

A Complicit Loneliness

By Katherine D. Stutzman

Book Review:

Voice Over, by Céline Curiol,
Seven Stories Press, 2008.



“The bearers of secrets are condemned to wander on the periphery,” the narrator observes in *Voice Over*, Céline Curiol’s dark and enthralling debut novel. This statement proves true for the book’s protagonist, a woman who bears a significant secret: an illicit longing for a man who lives with another woman. Accordingly, she spends much of the book wandering on the periphery of mainstream society and her own life. She drifts along the streets of Paris and roams through her thoughts with equal lack of volition.

Curiol’s novel, published in France in 2005 and now translated by Sam Richard, focuses on the inner life of this woman, providing a psychological portrait of such depth and richness that it makes up for the sometimes scanty plot. The protagonist remains mysterious—we never learn her name, her age, or any details of her physical appearance—yet the novel vividly reveals the workings of her heart and mind. Writing in an intensely close third-person, Curiol depicts minute sensations that flit across her character’s consciousness. When the woman meets her beloved for coffee, Curiol writes, “Once inside the café, she had lost all notion of time. There was only a great bath of liquid, and she was floating in it, borne away by amnesia and euphoria.”

As the novel delves into the psyche of its anonymous heroine, it becomes a study of loneliness. The woman lives an isolated life; she has no family, and she has cut ties with her only close friend. Curiol’s descriptions make the woman’s loneliness palpable and lend the novel emotional weight. At the nadir of the protagonist’s

solitude, when she has gone several days without speaking, Curiol writes that, "She feels as if her voice has been hidden somewhere inside her body, as if it were a living creature in the process of dying." Yet, isolation appeals to this woman: "She longed for the challenge of absolute silence. She wanted to know what thoughts she would have after a few months, after a few years without uttering a single word." The woman's desire for solitude clashes with her need for connection, and Curiol shapes these warring impulses into a believable character.

For all her isolation, the main character has one important figure in her life: the man she loves but cannot have. Her desire develops into obsession and looms over the novel, threatening the woman's sanity and dominating the plot. Gripped by her longing for this man, she can only respond passively to other events, even while experiencing many remarkable encounters. Picked up by a transvestite cabaret performer named Renée Risqué, she has sex with him in his apartment; she allows a photographer to persuade her to pose for pictures with a bunch of tomatoes on her neck; throughout, however, she plays no active role. Because they have nothing to do with the man she loves, none of these incidents leaves a mark on the woman. The encounters disappear from the novel just as they disappear from her life, leaving the book feeling dreamlike and hypnotic, but sometimes disjointed.

Curiol writes rich and sensual prose. When the protagonist imagines her beloved preparing dinner, she muses, "His hair must smell of onion and bay leaf, his forehead of the salt from his sweat." Observations like these drive the book forward and anchor the wispy plot.


Occasionally, Curiol succumbs to the temptation to portray her character as the only sensitive one in a callous world. In one instance, the woman takes action to help an injured homeless man, while others look on and do nothing. In another scene, she asks if a dying fish can be thrown back, while the fisherman and passersby laugh at her. These moments produce a sanctimoniousness at odds with the rest of the narrative. The woman's passivity threatens to pigeonhole her as just another lovelorn female,

but Curiol's acknowledgement of the woman's complicity in her predicament saves her from stereotype. On the whole, *Voice Over* fits the existentialist tradition, with its bleak and gripping account of an individual's struggle with alienation and her attempt to maintain sanity. Like Camus and Beckett, Curiol takes a long look at her character's soul, and comes away with a portrait of her complexities.

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