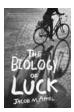
Comparisons to James Joyce

By Anika Gupta

Book Review:

The Biology of Luck, by Jacob M. Appel. Elephant Rock Books, 2013.



ther writers—in their second novels—might want to avoid comparisons to James Joyce. Not Jacob M. Appel. Appel structures *The Biology of Luck* around twin allusions to *Ulysses,* and his cleverness as a writer doesn't end there.

The Biology of Luck chronicles a single day in the mundane life of Larry Bloom, a New York City tour guide stuck among ungrateful patrons, the unpredictability of New York City, and the tremors of unrequited love. Bloom's big source of angst—and the novel's major theme—is his ugliness. He's not ugly in the way of a hunchback or a cyclops, but merely "unattractive, middle class, ordinary." He has two achievements that he hopes will redeem him: He has written a novel that he wants to have published, and he has scored a date with the beautiful, young Starshine Hart. His obsession with her is so intense that his novel is actually about her, a recreation of a day in her life. Appel alternates chapters about Bloom's life with the chapters of Bloom's novel, so the two lives unfold together over the course of the day.

Thematically, their lives are equally related. Everything in Starshine's life either relates to or derives from her spectacular looks: her job collecting money for a dubious charity, her love affairs that never go anywhere. Despite their outward differences, Larry and Starshine are not really different. They both long for love and to be seen for more than what they appear to be. At least, that's Bloom's version of events.

The main strengths of Appel's writing lie in his talent for description (the novel opens with a personification of Harlem that recalls Walcott in its intensity and energy), his extensive library of

allusions (Appel has nine graduate degrees, and, at times, this novel appears to contain all his class notes), and his penchant for absurdist humor (at one point, protestors throw food at Bloom's tour group).

The notion of the beautiful young woman as muse is as old as myth and the theme may seem, at times, too familiar. In claiming Starshine's life story and appropriating her beauty as a literary device, Bloom is no different from her other admirers, who all want to take pieces of her for themselves. At one point, he states his version of life's sole universal truth: "a beautiful girl on a bicycle is communal property." Of course, she's not. The story raises old questions of beauty and representation but could explore the answers in greater depth.

The story ends when Bloom and Starshine meet. He tells her about his novel and asks her if she will consider being with him. "Yes and no," she answers. The well-read reader will recognize the final hat tip to James Joyce.