

The Diviners by Rick Moody.txt

The Diviners by Rick Moody (Random House)

Review: Michiel Heyns

There used to be, in the nineteenth century, something called the Condition of England Novel. Written by the likes of Benjamin Disraeli and Charles Kingsley, it had as its real subject, thinly veiled by a love-interest plot, the perceived crisis in the internal economy of what was then the most powerful nation on earth.

We now have the Condition of America novel, as American writers start to deal more or less overtly with the social, political and spiritual condition of their heavily compromised democracy and the ills spawned by its unevenly distributed prosperity, under arguably the most incompetent president in history.

Richard Ford's *The Lay of the Land* and Jonathan Raban's *Surveillance*, recently reviewed on this page, were both, amongst other less tendentious things, Condition of America novels, the former concerning itself with the degradation of the American countryside into real estate, the latter with the security psychosis induced by 9/11 and its aftermath.

Ford's novel was set at Thanksgiving of 2000, that is, at a moment when the results of the fateful election of that year were still in the balance. Interestingly, Moody chooses to set his novel on the same knife-edge of history: it is of course a convenient had-they-but-known irony to visit upon your unsuspecting characters, having them blandly take note of the happenings in Florida, not overly concerned with what we now know to have been not only a national blunder but an international catastrophe. Moody leaves it to the last line of his novel to make that point; it's all the more effective for being left for last.

Moody chooses as his stalking-horse America's torrid love affair with the movies and tv, which in his telling is America's love affair with itself: he has said that "the culture business is a metaphor for how America thinks about itself."

In elaborating that metaphor, Moody structures his novel like a miniseries: the centre of action is a small independent production company in New York City called Means of Production; the characters are all somehow, even if only peripherally, related to this centre, and different episodes give prominence to different protagonists.

The queen bee of Means of Production is Vanessa Meandro, addicted to Krispy Kreme doughnuts, overweight and belligerent. Around her are the hapless young women at her beck and call; in return for her abuse they call her Minivan, and run their own lives as they see fit.

Annabel Duffy, for instance, is having it off with Thaddeus Griffin, "a celebrated action film star" who shares the rent of the office suite while trying to cash in his action credits for a career in independent movies. Between them they conceive the idea of a miniseries called "The Diviners", a "multi-generational saga" which will trace the history of civilisation from the Mongol Hordes to the founding of Las Vegas, based on the notion of water divining as the seminal act of civilisation: "always the diviners are on the side of the oppressed and the downtrodden."

Surprisingly, the idea becomes a hot property, and the machinations surrounding the acquisition and developing of the series are what keep the wildly erratic story line on the road, with just a few detours to take in, hilariously, a botox party in Los Angeles or a terminally toxic wine critic.

The idea of divining is as central to Moody's novel as to the miniseries dreamt up by his characters. In a world of "gluttony, selfishness, megalomania, chocolate addiction, pathological lying, promiscuity, obsessive-compulsive disorder", the characters are, in the novel's central metaphor, left thirsting for spiritual sustenance.

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The idea of spiritual drought is not a new one; what makes Moody's treatment so engrossing is the endless spin he gives to the central metaphor, the comic, tragic and tragic-comic convolutions he devises on the theme. Rosa Elisabetta, Vanessa's mother, has the simplest thirst of all: she's an alcoholic. The women submitting to botox injections "are thirsty for good news": they want to believe they are not "the leftovers of domesticity" they suspect they are. Randall Tork "the greatest wine writer in history", falls in love with an illiterate lout, and composes a description of a Chianti Classico that is in fact a paean to the beloved: "It is yours to delight in love and to remember that love and wine call you to the same reverence."

Tyrone, Annabel's adoptive brother, a bi-polar bicycle messenger and artist, seems to be expressing the malaise of the civilisation he moves through, in his strange works of art called the Thirst Paintings. And in the novel's climactic episode, Vanessa, scouting for locations in the Texan desert, comes across a group of illegal Mexican immigrants, and uncharacteristically takes pity on the bedraggled group, because "there's the danger of hypothermia or death by thirst, which is apparently a horrible way to die." Thus is vindicated what at the beginning of the novel is called Annabel's "steadfast if misguided belief in the possibilities of tenderness". Indeed, for all its satirical edge, the novel is surprisingly forgiving of its characters: one feels that Moody does not begrudge them such moments of dignity as they can salvage from their shabby lives. If Moody is to be believed, the Condition of America is to be alleviated only by individual acts of divining, somehow finding water in the waste land of corporate America.