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THE WALKING TOUR

Kathryn Davis's fourth novel, *The Walking Tour*, belongs to a noble family of fictions. It is a descendant of the fantastic, world-building complexity of Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*, the eccentric humor of Hughes's *A High Wind in Jamaica*, the boldness of Woolf's *Orlando* and *The Waves*. Thankfully, though, Davis herself is no dutiful daughter. At the dinner table, she is mannerly and respectable enough; she knows her forks and the right words to say. But after the evening meal is over, you may catch sight of her on a balcony, bumming a smoke from the butler (there are rumors he's a warlock), or up further, on the ramparts, performing experiments on some very lifelike figures in a dollhouse which stands open to the night sky. If pressed, she may tell you that these experiments have something to do with the mysterious and malleable substances called "time" and "space." Hang around her long enough, and you're sure to experience a change of perspective, to become aware that, between our world and the others, there are more passageways, more "thin places," than you have been led to believe.

This is the way Susan R. Rose, the narrator of *The Walking Tour*, describes the problem of "repentance," which eventually comes to confront the painter in oils:

Repentance occurs when the last application of paint—which usually happens to be thick and opaque and is, consequently, the one used for the face of things such as people or watches—begins to turn transparent, and ghosts begin leaking through. The paint loses its opacity: the teeth are shown to be gritted. Clockworks appear, the clenched fist lifts. In the woman's belly a little baby, under the thick swirling clouds a shining sun.

Unless you are Van Gogh, you must proceed slowly, layer upon layer. Be patient. Surfaces deceive. Thick over thin is the general rule of thumb.

The Walking Tour does not lend itself to summary. In its pages, Susan, child of Carole Ridingham, a painter, and Bobby Rose, “founder and original CEO of SnowWrite & RoseRead,” recounts the story of her parents, and above all the title’s fateful walking tour, when they, together with a group including Bobby’s business partner, Coleman Snow, and his wife, Ruth Farr, set off on a long tramp through the Welsh countryside. In the course of this tramp, during a violent storm, Susan’s mother and Coleman Snow are swept—or jump—off a cliff into the sea. There is a trial to determine the cause.

But between that “infamous summer in Wales” and the present day, many things have changed. The house on the coast of Maine that Susan has inherited from her mother has fallen into ruin—as has reality itself. All around, Susan is surrounded and impinged upon by people called “Strags,” who live in encampments and scavenge for food. Individual objects, having lost their names, have disappeared: the old variegated, multifarious vegetation, for example, has been overtaken by a uniformly gray growth, difficult to depict: “tall things with knobby tops towering over thorny tangled bushes.”

This loss of names and things can, we learn, be traced back to the invention of Bobby and Coleman’s SnowWrite & RoseRead, twin technologies born of one of those straight-shooting American business conversations that have, for a while now, been desecrating the lineaments of the world. Caught in a roadhouse bar during a blizzard, Bobby Rose whines to Coleman Snow: “When I’m reading, why should I have to wait to express my opinion? [. . .] Why can’t I just send my opinion directly to the writer?” When Coleman says that not only can he imagine technology that allows you to send your opinion directly to the writer but also to comment directly on the relevant passage in the text, Bobby replies: “Too slow. I want it quick. Quick and dirty. I mean, while you’re at it, couldn’t you fix it so I could actually *change* the text to reflect my opinion?” And that is how—let us say in *The Walking Tour*—the erosion of reality as people knew it began.

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Much of the pleasure of reading Davis's novel comes from the way she holds all its many narrative strands together, so that we are, though we do not realize it at first, always seeing what happens from the perspective of someone living in the aftermath of an unnamable catastrophe. Susan's situation in Maine makes her the ultimate retrospective narrator—something like Dickens's Pip, if during the narration of *Great Expectations* Pip's home had been broken into by a crazed human creature named Monkey after everyone and everything he'd ever loved had died. Certainly, this extreme situation gives rise to some very curious paragraphs, such as:

Bobby founded the business, as he iconically liked to refer to it, the same month my mother called him collect from a Roman trattoria to tell him she was pregnant with me, which also happened to be three months before I was born. I put it this way on purpose to make it sound like everyone was too confused and distracted to realize what was going on, though of course that's a lie. Bobby was a genius at business like my mother was at painting. With them it was a fight to the death, and if I give her the edge it's not so much because I think she was better at what she did than he was, but to balance the moral fallout of his actions, the way they still poison every breath I take.

The busy first sentence—chatty, ironical, cosmopolitan—seems torn from Cheever or Salinger. But by the final sentence, the tone has reoriented itself to Susan's state at the time of the telling: “an endless state of cause without effect, which is to say endlessly waiting, waiting, waiting.”

There is great pleasure to be had, too, from Davis's development of what in a more traditional novel might be called the plot. It is not completely surprising to learn, from an interview, that as she began *The Walking Tour*, she was toying with the idea of writing a more or less conventional murder mystery. The wonderful thing about conventional murder mysteries is that every least

thing mentioned (bees, mists, carving knives) is expected to have a *meaning*. Every least thing mentioned could *play a part in the mystery*. But the horrible thing about such books, and why Davis ultimately did not write one, is that the author is expected to spell the ultimate meaning out—to reveal the mystery, which isn't a mystery at all, but merely a problem, a crime, an effect with a cause.

Like Carole Ridingham, Davis understands that when you “find yourself in possession of something dangerous,” all you can do is “lock the dangerous thing up in a work of art.” For this reason among others, all of her books, however enjoyable they may be on first encounter, require rereading in order to be truly read. As Edwin Frank observed in his review of *The Walking Tour*:

what's striking about Davis's work is the peculiar concentration of careful art and pure fury with which she pursues her digressions. [. . .] She multiplies and fractures narratives, ropes in elements from myth, history, natural history, and fairy tale, accumulates allusions, superimposes characters, raises expectations and then lets them hang.

Some readers may be frustrated by these expectations left hanging. The pleasures of exposition are so great in *The Walking Tour* that one longs for the comforting closure that might be provided by less careful, less furious books. But to complain about loose threads in a novel about the fraying texture of the universe would be frivolous, to say the least. (“If I ask someone ‘Is there a fire in the next room?’” Wittgenstein wrote, “and he answers ‘I believe there is’ I can't say ‘Don't be irrelevant. I asked you about the fire, not about your state of mind!’”)

The questions posed by *The Walking Tour* are large, but its method is to regard what is small. As when, toward the end of the novel, Susan, fleeing from her crumbling house with Monkey beneath some very ominous, bulbous clouds, takes time to wonder about the ruined garden house, formerly her mother's studio:

at what exact moment did the garden house cease to be a studio and turn into a dreary outbuilding, a few paint smudges on its disintegrating stucco walls the sole sign that an artist used to work there? Green smears and red, still visible through the paneless windows after all these years. Red-haired Mrs. Renfrew and her squirming red-haired litter. A smell like mulled cider. Oil of cloves, without which the paint dries too quickly; Paris green, a deadly poison . . . for God's sake, Susan, watch what you put in your mouth! As meanwhile the base of the cloud is developing more and more bulbs, and the bulbs themselves growing rounder and rounder and appearing at more and more regular intervals, their color darkening, no longer gold but an orange verging on brown that first looks heraldic, then spoiled, like old cheese.

The technique here is very much that of the literary painter in oils, patiently layering the perceptions of a body and a mind: the speculative question about the exact moment when the studio became a dreary outbuilding gives rise to the association between the smears of green and red paint and the memory of red-haired Mrs. Renfrew, which in turn leads to the observation that the clouds are no longer gold but orange, verging on brown, like old cheese—which, like the oil of cloves of old, you might want to keep far from your mouth.

In Davis's fiction, realities lie one atop another, or one beside another (as in *Duplex*), or one within another (as in *Hell* and *The Silk Road*). They are not singular. Look at the world long enough, she seems to say, and you are bound to feel the uncanny shiver of repentance. Everything here is friable. Everything can be lost. Attention must be paid, not only to what can be seen, but to what cannot.