

REVIEW

Review of Trevor Cribben Merrill's *Minor Indignities*: A Novel

Bob Hudson

Brigham Young University

It is not uncommon for a first novel to adopt the *Bildungsroman* mode to relate the snags that line the route for a protagonist coming of age and adapting to adulthood—however, few accomplish this feat with the same degree of panache and polish as Trevor Cribben Merrill in his first offering *Minor Indignities* (Wiseblood, 2020). Author of the literary essay *The Book of Imitation and Desire: Reading Milan Kundera with René Girard* (Bloomsbury, 2014), Merrill's *Minor Indignities* demonstrates an anthropological phenomenon that he sees present in Kundera's novelistic world and that Scott Sprenger previously identified in Honoré de Balzac's literary project in his "Balzac as Anthropologist" (*Anthropoetics* 6.1, 2000). To wit, Merrill understands that the novel is a far better vehicle for the human sciences than is a philosophical treatise and, to quote Sprenger, "only in *literature* [can one] communicate his universal thoughts about the human condition and at the same time inoculate himself against any *real* resentment" (7, italics in the original). Indeed, Kundera and Girard stand out as models, as examples abound demonstrating the tensions of triangular, mimetic desire as formulated by the latter and the essentially fragile nature of the human psyche in navigating one's emerging sexuality explored by the former. Likewise, hints of Balzac and even Flaubert (another figure mentioned in the text) are perceptible as youthful blunders and errors in judgment lead to demystification and culminate in the possibility of unexpected redemption.

From a narrative perspective, the thirty chapters of *Minor Indignities* are neatly framed within the nine months of an academic year, as we follow the central protagonist Colin Phelps from his middle-class upbringing in Maine into the systems of power, wealth and prestige he encounters over the course of his freshman year at an Ivy League university. Employing what Gérard Genette would call an internal focalization, the limited subjectivity afforded the reader represents a shrewd discursive choice for Merrill, as the type of psychological and moral progress the novel depicts requires the reader to see things from Colin's incomplete perspective. His motivations and ontological awareness (or lack thereof) work best experienced from his singular point-of-view. Considering another alternative, the excessive mediation of an omniscient, Flaubertian god-like narrator employing free indirect speech and fully aware of the thoughts of Colin's roommates, friends, paramours and professors would render the protagonist at best derisory and pathetic, and at worst, entirely unlikeable. As written by Merrill, young Colin remains relatable in his naïveté and the comedic punch of the gauntlet of indignities that give the novel its name is experienced seemingly firsthand.

Ripe with empathy-inducing comical flourishes and laugh-out-loud scenes, the novel refrains from being slapstick and the humor is almost always situational. In fact, due to Colin's inexperience and frequent awkwardness, certain readers may experience second-hand embarrassment. Humiliation, identified as the path to humility in the St. Bernard de Clairvaux quote that serves as the book's epigraph, is a sentiment often felt acutely by Colin late at night

when second thoughts about a poorly timed or poorly worded e-mail lead to bouts of self-deprecation and self-doubt. Likewise, only with the two decades that separate us today from Colin's freshman year can we find humor—and relief that things have changed for the better—in depictions of the sexual politics of the late 1990s. Song lyrics by Skee-Lo and a President Clinton State of the Union address allow us to fairly accurately date the book; but, beyond verifiable cultural facts and artifacts of the late-90s zeitgeist, the subjective elements presented in the novel ring true and give the distinct impression of lived experience. If *write what you know* is still a signpost for an aspiring novelist, it appears that it is one that Merrill takes to heart in this novel—just as it seems to be lesson Colin is learning in his own creative writing classes. The potency of *Minor Indignities* lies in the ostensible authenticity and lived experience of the account that reads at times like memoir.

While this is not a novel *about Yale*, the location of the Ivy League institution in New Haven, the “Freshman screw” blind date dance tradition, mentions of “the face book,” references to Old Campus, etc., clearly identify the unnamed university. In fact, while neither is observed in the text, one fully expects to see Harold Bloom or Shoshana Felman lurking nearby in the background as they cross a quad. However, one is thrilled to see Pierre Capretz, the famous pedagogue of PBS and *French in Action* fame, appear to teach Colin's introductory French class, with his familiar “v-shaped eyebrows, a prominent, graceful curving nose, and gray hair swept back over a high forehead, a smile both amused and urbane on his lips” (18). Remaining anonymous, another character is introduced with an uncanny resemblance to Bernard Henri-Lévy: A “superstar of the intellectual scene [who] hosted his own cultural program on French television” (165–66), with “masculine features frozen in an expression of heroic pensiveness” (166), a “sun-scorched brow” (166) and a “white button-down shirt, open at the collar to expose tendrils of chest hair” (165), “Sartre and Malraux rolled into one, this era's only true candidate for the rank of *maître à penser*” (166), this character has all of the magnetism and mannerisms of a late-90s BHL (before Le Gloupier's infamous cream pie assaults would render the public intellectual less cocksure). His opponent in the ensuing debate, a fictional Xavier Mongron, is an amalgamation of many Marxist intellectuals produced by France during this same period. Even the fact that professors and French consulate types accost the BHL character and graduate students flock to his debonair counterpart following the debate is all so very true-to-form.

Of central interest for readers of an academic journal dedicated to French, Italian and Romanian culture would be especially these cultural vignettes—both fictional and real—from the apogee of French theory, as would Merrill's depictions of the debate between the two above, moderated by a “ruddy, white-bearded [man whose] mien invited comparisons to Father Christmas, but betrayed no obvious stupidity” (165), in which the opponents “exchanged prudently phrased objections to each other's positions” (166) and during the course of which “Mongron refused to defend his own positions, claiming that persuasion was a form of violence” (166). As one can naturally expect, this exchange would devolve into a cacophony of jargon and buzzwords, the textual pleasure of which deserves to be saved for the reader. Suffice it to say, it was a faithful rendering of the all-too-familiar *dialogue de sourds*, or in this case, of self-satisfied pedantic *cuistres* (and not unlike the much publicized 2019 pay-per-view nonstarter between Slavoj Žižek and Jordan Peterson).

All the same, far beyond a satire of hifalutin theory, Girardian mimetic desire appears to constitute the core of this novel, and Colin's initial ignorance of such models render him prey to

the minor indignities he has to endure. For obvious reasons, Merrill typically depicts this phenomenon in the form of love triangles (or sometimes even in Gansian interdictions). For example, despite having moved on emotionally and his longing for new experience, Colin initially refuses to betray his girlfriend back in Maine, all the while torn between the interests of Julia, the cute, devoutly Catholic ingénue from rural Massachusetts, and Margot, the sexy, sharp-witted, world-wise vamp from Los Angeles. Whenever he does make up his mind one way or another, his overeager pursuits more often than not lead to a series of indignities that he is still too immature to process or understand, sometimes even driving Margot right into the bed of his peacocking, name-dropping, derelict chic roommate Rex. Along with his comrade Sasha, this character's sanctimonious virtue signaling, incessant dropping of names (Godard, Baudrillard, Doctorow, etc.) and practice of conspicuously holding books in such a way that others can read their titles is a trait so often seen among the aspiring literati of the academy that we immediately recall our own personal acquaintance who does the same. If nothing else, it should be clear that Merrill's characters—those mentioned above and the dozen or so more of the supporting cast—are well-fleshed out, feel true-to-life and never seem to be stock, ready-made allegorical archetypes or rhetorical straw men. All in all, the literary world Merrill creates has the feel of the novelistic equivalent of the moral universe of filmmaker Éric Rohmer.

To avoid spoilers, it would be wise to save the climax of the novel for future readers, of which I hope this review engenders many. Still, I will say that as complete as Colin's decadence feels to him by the end of the novel, when he fears that a mundane lapse in judgment is such a glaring transgression that no other university would possibly accept him should he simply decide to leave his current situation altogether, it is not presented without the prospect of redemption. One character's crisis of faith allows the door of Christian belief to open to another, although Merrill is far too sophisticated of a writer to depict conversion in such a pat manner. On the back cover of the volume, Patrick J. Deneen praises Merrill for his ability to instruct "without preaching"; while I agree with this assessment, it seems to me that Merrill's very instruction remains open to interpretation and personal application. *Minor Indignities* is neither a *roman à clef* nor a *roman à these*; rather, it is a traditional *Bildungsroman* that invites the reader to recall his or her own indignities of youth and subtly suggests the all-important follow-up: What has each of us done with the lessons gleaned?