

the ART REVIEW BOOK

SNIPER: A Piece of Fiction

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Reviewed by Samantha Roth

When there were no men around, photons and molecules were the invading forces that presented the greatest challenge to her daily happiness. The government, minor players—not much cause for concern. Their function was concealment, but she didn't care, since she'd pierced the veil, stared straight into the machinations of reality, experienced the burn. It was the feeling represented by a frame of celluloid melting in a projector, and could only be explained to a certain point. In a lucid but half-dreaming state, she came to understand that her difficulties with language came from years of exposure to fry grease, having worked so many years in kitchens. The molecules that compose the sound of a human voice, those specialized particles, combinations of oxygenated potassium and nitrate that represent every sound in all languages, are interpreted by the ear, become coated with a thin film of grease as they are pushed from the breath into the ear of a kitchen worker. That's earwax. If the wax isn't cleaned frequently enough, and there's no way for a dishwasher to reach the eardrum, the wax keeps up, it melts from the heat of the room and slides around the brain. The passageway for the word molecules gets coated with grease, so that all words entering her ear pick up a bit of the lubricant, slip and slide within her mind. That's why she couldn't hold a thought. That's why she needed a man, to keep straight the jumble inside her head.

Women leave after being hit, because it means they've found a man's limits, moved him beyond the flat emotional tones of masculinity, raised him of power and reduced him to a laughable lump, covering his head in the back of a squad car. Violence escalates. Women know when composure will fail. He's impenetrable and cold. He cracks against the shrill sting of a woman's laughter. She can see his explosion in her mind and determine his next step. A gesture of her head, or hand, the flick of a tongue or the twist of a curl and a well-timed snarl—she decides where passion goes, pushed inside of her or a fist through a wall. Men want blood either way. Will he bite her tongue, neck, and cheeks, or will she call him a failure, an inept cock-sucker as she bloods her face? From that semi-protected zone, peeking out from between her arms, she overcomes him. Crashing dishes, broken shatters, pens of chairs—a sublime wonder. She made the scene and takes the credit, satisfaction in the back of her mind.

As I read Christopher Russell's *Sniper*, "a sort of Novel", I repeatedly believed that I had grasped the best description. A cheetos fueled marathon session of *Intervention*, reality TV at its most guilt inducing? *50 Shades of Grey* for the alt-crowd, dashed with *Elfriede Jelinek*? I persistently puzzled a comparison. The writing was engaging and fluid, but I also felt somewhat terrible, uncomfortable, and a little confused.

Sniper disallows boredom. I love to read, but even with favorite novels, I'll occasionally find myself counting pages until a chapter's end. Sometimes you want to move onto a different scene before the author does. In *Sniper*, this does not happen. At times, I feel like the opposite has occurred. Things keep changing. Made up of many small sections with varying typographies and layouts, the book vertigos through styles and perspectives. Some steady narrative cues throughout help readers gleam overlaps in the character's experiences.

Intrigued by the notion of an artist writing a novel for somewhat selfish reasons, I was curious to see which realm this might sit more comfortably within. Switching between a visual mode and one of direct literal address is complicated. Artists who normally traffic in objects and images, at least partially believe that they are superior to a description of those things. When we fall back on language, in press releases or studio visits, we are partially giving in to the pressures of verbal articulation and elocution. What does it mean to choose to write something instead of representing it on a plane, in space?

I'm not sure that *Sniper* helped me answer these questions. Described as "a perverse version of the classic American love story told through narrative chaos," Russell's departure from the genre is far. I often found myself thinking about how deflective the visuals were from the content of the text. I could describe in full detail many of the pictorial choices made in this book: text laid out in a stained glass formation, sentences peeling up from the page in a confusion of dimensions, bloody gothic letters, photos, collage, bright colors, etc – but I couldn't tell you the narrative order of things. I could share the impression of things that happened, strange and scary things, disgusting and sad, but I couldn't tell you when and to whom, exactly.

In art, we often crave some collapse of linearity and logic, but in narrative, at least for the most part, we're looking for some idea of order. *Sniper* serves a little bit of order, and a little bit collapse, and it's also simply, a piece of fiction.

Christopher Russell, *Sniper*, (Bedwetter Books, 2011)

Images: Cover and interior images from *Sniper*

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