened to the inner drama of headphone sonics, while the motions and momentum of the surround played out around you?

Maybe you’ve revelled in the self hypnosis of a train journey and watched transfixed as the passing landscapes, pylons, buildings... pulsed by... in sync with your inner music.

Overheard, in passing, a single fragment of conversation which formed both an absurd statement and a philosophical treaty?

These transitional moments during travel, when we’re often in meditative states of our abstracted selves, reveal the world to us in ornate patterns of both the banal and the enlightening.

Renata Adler’s debut novel —recently republished— captures this sense of heightened awareness through a combination of reportage, biography and anecdote and a hypnotic prose style. Her real skill is in conveying complex, intricate and nuanced existential observations in the suavest, terse and minimal prose. It’s hip, man. Yet full of soul and heart and guts.

Speedboat's narrator, Jenn, is a young newspaper reporter, living in NYC and chronicling her life and observations, attempting to comprehend the world around her. We can sense her dislocation, and throughout the text, begin to understand that she is projecting her feelings upon the scenes she describes.

The morning after a calamitous date, Jenn describes the scene in her apartment:

'When I woke up at noon the next day, the wet wood and ashes with a kettle looked like some desolate form of art'

The narrative emerges through episodic fragments of dispatch and reportage; in gradual pieces of assemblage in its terse and cryptic prose style. Vignettes and anecdotes on failed dates, end-of-evening goodbyes and good nights; of transactions and exchanges with taxi drivers and transient descriptions of street life or overheard dinner conversations. Never static; always journeying. In-between and transient, even in endings.

Immigrants, travellers and the disaffected feature throughout - entering stage left, delivering a line of dialogue, exiting stage right.

The obsession with mortality, which pulses gently in the lower echelons of the text, gradually surfaces to pervade Jenn's mind and the existential premise of the writing. I began to experience Renata Adler's book as Proust through a filter of disaffected urbana, the frequency adjusted. [Proust is mentioned several times]

The theme of childhood and innocence lost also surface to a pitch. Renata Adler deftly explicates upon what it is to see the adult world through a child's eyes - to devastating effect in fact.

And devastation and catastrophe hang heavy over this novel. Spliced and edited, cinematically, in-between the dinner dates, the hotel lobbies, the taxi cab rides and the passing vignettes of NYC are described human catastrophes. Hard cuts.

I attuned to the frequency of this writing just as I read about the awful Boston Marathon bombing earlier this month and at that stage this writing melded to my psyche.

This book is fiercely good.

And Proustitute's review for 3AM magazine is a must read:

<http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/centur...>

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## Carolyn says

Renata Adler's Speedboat faced great contention upon its release. It was not for the content, albeit morally-spotty in parts, but rather, that the work was classified as a 'novel.' Speedboat is a heterogeneous mixture of story-fragments. Collected, they feature no sort of temporal progression, nor is there any plot to Speedboat as a whole. Instead, these microcosmic tales are connected by context and character alone.

One of Adler's most immaculate passages states:

"So for these purposes, digitalis, adamantine, apple orchard, gonorrhea, labyrinthine, motherfucker, flights of fancy, Duffy's Tavern, Halley's Comet, birthday present, xenophobic are all synonyms," the great professor said. "Synonyms, in terms of meter, that is."

The quotation continues to discuss synonymy and contexture as unifying features. What *Speedboat* lacks in plot-continuity it makes up for in continuity of style, mood, and a vague-but-substantial sense of connectedness throughout each of Adler's miniscule tales. In this sense, Adler transcends the traditional story format, presenting to the reader an avant-novel. We must read through *Speedboat* considering it as a newspaper (not unlike those at which Adler found employment). The work is held together by the theme of life itself, ever-mutable. *Speedboat* highlights the beauty that can be found when meaning is ascribed to the seemingly-random.

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### **Ronald Morton says**

Really it's 3.5, but I like rounding up, even though at times it makes me unreliably enthusiastic.

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This is one of those times (where the rating is unreliable), but I think a 3 is too low, or at least that it would put much of what follows in the wrong light.

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And really, that rating is based on Adler's prose, and not the book itself. And (further) really, what I mean is that Adler is one hell of a writer, I just found that I didn't like what she was writing. Or, more specifically, I liked (at times loved) almost every paragraph in this book, and yet the book as a whole left me cold.

I can see why people love this book, it's just not for me. I found *Pitch Black* to be stronger, as it is a more cohesive whole for me. There are connective strands here, there are hints of autobiography or quasi-autobiography that are intriguing (I really do need to track down some of her *New Yorker* pieces, I bet they are exquisite), within each chapter I think there are unifying threads - and discordant interruptions- that I enjoyed following.

But, as a whole, it's really only the writing that stands out, not the whole, and the whole (as a whole) was kind of tedious, and by the end I was ready to be done and on to something else.

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### **AC says**

Interesting... a period piece. For a book, though, whose main *raison d'être* is to be essentially modern, what happens when that particular moment of modernity passes...?

On the other hand, NYC 1971 is something I can dig... I was there. Still...

Renata Adler in 1970 was relentlessly gorgeous. I still dig her hair...

If I were 25 and female, I'd probably take her as a role model. But that said, being neither, I feel no particular compulsion to finish this, and will shelve it.

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## **M. Sarki says**

<http://msarki.tumblr.com/post/5903479...>

*"In any group of two or more, it seems, somebody is on trial."* —Renata Adler from the novel *Speedboat*

Nobody ever said the poet/essayist/novelist/short story writer Jim Harrison was anything but a very smart man, charming when not drunk, a very talented cook if the reports are true, an avid walker, and very good at what he does which is basically write, that is, when he isn't involved in these other things outdoorsy men do. Renata Adler is a very smart girl too. And she tells a very good story. In fact, she tells a lot of interesting anecdotes and puts them all in one book. It would not be smart of me to talk bad about either one of these literary giants of the USA. So I won't. But what I will say is they are neither as good as people in the know make them out to be. Not as fantastic say as a writer like Jenny Erpenbeck, Marguerite Duras, Thomas Bernhard, Robert Walser, Gerald Murnane, W.G. Sebald, Cormac McCarthy, or countless others just to name a few off the top of my head.

I read this book because it came to me so highly praised. It wasn't but a few short weeks ago that I read another highly touted so-called masterpiece and was sorely disappointed in it. So disappointed I cannot even remember the author's name or the book I read, but it is sure to come to me while moving along the page here. He was a precursor to all the... Rilke, that was it. Rilke was his name and the book was his only work of prose fiction that I have thankfully forgotten already. Rilke's book was so dull that I gave up on it about less than a third of the way in. *Speedboat* was nowhere near that poor of an experience at all. *Speedboat* was basically a very good book, interesting, and would have been worth my reading it back in the seventies when it first appeared. I missed it, sorry to say. But it is no masterpiece and for me it is nothing worth reading a second time. The book was clever and funny just like Jim Harrison used to be for me when I read him in the early eighties. Matter of fact Harrison used to be a god of sorts for me along with Tom McGuane and Richard Brautigan. Later I morphed and got into a bit of Rick Bass after reading these guys, and I liked him well enough for another several years before I began to take my reading more seriously. But first I had to learn how to do that. I began my new vocation with Gilles Deleuze, and a little bit of Cormac McCarthy, if those two ring a bell for you. They certainly rang mine.

Before I get all mundane here and begin rattling off more crap about why I like this guy or that guy, and prove to you I know what I am talking about, I want to say for the record, and be abundantly clear about it here, that I have no bone to pick with Renata Adler. I like what she says and how she says it. She is very interesting. Her character in this book seems to me a very nice woman and I thoroughly enjoyed her personality and would wish her to be a friend of mine. None of my real friends are even half as smart as Renata Adler's narrator in this book. (I say real friends as opposed to virtual friends because my friends online are all pretty much brilliant though we've never met in the flesh and probably never will.) But let us not kid ourselves here. Renata Adler is not putting herself or anybody else in any jeopardy with this book. I am not seeing or feeling anything courageous or demanding of either her or the people reading this book. It

is far too easy. It is too pleasurable, and for that there would be those among us here that would have me drawn and quartered for finding fault with a book that is not only entertaining but enlightening to the times of the seventies and what they might have meant perhaps to those of us who had to come after them. I was pretty much there, at least in spirit and in my ingestion of illegal hallucinogens. My ass was actually on the line in the last military draft in a lottery drawing for the Vietnam War, and I was lucky enough to receive a very high number that could have very well saved me from being shipped back home to Mom and Dad in a body bag as so many others were my age. But that is not enough when we are talking great and important literature here. It is simply not enough. There must be jeopardy, and the writing must make every demand on the heart of the writer or it is not going to be worthwhile to be included one day in the literary canon, and most times even worth a first read by me.

This is a book coded for those of the New England elite, or those imminently interested in hifalutin ways. This is not important world literature, and not even of regional significance as far as I am concerned. But it isn't a much different code than a Jim Harrison outdoors sexual adventure story. There are groups who should relate to either culture and derive some secret pleasure by reading about the exploits of these characters. My argument is not to take away anyone's fraternal pleasure, but to be honest and state categorically that *Speedboat* does nothing literary in regards to anything lasting or even remotely suggesting we take a better look. It is not a book worth studying. It is actually an accounting of sorts. A chronological listing, for lack of better terms, of everything she (enter character's name or anybody's) felt important enough to be spiritually deemed remarkable. And there have been plenty of believers who have said and written how remarkable this book was and still is. I am not one of these people.

Renata Adler is a pretty fair writer. She is smart and also a smart-aleck, which are both good things to be in my opinion. She is interesting and would make a wonderful friend. But she does not write a fiction of the highest degree that could or should be heralded. It saddens me to think this book ranks as high as it does in the minds of most of those who care. And the book does not confuse me, and it offers up few questions I don't know the answers to. It causes me no pain whatsoever except for my own personal boredom, and never have I felt the slightest bit uncomfortable while reading her charming little work. In fact, the book just doesn't seem to matter to me at all. About the worst thing that I could say about this book is that it sadly promotes indifference. And that, unfortunately, is worse, as in less, than feeling hate.

With only twelve pages remaining to read in this trial, which has now become a bore of such an extremely large proportion, I feel as if I were the condemned and my having to sit here attentive and all, listening to this high brow bullshit. I can say I did it for my friends, you know who you are, and it is my wish you will have mercy on me for it is I who will be judged here and not Renata Adler instead, a writer so enamored and credited unnecessarily and unfortunately for writing a so-called great work of fiction, but is instead something that just fails to measure up at least to standards I have set for great fiction. In paraphrase and allusion to my beloved John and Yoko, I ask that you, and Renata Adler, just give me a break. And given the awful fact that David Shields heaped praise upon this book ought to be fair warning enough for us all.

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## **Ademption says**

Adler published a novel of 5 previously published short stories that mostly consist of temporally and spatially disjointed, aphoristic paragraphs. In sum, a novel of pithy standalone paragraphs. Some paragraphs are biting, some banal. All are the often subvocal observations of narrator Jen Fain. Fain is by turns a journalist, teacher, and political intern, who drifts through jobs and lovers. She attended expensive prep schools, summer camps, and ivy league universities; studied abroad in Paris; and takes group vacations on



Malta and other Mediterranean islands. Her rapid, jet-setting life doesn't descend into alcoholism, bohemianism, drug addiction, or squalor. She tries to get along with all her advantages, and still finds living in New York fast, tough, and fragmentary.

If, like me, you've ever wondered what growing up rich and waspy in Connecticut or Upstate New York, then trying to "make it" in the big city with all your connections and wealth was like, Speedboat delivers on this experience.

Some of the paragraphs ring true and are quotable (See below). City life is a bothersome dance of transactions. People must wade through a welter of trends and lifestyles and depressing parties, giving each absurd gesture and pose its due, while managing to push themselves forward through hectic rather disappointing lives. Fain's thoughts, and the recorded snippets of conversations she either has or endures, mimics the frenetic pace at which we now live. Comparisons elsewhere have been drawn between Fain's thoughts and hypertext. Even if that were the case, *which it is not*, Speedboat would be a yellowed zoetrope next to a Pixar film. Speedboat is sui generis, working on its own terms without tortured comparisons to the internet.

The first chapter has a neurotic urgency, which subsequently trails into flat anomie in the register of an upper-class Aubrey Plaza. Speedboat works much of the time. When it falters, the book is as smug, insular, and shapelessly ironic as a bad New Yorker cartoon (i.e. two besuited dogs in a boardroom drop a weak pun about economics, because dogs understand economics as well as John Updike did: *ruff*).

The novel has negligible characters, description, and development. The few other reoccurring characters are identified only by name and a quirk or two. I wonder if this sparseness was a defensive position taken by Adler, a Harvard-trained lawyer. She was also a long-serving critic at The New Yorker, noted for her savaging of Pauline Kael, the latter of whom rarely saw a movie she didn't bitch about and loathe for a couple thousand words. Perhaps, Adler the lawyer wanted to give critics little to carp about. She wrote a spare novel, and from her dominant critic's perch, she then reaped the rewards of having every aspiring writer and critic briefly kiss her ass. Nearly 40 years later, the dance happens again with a reprinting.

Half of Speedboat is excellent. The other half is listening to someone complain about her existential angst as she pops vicodin on the deck of her yacht. I'm sure the über-wealthy experience the human condition as keenly as anyone else, but their advantages do not imbue their utterances with any extra legitimacy, and only another of their number is truly sympathetic.

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## Jeff Jackson says

Maximum Droll.

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## Tosh says

Oddly enough, this book doesn't rock for me. In theory, and reading past reviews, this is a book I would go for - but alas, it didn't do anything for me. There are seven chapters or stories - and there is no real chapter narration, but more of a writing that is fragmented and jumps around a lot. Most of the stories, if not all, were published in the New Yorker, in the early and mid - 1970s. It is very much the fiction of its time - there are

traces of Donald Barthelme's sense of narration or jokes, but Renata Adler's writing leaves me just not caring at all. It took me about four weeks to read the book. I would read one story or chapter, and forget about it, and then pick up the book again. But it was more out of a duty to finish the book than anything else. And this is only me, but I have a hard time dealing with literature that is published in the New Yorker. I usually hate it. There is a certain voice or "sophistication" that doesn't appeal to my aesthetic. Especially works published in the 70s. Or maybe i don't like American experimentation via the editors of the New Yorker. Nevertheless, I pass on this book. I give it two stars because once in a while I get excited by her writing - a phrase here or there, or a narration that is way too brief. And then it is dropped and we're somewhere else that doesn't equal the part I just read.

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## **Nate D says**

A constant incisive crosscutting of anecdote, allegory, reminiscence, and upended maxim, all jumbled into an unfamiliar poetry and forcing new associations out of the disarray.

Page by page, the wording and insight here are a pleasure. And I appreciate Adler's humor: satirizing through cynical, scathing restatement of the familiar, rather than engineering outlandish scenarios to advance a point. (There are a few outlandish scenarios nonetheless, but they tend to be off on their own, filling some other role in the story.)

On the other hand, there's very little continuity. I'm fine with foregoing narrative continuity at this point, but this also has little character continuity besides the narrator, or continuity of subject matter (though certain motifs recur), or even continuity of mood. Instead, we're left with stylistic continuity, and the style really is effective, at least. And perhaps thematic continuity, in the social context -- race, class, politics, and modern life.

This is also often very much of its time, I think, but I'm pretty into its oeuvre (70s modernism) so that's just fine.

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## **Lee says**

Excellent slant autobiography, maybe the original of its type. I felt as I read that I was getting a purer strain of this stuff, something closer to the source, maybe even the original approach, tone, and form itself. A period piece in many ways, nicely dated, historical, fifties, sixties, seventies, Tiny Tim talk at one point, a good deal of perfectly phrased '70s feminism (well-educated women from the great women's colleges asked if they type), fragmented form to match the times of course. For a book with only 170 pages replete with hundreds of section breaks it seemed like it went on too long and didn't really evolve, like it started to collapse under its own weightlessness, something the author acknowledged toward the end with the bit about the microtonal composer suffering from "pitch fatigue" -- evolution however probably would've taken the form of plotwork (more about Aldo or the landlord murder) and otherwise ruined this. Didn't really seem like a predecessor to personal blogging and social media posts, in that the language in this is so sculpted, carefully reckless, savvy, always entertaining, turns unexpected corners, relies on associative leaps, eschews traditional orientating transitions. Intentionally about fragmented times and feminism, obviously, but more subtly about class privilege, pins to the page what feels like hundreds of iridescent, delicate, upper-class, northeastern sociological specimens. Loved that the narrator's surname sounds like "feign," as though to say

it's a fake name. Feels real throughout, entirely, and therefore's a favorite, a pretty major meat in the relatively contemporary literary stew I'd somehow known was in the bowl all along but had let sink to the bottom for too long. Seriously, I've had this on my radar for nearly ten years. So glad I finally got to it. Will read her other novel soon and maybe some essays too.

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## **Stephen P says**

When I begged Renata Adler a third of the way through to please not give me any plot, no throw-ins for the publisher of mystery, suspense, unresolved conflicts, she happily agreed. There was no hard edge of the revolutionary who is out to show-up the publishing industry or forge any critical new paths. Just a kindly smile. Until that smile of agreement and recognition I worried. That was the suspense. Any wisp of a narrative would have decimated the exquisite paragraph long pieces laid out like refractions of gems beneath glass.

I love books steeped in the richness of language. The lack of an overall structure did not for a moment veer me away from this immersion. There was no linkage so I didn't search. Searching doesn't work for me anyway. It is like telling myself to be spontaneous or fall asleep. At least keeping my mouth shut to myself doesn't prevent the rising of images, then eventually themes and meanings.

What first arose was the genius of the creation of the narrator. The narrator is relating the inanities and stupidity of human beings. Unlike the countless other narrators in literature who have accurately scribbled out the list for us, she is also participating in this vain and sadly funny life. This for me was the difference, a unique point of view that found its unique voice. If I read it right, and believe me I am open to correction here so please chime in, there seemed therefore to be another voice, the voice of the narrator candidly, maybe a bit weary, observing her own participation, or was it Adler openly observing her creation, the narrator? Either way it is such a skillfully angled perch that it completed the book for me.

Past the halfway mark themes peeled off the printed words on their own. The use of cliches, generalities, inaccuracies, the shudder of delving into the precision of thought, the flee from the burden of the self, creates and maintains a level of ignorance that endlessly perpetuates itself. It also keeps at a safe distance the burn of reality as we skim over its surface as a speedboat skims over the chafe of the passing waves.

In the end the book was for me about the book ending and my finishing. The experience of reading speedboat, how it is imposed on the reader to move through the sentences and paragraphs, provides what Adler and her book says is missing-a jab at reality and its undercurrents.

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## **Matthew says**

Only thirty or so pages remain for me to read, but I just don't return to it.

On first glance, this book would seem a perfect fit for my taste. It's a collage of cleverly recounted, often humorous anecdotes gathered from the narrator's extensive travels all over the world.

Even the most remarkable events are told with a blasé tone that began to disgust me more and more as I read on. At times I suspected I was approaching the material from the wrong direction, that maybe I was injecting

the wrong mood into the sentences, but further reading confirmed that the author was writing all of these tales solely as an exercise in cleverness. For example, a few paragraphs describe the narrator being drunk and getting completely lost in the utterly dark wilderness of an African country on the way back to her tent, and the setting is vividly recreated, but the memory is tossed off like a story about accidentally buying expired orange juice, or something equally mundane. The narrator's life is a spree of international adventure, but witnessed without pleasure or concern.

I don't need my travel writers to be completely enthralled by all that they see, they can be bitter or difficult to please or even frequently ignorant, but when they are so numbed by adventures in foreign lands that near plane crashes are no more exciting to them than clipping their toenails, their nonchalance begins to horrify me. And I suspect this author was trying to convey how such a lifestyle could create such a state of mind, one that attempts to filter every event great and small, boring or bizarre through clever and concise language for the purposes of a nifty journalism piece.

Since this type of writing has become more commonplace since this book was published, I found it much more dull than I possibly would have if I discovered it decades ago. Similar writing flourishes on the internet, the first example that springs to mind is the international writing on sites like Vice: Writing with a lot of style, topics chosen because of their violent or unusual nature, but presented with the absolute minimum of concern or passion for the subject - often coming across as (to me at least) voyeuristic and exploitative.

Like I said, this author has a lot of style, and I would even be curious to read her other notable novel, but this one bothered me.

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### **Eugene says**

a snarkfest. some funny punchlines--but many more stale ones. a structure to admire if it only had a bit more heart and a little less posturing. that is, just couldn't get into it... best things about it were historical -- its capturing of 60s and 70s racism, its city university riffs, the tone and portrait of hip and swinging but fried and bankrupt NYC intelligentsia.

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### **Rowena says**

**“That was a dream, of course, but many of the most important things, I find, are the ones learned in your sleep.”** - Renata Adler, Speedboat

As soon as I read the first page I knew I was going to love Renata Adler. This is a hard book to review but one I hope more people will read. Adler has quite an unconventional writing style I was curious about her as I've never heard of her before. I think I might be a fan.

From the first page, I was really sucked in to the story. We follow journalist Jenn Fain through her life in the USA, in the 60s and 70s, I believe. What I liked most were her observations, often humorous. I have always had a soft spot for books like this one, made up of interesting vignettes. We meet the characters briefly and they disappear and we meet new ones. Jenn Fain is the only constant.

I've seen comparisons with David Foster Wallace and though I've only read half of *Infinite Jest* I can definitely see that. Adler's anecdotes and her discourse on language all made the book fascinating. I can tell she must be a fascinating woman in real life. I'm really looking forward to reading more of her books.

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## Brian says

I can't make any more excuses to myself of why I haven't written a review of this book until now. It's because I'm really fucking pissed at Renata Adler.

*Speedboat* and *Pitch Dark* are two of the best works of fiction I've read in the past five years. I'm certain that Adler's collected essays are amazing. And yes, one day I'll read them. But right now I want to stew in my selfish indignation that she hasn't written another book of fiction in *thirty years*! It's just too frustrating to me. I want more. I *need* more.

Before I started typing this review I went back to my notes, then to the book itself for some highlighted passages - and then found myself reading twenty pages of text. Adler's fiction works like life stories work. We meet, we anecdote each other. There is no sprawling narrative from zygote to today's breakfast. When we speak story to each other we are on the clock. Make it interesting. Keep it pithy. Entertain me, distract me. *Speedboat* does this.

I daydream being a gold-laden sultan, contacting Adler and asking her to name her price to produce more fiction. A commissioned work - not to hang on my wall, but one for us all to enjoy. Wouldn't that be amazing? In the meantime I'll just continue to grouse about only having these two books of hers to love and reread ad infinitum.

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## Alex says

That 'writers write' is meant to be self-evident. People like to say it. I find it is hardly ever true. Writers drink. Writers rant. Writers phone. Writers sleep. I have met very few writers who write at all.

NYRB Classics, the imprint that's mostly about reviving out-of-print books they think deserve a second look, got a big hit with *Stoner* a few years back; now *Speedboat* is getting a little traction, and I'm happy to say that it's better. I first heard about it in this piece, which compares her to Joan Didion - but what it really reminds me of is Louis CK.

Like CK's semi-eponymous show, it has no real plot; it's more of a series of very loosely connected vignettes. Some are funny; some are wise; some are mystifying. And it's very much New York. It's ironic and it can be cynical, but it's not without hope. "I wanted to write the kind of book I liked to read," says

Adler, "which is narrative, thriller, with plots...I found I didn't seem to be doing that. I thought, 'Well, now what do I do?'" And the answer is fuck it, apparently.

The problem is this. Hardly anyone about whom I deeply care at all resembles anyone else I have ever met, or heard of, or read about in the literature.

At times it comes off like Lydia Davis, whose short stories are famous for being very short. Here's one of hers in its entirety:

**They Take Turns Using a Word They Like**

"It's *extraordinary*," says one woman.

"It *is* extraordinary," says the other.

Here's something from Speedboat, presented - like many vignettes - without context or comment:

"Well, you know, you can't win them all," the old bartender said. "In fact, you can't win any of them."

Louis CK does the same thing: just little sketches, sometimes with a punch line, sometimes not. There are no rules.

I underlined like half of this book. It gave me at times insight into my own life:

I think when you are truly stuck, when you have stood still in the same spot for too long, you throw a grenade in exactly the spot you were standing in, and jump, and pray. It is the momentum of last resort.

And I thought oh, that's wonderful: finally, someone else who knows about that. Sometimes Adler shows you a whole horizon with a single sentence: "'Self-pity' is just sadness, I think, in the pejorative." Sometimes I underlined things just because they were funny: "Many English girls one meets abroad are called Vanessa," she mentions, and then just moves on. Or when a child named Kevin goes missing on a field trip:

It turned out that every single child on the school bus had known that [Kevin] was missing. They had not mentioned it to the driver, or their teacher, or each other. They took it that Kevin had been left, forever, for some reason, which would become clear to them, with patience, in the course of time.

Sometimes - often - she's both at once:

"Take off everything except your slip," the nurse said. "Doctor will be with you in a moment." Nobody under forty-five, in twenty years, had worn a slip, but nurses invariably gave this instruction. There they all are, however, the great dead men with their injunctions. Make it new. Only connect.

And you're like holy shit, where did Ezra Pound and EM Forster come from?

I'm quoting a lot from this book because that's the primary thing it is: quotable. I rarely buy books I haven't

read: I buy them later, when I decide that a book I've already read is important enough that I want its help defining me. My bookshelves aren't to-do lists - they're a collection of talismans that remind me how to be. I'd like to buy this book.

ETA and I did buy it - I found a signed copy at Powerhouse! - and it is all good. Here it is with its bookmark, which due to one of the quotes above is a grenade pin.

*(More of my custom bookmark project here)*

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## **Samadrita says**

Much of life does not make a lot of sense in the moment it is occurring. Only in posterity, when we dwell on memories, are we able to see past happenings in a clearer light. The passage of time helps us tame the inveterate romanticism of first perceptions and lets the realization sink in that some things are just what they appear to be and further efforts at figuring out some deeper significance are going to remain futile forevermore. Scattered fragments of time spent with people in places glow like fireflies in the dark but the dots never connect. No hidden, congruous patterns emerge. Some moments stand out in the multitude and bring us pleasure, sorrow, mirth, intrigue or some other keenly felt emotion while the rest merge with the void and perish.

Renata Adler's writing is thoroughly deserving of all the accolades because of her earnestness at remaining faithful to dull realities, everyday mundane things that we eagerly discard in favor of the exaggerated glamour of tragedy or romance. Her fictional love interests are ordinary and unexciting, her protagonist is just another city girl in the endless sea of anonymous faces, and her sardonically narrated observations utterly devoid of the artistic grandeur found in the trademark melancholic novel on urban alienation.

Just as the traditional narrative of the novel is subverted without any pretensions in *'Speedboat'* which, true to life, refuses to stitch together ephemeral moments into a much bigger collage of the human consciousness, the short story format is also ingeniously shunned. Adler's aphoristic 'stories' (for lack of a more apposite term) are just what they are - anecdotes on events and conversations recounted somewhat dispassionately and left unexplained, minor departures from the cyclical nature of routine-bound life laid bare for the readers to dissect and derive their quota of *'reading between the lines'* from. The random handsome, young man encountered on the subway on your way to work who monopolized your attention for the length of the journey, the quarter found in the backseat of a cab that you surreptitiously picked up after wrestling with your conscience for a while, the ailing woman on the verge of certain death in the hospital ward who said she was doing fine on being asked how she was - these are but some of the many discrete snapshots of our collective lackadaisical existence in the backdrop of any nameless metropolitan city of the world and not just Adler's New York.

*"The idea of hostages is very deep. Becoming pregnant is taking a hostage-as is running a pawnshop, being a bank, receiving a letter, taking a photograph, or listening to a confidence. Every love story, every commercial trade, every secret, every matter in which trust is involved, is a gentle transaction of hostages. Everything is, to a degree, in the custody of every other thing."*

Her depiction of idiosyncratic urban life as she knew it is one of the most life-like I have ever come across and, possibly, ever will.

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## **Paul Bryant says**

Newton's Third Law of thermodynamics says that things cannot be held up indefinitely. This applies to traffic jams and also especially if you're over the age of 50 when the evidence will be clear even to non-physicists, just look in the mirror. The angle of dangle is in inverse proportion to the square of the hypotenuse; and the radius is constantly half the diameter and twice the circumference except for catwalk models when it's the reverse. These are things known to the tiniest schoolgirl.

Newton's Second Law says that long and thin is always better than short and stubby. He omitted to add : except for babies. Whoever wished for a baby with long thin arms and legs? That wouldn't do at all. It would be put out in the rushes for a stork to bring up as one of its own. I wanted to form my own band when I was a teenager. It would have been called Tolkien Heads and we would have issued Burning Down the Shire and (We're on the ) Road to Mordor as our first single. Or possibly The Elf Pistols (First album – Never Mind the Hobbits!)

So many many many many people wish to write, you know, "write", but have no idea what to write, so, bereft, they take their cue from LIFE ITSELF as it ephemeralizes past their noses. There's this desire, and there's this keyboard. And here's this 190 pages.

Speedboat is writing. Various paragraphs with no discernible order to them, making innumerable semi-interesting, semi-amusing or just banal, crushingly banal or ordinary ambient banal (hard to tell often) observations. Stoned on life in New York, early 70s. This guy, that cop, this street, that office. A flight. A piano. Tiny Tim. The one with the ukelele. He turns up.

The tone is pretty much what Donald Barthelme (a Speedboat fan) was also doing, but he was funny. And on through the decades, not so far from what George Saunders is doing right now.

Any fan of Speedboat could write as good a book as Speedboat. But that doesn't make it good. I believe that's Newton's 14th Law of Thermodynamics.

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