



Aberration of Starlight

Gilbert Sorrentino

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Set at a boardinghouse in rural New Jersey in the summer of 1939, this novel revolves around four people who experience the comedies, torments, and rare pleasures of family, romance, and sex while on vacation from Brooklyn and the Depression. As the novel's perspective shifts to each of the four primary characters, four discrete stories take form, stories that Sorrentino further enriches by using a variety of literary methods—fantasies, letters, a narrative question-and-answer, fragments of dialogue and memory. Combining humor and feeling, balancing the details and the rhythms of experience, *Aberration of Starlight* re-creates a time and a place as it captures the sadness and value of four lives.

Aberration of Starlight Details

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Author : Gilbert Sorrentino

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From Reader Review Aberration of Starlight for online ebook

Zadignose says

A truly excellent family nightmare. There's cynicism and viciousness in it, but also heartfelt sincerity. The book is quite a surprise coming from the author of the far more outrageous and facetious Mulligan Stew. This has formal-experimental qualities which are familiarly Sorrentino-style: lists, linguistic quirks, written correspondence (whether it was "actually" written, or just imagined, or whether such a distinction can be made, I can't say), the intrusion of fantasy, etc. But it's not an Antony Lamont book. It's a book designed more to hurt you emotionally than intellectually, while not being so over-the-top absurd.

The book has a time, place, and culture to it, and it gave me the strong impression that no one could write this book today. There's a bitter nostalgia to it, but the culture it reflects is well behind us now, and perhaps only accessible through rare gems of books like this one. And, while it trades in fixed-phrases and idioms galore, there is something deeply personal about it that saves it from being either a parody or an archetypal construct. The characters' minds and mouths have been stuffed full of inherited thoughts and utterances, but their hearts are their own, and their struggles and hurt are real.

This book's a winner.

Javier Avilés says

Rashomon en New Jersey. Una historia mínima, un romance con gran carga sexual, en una casa de verano, desde cuatro puntos de vista. Fragmentos de una narración que se intuye mayor, segmentada e inconclusa deliberadamente.

Gilbert Sorrentino ni siquiera tiene entrada en la Wikipedia en español. Esta es la primera novela que se traduce de él y nos preguntamos ¡por qué!.

Gracias a Underwood por traernos esta pequeña, concisa y versátil maravilla.

Schuyler says

This is my first Sorrentino book and I have to say, I was surprised by how much I enjoyed it. I usually have a hard time getting into period novels (this story taking place in 1939 New Jersey) but this one didn't feel like a period novel. Well, it did and it didn't.

Mostly, Sorrentino is just a master storyteller, employing all the tricks of the trade, but not in a hokey or gimmickry way. The story is told through letters, bits of question and answer type exposition, inner dialogue, and other modes that might feel disingenuous but I never once felt like his techniques were interfering with the narrative. I think that Sorrentino wanted to tell the lives of these four characters and he felt the best way to do that would be from these multiple angles. And he succeeded.

This quote below is great mostly because his father ends up leaving the mother for his secretary and throughout most of the book, you come to understand how much that affected both Billy and the mother, and they pretty much hate the father beyond all measure and this one scene seems to be the only happy moment

Billy can manage to conjure up regarding the way things used to be.

"His mother and father turned toward him as he entered and his mother said, 'Your father broke the bed.' At this she began to laugh, putting her hand over her mouth. His father, wagging his finger at her, got up, grabbed Billy in his arms and sat down again with him on his lap. 'Don't believe Mama,' he said. 'She's the one who broke the bed!' Then *he* began to laugh. Then he shouted, in mock anger that made Billy giggle, 'Pancakes! Bacon! Gallons of coffee! Eggs! Rolls!' His mother reached over and put her hand on his father's shoulder with a tenderness that gave Billy a chill of intense delight. There was, he considered, nothing more wonderful and funny than breaking a bed if you were a mother and father." pg. 17

Geoff says

Did y'all know this was one of DFW's favorite books? That right there's some trivia you can use to get the conversation loose at your next cocktail social. In a lull say "Did y'all know Sorrentino's "Aberration of Starlight" was one of David Foster Wallace's favorite books?" and watch the crowd gawk and slobber. Guaranteed to make you up to 60% more interesting to the opposite sex.

Nati Korn says

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MJ Nicholls says

Sorrentino's sixth work of fiction plants an unexpected but apt quotation from Brian O'Nolan after the final page: "The meanest bloody thing in hell made this world."

Aberration of Starlight is one of Sorrentino's most bitter, scathing and unflinching novels (and perhaps the closest he came to 'realism' in content only) in his hefty canon. Split between four characters—a son, his mother, her lover and a father—the book probes into the “psychopathology of everyday life” (Freud ref but also a short story by Gilb) with a series of structural scalpels and stylistic callipers. Making use of letters, fantasies, internal monologue, question-and-answer, dialogue and memory fragments (all this is on the blurb—don't panic), Gilb summons up the burning contempt, sexual repression and overall heartbreak at the heart of this painfully “real family.” Billy, the “cockeyed” child, hopes that Tom, her mother's philandering lover, will replace his absent father, while their poisonous old prick of a grandfather can't stand to imagine his daughter as a sexual being or having his virility challenged by a younger man. The story is beautiful,

painful, darkly humorous and melancholy. And tough, damn tough:

“He wasn’t prepared for her anger and spunk in talking back to him, and what did Bridget being sick all that time have to do with her letting this man be her escort, he’d like to know that, and could she tell him that? With a pair of high-heeled shoes meant for a girl of eighteen, not a mother who’d been married in the church at a high nuptial mass and in the eyes of God was *still* married. She sailed right by that and tore into Helga, that backbiting dutchie she called her, can’t you see what’s as plain as the nose on your face? That sauerkraut-eater has, oh don’t deny it, she has grand plans for you, oh my, *grand*. Why, you talk about people, pardon me, the antiques here, think about Tom and me, Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Don’t you think they can all see that woman setting her cap for you? And she’d say anything to play up to you, anything she thinks you want to hear, by God, she’ll say it, in spades. He didn’t mean to—maybe he didn’t actually say it—but he forebade her to go out with that sly article and her face got as white as her shoes. She said she’d do as she damn well pleased! With a bleached blonde of a tramp he was seen, a whore! he said, and blushed. That’s the kind of man who’s taking you *dancing*! Worse than that greaseball of a husband of yours, and bejesus he doesn’t even have a bit of ass on him! By God, it’s one of the wonders of the world that the man can manage to sit down. She was holding the door open for him and wiping tears from her eyes. Oh Poppa, she said, what a spiteful thing to say, what a spiteful, mean thing to say to your own daughter.” (p192-3)

Dan says

In this novel, Sorrentino explores the different ways in which a story can be told. There are four main characters in the story, and the text is in four parts, each of which focuses on a different character. Moreover, each of the four parts is in several sections, and in each of these latter Sorrentino deploys a different narrative technique to represent the character’s experiences. Thus, in one section he employs third person narration, in another he employs interior monologue, in another he employs the epistolary form (letter writing), in another he employs dialogue, and in another he employs free indirect discourse (look it up). Because the text is organized in this way, the reader learns about the characters by interacting with the text; in interacting with the text, the reader gets more information about the characters, not only in terms of the style of their speech, but also in the way that each character’s perspective of the events in the stories contrasts with the perspectives of the other characters.

Vit Babenco says

Aberration of Starlight is a postmodern love story: a mix of drab reality and crazy fantasies, a single story told by four participants from different vantage points...

A ten-year-old postmodern boy seeing a grownup world distorted in his mind, a lonely child dreaming to have a father;

An inexperienced and romantic catholic woman, boy’s divorced mother cherishing hopes to find a new love and a perfect new spouse;

An unscrupulous petty lecher loaded with dirty dreams and cheap lewdness:

“Then, through the still-open door enter, in various stages of undress, Tom’s eighth-grade English teacher, Greta Garbo, a typist currently employed by Uneek Metal Parts, Inc., a woman in powdered wig and domino, and Tillie the Toiler. Their eyes are bright with sexual frenzy”;

A woman’s old father – a miser and widower, a former pussy-whipped husband disappointed in people and life;

This world isn't exactly a garden of earthly delights...

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

In his review of David Markson's Wittgenstein's Mistress, reviewer Adam says, "It is a bit insulting to consider this work "experimental", as it is well, so successful." Great minds may disagree as to whether 'experimental' is a pejorative and 'insulting' descriptor, but in the case of Gilbert Sorrentino it is simply incorrect, as it is also incorrect in the case of David Markson.

Aberration of Starlight is a beautiful family story which takes place over the course of a few days at a summer vacation house. It is a story about Marie and Tom attending a dance at the Wigwam. The story is presented four times, each telling presenting the perspective of a different character--10 year old Billy, his mother Marie, her father John, and the rather charming Tom Thebus. Each telling of the story circulates through eleven narrative techniques--portraiture, epistolary, unattributed dialogue, interview, fantasy, etc. There will be those who might say that this 211 page book could have been trimmed by 153 pages because who needs to hear the same story more than once? Couldn't Sorrentino have gotten the whole thing done on the first go round, with little innocent Billy's perspective? In response, we should say that *Aberration of Starlight* may easily have been 106 pages longer, with a perspective each from John's flame, Helga Schmidt, that Nazi hag, and perhaps from one of the Stellkamps who operate the vacation house. In these 211 pages we have only the beginning of a novel.

What, here, is experimental? The story works, and brilliantly. We have full blooded characterization, we have plot, we have setting, we even have tea. Nothing familiar to us from childhood fairy tales is missing--there is even the thing about the glass slipper! To speak of a novel as 'experimental' is of course to build a metaphor, and at the very most what can be taken from this metaphor is the question whether this novel, qua experimental, does what a novel ought to do. And one thing that a novel ought to do is precisely to ask what a novel ought to do. But not many novels go quite so far down to the constitutive elements of a novel (as *Finnegans Wake* does). The other task an experimental novel may have is to produce the commonly understood 'novelistic effects' by uncommon means. Possibly, in 1980 when *Aberration of Starlight* was published, it may have had to do with creating novelistic effects in novel ways, but 32 years later (if not in 1980 already) this is simply the way novels are written. The experimenting is over; Sorrentino is successful.

postscriptum

A word re: bigotry, racism, misogyny, anti-Semitism. I seem to be unable to avoid novels in which the protagonist or major characters (severally) are really mean and nasty, monstrous human beings. In addition to *Aberration of Starlight* we should include *Take Five*, *Laura Warholic: Or the Sexual Intellectual*, *The Tunnel*, *Lolita* (and which else?) My guess is that this series is at the heart of the debate between 'moral' fiction (John Gardner) and 'aesthetic' fiction (Gass, Nabakov). As with all distinctions, nothing mutually exclusive here. But these books will offend some folks and my thesis is that such taking of offense is the death of the novel.

Jonathan says

I think, as I am one of those who prefer a little more Mo and a little less Po in my PoMo, this was rather a

perfect selection for my second GS book (the Stew was great, but some of the play left me a little cold), and it has encouraged me to continue with his work.

In many ways this is quite a traditional text, the subject matter being that which thousands of writers have considered thousands of times before. What elevates this is both the quality of the prose itself, and the intelligent and controlled use of non-traditional textual techniques to further the exploration of the characters, and their distorted view of events. Each player is blind to any truth of the others, and exists solely within a script of their own making and the structure of the novel reflects this fact.

So, yes, this gets a hearty recommendation from me, not least to those of you who are curious about this writer, but wary of the more "experimental" (and I use that term simply for simplicities sake, and do not intend it to have any specific meaning) of his works.

Mariel says

aberration of starlight... The true path of light from a star to an observer is along the straight line from the star to the observer; but, because of the component of the observer's velocity in a direction perpendicular to the direction to the star, the light appears to be traveling along a path at an angle to the true direction to the star. - The New Columbia Encyclopedia

Did I like Aberration of Starlight? Kind of. Sorrentino uses different instruments to record the expectations from light years away of the four people. I mean ants. Stars and plasma and held in orbit by the gravity of the expectations of others. I mean the dead sun. Set up some charts and a telescope and get disappointed when the broadcasted phenomenon is a blip. It's probably a red plane light like the "Santa Claus" I spotted when four years old. I didn't get to keep the illusion for long. I don't think some illusions burn hot enough to be worth eating off of anyway. Dancing shoes, pornographic post cards, "fathers". I never wanted to pluck these stars out of the skies and put them in my eyes. I wanted to be moved and instead I was wearing a lab coat and holding a pencil and putting things in baggies with tweezers.

I was going to do a question and answer type of thing like some parts of "Abberation". I've already forgotten about doing it. (Liar! You just said you were going to do it.) Those were the least affecting parts, for me. The letters, the diarrhea memories, the bleeding with sarcasm hopes and dreams. No one is ever happy. If I were them and '50s sitcoms had been invented yet (we're in the great depression) I would have cried. They would have offered no solace. I remember when I first acknowledged to myself that I craved escapism when confronted with swallowing shit instead of doing what I wanted to do. It was in elementary school and the teacher was scaring us kids with how "Everything is going to change" when we got to middle school (it was exactly the same). I thought about how I wished I could go home and watch The Fresh Prince of Bel Air and not think about not getting to do what I wanted to do (probably reading). I didn't even really like The Fresh Prince (except for Carlton when he did something humiliating). They had rich people problems that were solved in under thirty minutes. Who wants to compete with that? The distraction is no good. Every happy thought they ever utter is utterly useless.

I read the never lasts that long self deceptions as oozing between the lines sarcasm. The toes would have gunky yolks in between them from walking on shells. Sorrentino interrupts to ask questions and answers. It was a lot like reading a journalistic account of some people who could be just like some other people somewhere else. Maybe it's syndicated people. What are they doing here? What am I doing here? If there's a

star I could never get close to it because of this. He freaking tells me that Marie's mother Bridget was jealous that her daughter and former son-in-law broke the bed. When he doesn't just tell it's great. I got all on my own that Bridget left Marie 5,000 in her will so that her husband could decide on his own not to even tell her about it (maybe I'm not right but I don't mind that as long as I get to wonder). Their problem is that problem. The telling without knowing what the real questions are. Does Tom just wanna fuck Marie, maybe pretend to love her a little bit if that's what it takes? Yes, of course. The of course is what bored me a little. I would need another television show to watch to distract me from the tv show of the adults who want to fuck each other, who are afraid that it's not the right thing to do, that maybe they aren't getting what they are supposed to get. It's like never having any peace and quiet in your own soul.

From a distance Tom is the aw shucks, gee whiz that sure is a purty dress you got on shyster (what do they call those kinds of guys?). It's not so copacetic when you move a little closer. Someone is putting on a show. His show would be to check his teeth in the car mirror. Someone has gotta be in on it. Marie's show is all of the things that she thought she should have. I kind of felt sorry for her that her husband was screwing his secretary down on the mission. Not because she thought she had it made but more like being rejected and set on a pile and not mustering what it takes to get yourself off it. I wish more that Sorrentino hadn't just told me that her little son Billy was spoiled for when the mistress got along with the kid and the dad without her. It would have meant more to me to earn that. If I'm gonna be on one end of the star I want some light. It is telling when someone repeats to themselves the same kind of lies and sometimes the routine cracks up. That's Marie and her father, John. Sometimes she hates John. Sometimes he's on her side, sometimes he's on Bridget's bed side. That's death bed, praying to God or pretending she is. The wrong side of it, that's what. I really had the feel of a fake kind of sitcom because of all the how things should be juxtaposed with how they weren't. I wish Sorrentino had cut some of the style out and hadn't expected to see so much out of it. I was worn down by my head in the sand. Dammit, don't just tell me all of this stuff in the questions and answers part! Aberration of Starlight would have been so much better without it. It's not much life living in these kinds of dreams. These aren't the dreams people have on their own. They get them on post cards, in church and under mama's cruel belt. I can't live on post cards. What you tell yourself is interesting. I liked that part. Do I want to know the distance between the journalist and its subject like that? Uh...

Will I read more Gilbert Sorrentino? Oh yes. This one just wasn't a favorite.

Mike Puma says

4.5 to 5 stars—for one of those interesting experiments in form, a narrative in parts and pieces, a kaleidoscope story—turn it slightly and it becomes something else, a different picture, some variation on what's preceded and a variation of what will come.

This is one of those novels actually done justice by the summary of its GR title page. Four people staying in a summer boardinghouse, most on a vacation from the city, each with his or her own story, although overlapping with the stories of the other guests.

But, Sorrentino begins the novel with a deception (what fiction isn't a deception?), that's clever and misleading. What begins with the story of a child, a child of divorced parents who resents his absent father and invests his paternal need in another guest, sets the reader up for a sentimental story that ultimately isn't what's presented. The child, someone who's hard not to sympathize with, lulls the reader into a story that's pain-filled, bigotry-filled, hate-filled, lust-filled, pretty much filled with the raw emotions of an unfortunate cast which readers really wouldn't want to know.

Four sections of the novel, divided into pieces of straightforward narrative from each of the four primary characters' perspectives, stream of consciousness mosaics, letters from that person to characters incidental or integral, Question and Answer sections posing the sorts of questions the novelist must have kept in mind while writing and which attentive readers ask themselves as they read.

Reminiscent, in a formal way, of *Atonement* or *Beloved*, where revisiting scenes with more information further informs the story. An interesting aspect to the story, for me, is that one ends up knowing the main characters the way one knows people one meets on vacations where you're exposed to other vacationers in closed, cramped quarters, learning about them partially, as they want you to see them and as others who know them better may reveal them, ultimately willing to be rid of them at the first opportunity. Not for everyone, probably, but definitely one for me.

Brad Lyerla says

John, Marie and her ten year old son Billy are summering at a boarding house in New Jersey. It is 1939. Tom Thebus is vacationing at the boarding house too. Marie and Tom strike up a flirtatious relationship. Billy hopes that Marie and Tom will marry and Tom will become his dad. John fears being alone and opposes his daughter's growing relationship with Tom, who John dislikes as glib and insincere.

Sorrentino makes this simple story complex by telling it four times, giving us each character's private perspective. He offers us little narrative. Mostly, we read dialogue, letters and stream of conscious impressions. When published in 1980, this may have been considered experimental literature. Perhaps, but it is also masterful story telling.

John and his late wife, Bridget, suffered a long and unhappy marriage undone by Bridget's repressed sexuality and John's ignorance. Marie, the child of this stunted marriage, inherited much of her parents' backwardness, which doomed her marriage to Billy's father. Having no other option, she and her son now live with her rigid, widowed father.

But Tom Thebus is not the knight in shining armour that Marie hopes for. He is, as John suspects, a shallow and selfish womanizer.

This is sad stuff. It reminds us that happiness is often fragile and rare. I wish that I could tell you that there is a message behind the story, but I do not believe there is. It is hard, but very good literature.

Garima says

After reading *Mulligan Stew*, Sorrentino had both my curiosity *and* attention, and I knew that I had to read his other works without much delay. The reason to pick *Aberration of Starlight* (Fantastic Title!) was to read something conventional (according to Gil's standards, of course) within the realms of story-telling and with this book, I'm convinced of his inimitable style which solely belongs to him because only he had the talent to make it work.

Nothing much is going on here plot wise: Summer of 1939, New Jersey, A boardinghouse, 4 main characters, 4 different narratives, 4 Unreliable narrators. Events of Thirty six hours is described individually through the eyes of an innocent 10 year old kid, Billy; his divorcee mother, Marie; Tom Thebus, Marie's suitor and a travelling salesman (view spoiler); and Marie's Father, John, a widower. All these characters are not essentially special in any way but they are memorable nonetheless, which I believe was the purpose of creating them at first place i.e. to present a somewhat normal set of characters and then carrying out the task of fitting them into various literary devices which Sorrentino employed in this book, which is undoubtedly the biggest strength of AOS. Those who have already read Mulligan Stew won't be much surprised by all these techniques like letters, series of questions and answers, footnotes, stream of consciousness etc which when used all at once, renders this novel postmodern but their usage here is a bit humble and a lot more controlled in an unfair comparison to MS.

The idea here is to work run-of-the-mill characters and storyline while exploring various layers of human nature and circumstances that govern such nature and in this process to bring the reader closer in understanding various elements of the narration with a distinguished clarity. Each character is given equal footage; 50 page each and the same techniques are used in re-telling the story 4 times. A sense of nostalgia is the main essence common to each story and almost every part containing stream of consciousness is aesthetically done. A glimpse into the psyche of Billy, Marie, Tom and John makes a reader experience different emotions and in a way place us at a position from where one can easily make sense of their respective intentions and to put on display an ironic reflection of their past as well as present. It has humor to make you laugh, sadness to make you cry, vulgarity to make you cringe and fragments of thoughts to make you ponder:

Q. What was the one truth in his life that he would not face?

A. That he had energetically conspired in his own defeat.

Sorrentino was known to be biased towards form and therefore it plays an important role in his books. The purpose is to *bare the device* and laying down the extent to which these devices can be implemented in producing something powerful notwithstanding the content. Perhaps it's not wrong to say that in his works 'How you write' always had an upper hand than 'What you write', and still have the desired effect on readers which can be easily witnessed and enjoyed by reading Aberration of Starlight. Why one star less? It could have been a bit longer. I'm spoiled, I know!

Aditya Watts says

With a fancy title as such I expected a fancy convoluted high-falutin story full of pomo experimentation but instead I got breathless interior dia(mono)logue sans much purpling. Easy, addictive and satisfying. Loved the first part the best - specially can't forget Billy's letter to Daddy.

"Dear Daddy,

...Well how are you? I don't know why, I ask, because I don't really care because I hate you.

...I hope Tom Theboss will marry Mom, ad I Really hope so. Because I am sick of thinking about you and wishing that you would come and say Hello. You came and see me about twice in many years and I allways hoped that you would say Hello on my Birthday or Christmas but, you never did. What a pain you are, what a Louse. Tom can do anything. And reads books all the time, I even think Gramp likes him, anyway..."

