

Summer Grammar by Ken Barris (Brevitas)

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In reading this novel, I was initially flummoxed: is it a tedious account of a group of utterly self-absorbed characters contemplating their own jammy toes, or a sophisticated satire on a tedious group of utterly self-absorbed people? On reflection and rereading, I've decided that it's the latter, but readers will have to make up their own minds, preferably by reading the book. In the meantime, here is the evidence:

The novel concerns two interlocking networks of relations. Zoë, a young art student, is a lodger in the home of kindly, boring Ian and sharp-edged Celia Ambler, whose chronically listless student son, Kyle, shares a house with two friends, the somewhat shadowy Simon and the obese, unwashed, unhappy Ivan.

Zoë is involved with Shabodien Paleker, handsome and spoilt son of a wealthy Muslim family; she is also not unaware of Kyle's attraction to her. Ivan's girl friend, the beautiful Ella Kantor, begins an affair with Kyle, then moves on to Simon. Celia is drawn into a sado-masochistic relationship with one Earl Lazari, a terminally suave married businessman who demands total obedience and delivers nothing in return.

In short, there's a lot of sleeping around, though there is less action than one would expect, partly because the characters spend so much of their time talking, and for the rest of the time seem chronically fatigued.

Like most modern urban novels, this one contains a lot of sex, food and drugs, all of it about equally unappetising. The food is either disgusting or just plain bad: "The chicken was tasteless and dry .. the vegetables were soggy.

'It's very nice,' she said."

The sex is not much better than the food. In fact, at times sex and food become interchangeable, as when a family dinner, where cow tongue is served, segues seamlessly into the book's first sexual encounter: "Zoë had a writhing animal in her mouth, a small hot frankfurter. It belonged to Shabodien Paleker. She bumped her head hard against the steering wheel of his BMW and bit down fairly hard as he gasped in pain and came spurting up her tonsils. She spat out, swearing and gagging, disengaged herself. 'Oh God,' she asked in disgust, 'why do I do this?'

'Because you love me,' Shabodien replied."

Shabodien, the owner of the frankfurter, is shiny with self-conceit; when Zoë gets pregnant, he refuses to take responsibility for the child; instead, he lures her into a broom cupboard for a last fling, as it were, only to be interrupted by his cell phone: "As he pulled up the telephone and spoke, he ejaculated, flung hot fluid over Zoë's face and chest, her dress, into her hair."

Poor Zoë. Like Celia, she is doomed to discover "[t]he sexual truth ... The truth of a man, whatever truth there was to be found." That truth, this novel suggests, is hardly worth finding. The narcissistic Shabodien, the sadistic, onanistic Earl Lazari, the demoralised Ian, the lethargic Kyle, the clinically depressed Ivan: on this showing, men are just not much fun to be around.

Indeed, the characters are all low-energy types. Even Zoë, the most up-beat of the lot, is not exactly exuberant. Speaking to her mother on the phone, she "felt crushed by a wave of fatigue, and saw no further point in this conversation." Kyle, in a fairly representative

moment, experiences “a strange compound feeling, a sense of weariness rather than relief It tasted of sour wine, smoke, the cud of milky bread.”

The would-be seducer, Earl Lazari, with his air of “exhausted seductiveness,” includes, as part of his foreplay, a lecture on the nature of that stock malaise of nineteen-fifties existentialism, *ennui*: “He pressed his hand against his heart; his wrist was encased in a thick gold watch. ‘*Ennui* is more of the soul. It is about the relationship of the soul with life, you see.’”

In one of the more incisive moments in the novel, Celia calls this “a pile of crap.”

I shall not reveal how this relationship develops, if that is the word: suffice it to say that *Summer Grammar* is, amongst other things, a satire on sex in the age of the cell phone. Seldom can fornication have been so little fun, and conversations so listless and inconclusive. Here is a snatch of post-coital profundity: “Where do you come from, she asked. I come from Mowbray, he replied. That’s not what I asked, she said. Where do you come from? What part of the universe?”

Reading this book is a bit like being the only unstoned person at a party in Mowbray where everyone sits around listening to Leonard Cohen. This can be quite an entertaining situation, given the right degree of detachment and well-developed powers of observation. Ken Barris has both of these, and ruthlessly but almost affectionately anatomises his world-weary, bored, lethargic city dwellers wandering around in a self-consciously gloomy fug. The grammar of love, he seems to be saying, is seldom conjugated beyond the first person singular.

After my initial mystification, I found this a witty, entertaining, mordantly amusing novel. There is very little chicken soup for the soul here, but plenty of other nutritious and stomach-turning dishes.

A final gripe: the editing is unaccountably and inexcusably bad. Brevitas should really make up its mind on its policy regarding punctuation inside or outside quotations marks. Alternating between the two is not a solution.