



Luminous Airplanes

Paul La Farge

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A decade after the publication of *Hausmann, or the Distinction*, his acclaimed novel about nineteenth-century Paris, Paul La Farge turns his imagination to America at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

In September 2000, a young programmer comes home from a festival in the Nevada desert and learns that his grandfather has died, and that he has to return to Thebes, a town which is so isolated that its inhabitants have their own language, in order to clean out the house where his family lived for five generations. While he's there, he runs into Yesim, a Turkish American woman whom he loved as a child, and begins a romance in which past and present are dangerously confused. At the same time, he remembers San Francisco in the wild years of the Internet boom, and mourns the loss of Swan, a madman who may have been the only person to understand what was happening to the city, and to the world.

Luminous Airplanes has a singular form: the novel, complete in itself, is accompanied by an online "immersive text," which continues the story and complements it. Nearly ten years in the making, La Farge's ambitious new work considers large worlds and small ones, love, memory, family, flying machines, dance music, and the end of the world.

Luminous Airplanes Details

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Author : Paul La Farge

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From Reader Review Luminous Airplanes for online ebook

Matt says

I read this because of how much I enjoyed *The Night Ocean*, and found this one to be decent but not as compelling. Getting to the end and realizing there's a companion hypertext novel makes me wonder if the sense that this was a little half-baked is inevitable? I don't really know-- I opened the webpage for the hypernovel but haven't read anything on it yet.

As things go, this was ok-- the basic hook is the character is dragged back to his old home town to pack up after the death of his grandfather, and it's a familiar enough idea, in novels literary and genre, where something will be discovered that changes the character's understanding and engages us as plot. Though the story isn't strictly realist, there's not much genre here as well, except an unwillingness to take itself too seriously... But what is discovered-- the protag's father's story, his own interrupted romance from his youth-- kind of doesn't amount to much, at least in the pages that make up the actual print novel. There's a weird strophe at the end, about 9/11, which is on the one hand interesting, and on the other feels less like a continuation or deepening of what went before than just another thing.

So, I'm not sure what to think. As it stands, I found this kind of underwhelming. But I think there's potential, as part of something larger?

Kate Rappe says

Tried to listen in audiobook. I usually like these stories that go back and forth in time about families but this one bored me so I stopped about 1/3 of the way through.

Elizabeth says

Meh. This book follows a feckless San Franciscan programmer, fond of ironic t-shirts, as he travels back to his grandparents house in upstate New York to dismantle and organize their house after the grandfather dies. There's a sometime girlfriend kinda involved in the beginning of the book. A childhood neighbor revisited once he gets back to New York. There's the complications of past family secrets and finding out truths. All of these ideas seem very intriguing and have the potential to build an interesting story but somehow they don't end up gelling. For me, it's the protagonist who seems to be this passive guy who doesn't really do much and that started to grate on my nerves until I ended up not liking or caring what happened to him.

The book covers San Francisco well during the dot-com era of the 90s and Burning Man is alluded to. As someone who lived in that city during that time, reading and relating to the insights was the highlight of my read and made the book entertaining on some level.

Everything else came out as a big, MEH.

William Clemens says

Let's be honest, I didn't finish this book. At 120 pages in, about 50%, I had no idea what I was supposed to keep reading for.

A computer programmer in the doldrums of the dot com burst finds out his grandfather is dead and goes back to the town he summered in as a child. His boyhood 'friends' are there, the brother is now weird and the sister, of course, is mysterious and attractive.

I didn't even get to the point where boy sleeps with girl, though it felt painfully obvious to be coming. The book is just filled with less than luminous stories and conversations and I didn't find anything in the style that made me want to stay.

I tried looking at a review (from the LA Times) to see what I might be missing, but the review basically hinted that there are better books about this and went on to say "Forget the plot, though! Throw down the book and seek out the website that complements the book"

So I did.

You know what's on the website? The book. Now, the book is deconstructed there, broken into its segments and hyperlinked on certain vocabularies, allowing you to flit from one subject to the next. A neat gimmick, but if that was the point of your book, why did you print a book? Also, going through this book in a disordered fashion after reading half of it didn't propel me to continue as I already knew how boring it was.

Okay, maybe I am ranting a bit, but in the end I hated this book, and I am just sad I wasted time I could have spent reading anything else.

Paul says

The narrator of *Luminous Airplanes* leaves his going-nowhere life in San Francisco and returns to an isolated village in the Catskills to clean out his grandfather's house, assessing his life and re-meeting characters from his youth. From this simple plot, La Farge weaves a cunning and compelling tapestry that addresses most of the big issues: love, death, memory, madness, family, nature, power, race.

Ben Bush says

Something pretty hard to put your finger on about this book. I read some of the online half of the book prior to reading the print version which I think affected my reading. The online version is in kind of rearrangeable modular chunks and it's in turn easy to picture that sections in the print edition could be similarly reconfigured. It seems like if you put each of the sections that fell under a same title heading "Regenzeit", "The Great Disappointment", etc. each one seems designed to function as a standalone novella, but their current arrangement makes them into a traditional novel structure. The narrator's interest in the misguided apocalyptic cult The Millerites who predicted the world would end in 1843 creates a nice parallelism with the book's own "false bottom." Reaching the end of the text, one can see the book continues online. If the print half is interest in the past, in remnants, dead fathers, and grandfathers, the indications are that the digital

half is concerned with birth, a world bigger than oneself, and post-9/11 political realities. AKA a reckoning with death of print and the emerging possibilities of digital media. From other reviews on this site, it looks like the narrative drive of the book is not going to be quite enough to pull people from one half to the next since the book moves in a fairly small quiet world. It's a weird book in that I really couldn't figure out what the hell I thought of it 3/4s of the way through and even now that I've finished it. Line-by-line it's pretty un-show-off-y in terms of prose style. I can't stop myself. I'll say it: The prose reminds me of a smooth flowing river. Yeah, I know. I don't think I mean that as a positive or negative thing. Also, multiple mentions of Murakami's Norwegian Wood, that I imagine comes up in part for the songs lines about flight and people abandoning each other. Last thing: Knowing that La Farge started in ten years ago, one can't help but have the feeling that this book might have hit much more of a digital, post-9-11 nerve had it been released a few years earlier. Also, descriptions of bay area are spot on.

Ryan Mac says

I'm sure there was a plot somewhere in this book but it was hard to find. The basic premise: At the end of the 20th century, a 30 year old computer programmer living in San Francisco finds out that his grandfather passed away. He travels back to Thebes, NY (in Norman Mailer's car apparently) to clean out the house because the rest of the family doesn't want to deal with it. Thebes is a tiny town where he spent his summers growing up. In Thebes, he runs into the brother and sister who lived next door to his grandparents and starts a relationship with the girl. This sounds okay but the book bounces all over the place--the narrator trying to find out about his long lost father, a homeless guy named Snow back in San Francisco and some historical research he did on the Millerites, a religious sect from the late 1800s who believed the end of the world was coming.

I didn't really care for any of the characters but stuck it out to see how the book would end, hoping for a big finish. I should have known better. Not a terrible book but I find it difficult to determine who I would recommend it to.

Melissa Forehand says

Beautifully written

Naomi says

I thought the story was a slightly unoriginal but promising starting point- but the characterisation and prose is poor.

A young-ish white man who is a nerd with lofty potential (for an actually interesting sounding phd dissertation on apocalypse cults) goes back to the small town where his grandfather has just died and rekindles his romance with his friend's sister - a troubled poet suffering from mental illness that apparently seems to only manifest itself in her having sex with lots of people and telling him about it in a kinda sexy way. He, of course, manages to save her from herself for a bit but then gets her pregnant and abandons her which is recognised as kinda shitty but is justified by the fact that it makes him realise he's just like his dad. Does this count as spoilers when it's so predictable?

It was kind of cool (in a "kooky" way) that the main guy has 2 mothers who are twin sisters - but this thread

of weirdness got lost in the novel's general blandness as it went on. Also, the imagery is tired and every character speaks exactly the same way, whether they're the main character's deadbeat uncle or his bitchy SanFran girlfriend.

At first I thought I didn't mind this book, but the more I think I probably hated it? Anyway, at least it did teach me that Leif Eriksson discovered America which got me a point in a game of Trivial Pursuit.

Oriana says

one of Flavorpill's 10 most criminally overlooked books of the year

Julie says

Super fun, contemplative read. It's one of the few books in which I can relate to most of the characters vs. just one or two. It seems to be like a train-of-thought kind of thing, so I felt like I was reading a long internet posting from one of my friends. Just like train-of-thought, this book went off in multiple tangents, sometimes even self-analyzing. I related to a lot of the themes: music festivals, programming, single motherhood, quarter-life crisis, career changes, lost love, the yearning to move to a big city, life's unexpected surprises, even the Turkish neighbors. I was sad that I finished reading and I was disappointed in the ending. But I am happy to know I can continue reading about the main character and his crazy life on the website. By the way, I wish I knew what the main character's name was. Lol.

Gabriel says

"This story is done. It may not be done well but it is done *enough*, which is the point of writing history: not to exhaust the past, but to know it well enough that you can move on." Or to enclose it, to give it shape and commonality, to rip oneself out of it; only *an* I, not any particular I, an expanding universe of I, getting further and further away from itself.

Steven Buechler says

Even though the novel is only 240 pages long, it is a complex and thought provoking read. A kind of intellectual "puppy chasing his own tail" tale.

Page 13 Lost Things

Thebes was never what my memories made it. My grandmother was a good cook but she loved her garden too well, and served us vegetables that only a mother could love, worm-holed lettuces, cracked tomatoes, small starchy beans. My grandfather was frequently in a bad mood and spent whole days in his workshop, sawing and pounding some hapless antique into submission. I played with Kerem and Yesim, the children next door, but this too had its perils. There was bad blood between the Rowlands and the Regenzeits: my grandfather had sued Joe Regenzeit before I was born, and lost. Regenzeit owned the Snowbird ski resort, a couple of bald stripes shaved into the side of a mountain just past the west end of town, and the lawsuit was

in some way connected to the resort, but I couldn't guess how. My grandparents didn't even own skis. It was bad enough that the Regenzeits lived next door, that my grandmother had to watch Mrs. Regenzeit gardening when she was in her garden, that my grandfather had to speak to Joe Regenzeit at town meetings, but when I went over to play with the Regenzeit children, it was too much, it was Montague cozying up to Capulet. If only there had been anyone else for me to play with, my grandparents would have forbidden me to see Kerem and Yesim, but there wasn't anyone else, apart from a few strange children who haunted the steps of the public library, children no one knew and no one wanted me to know.

Although I would know them, later on.

I wasn't in love with Yesim at first—that came later—but from the very beginning I liked the ordinariness of the Regenzeits' lives. The furniture in their house was all brand-new; they had a glass-topped dinner table, which I found fascinating, and a spotless white sofa where children were not allowed to sit. Kerem and Yesim had only one mother, the formidable Mrs. Regenzeit, who was barely five feet tall, wore a pink jogging suit, and spent her days talking on the telephone. I don't know who she called, or who called her, but her remarks were merciless. "I don't give one shit about that," she said, stabbing the air with a long cigarette stained red with her lipstick. "You tell him I am fucking pissed off." She had an accent that made shit into sheet and pissed into peaced, a Turkish accent, I assumed, but later I learned that it was German. Mrs. Regenzeit wasn't fierce to me; she daubed iodine on the blood that welled up when I cut myself; she fed me plates of strange Turkish cookies. Then there was Mr. Regenzeit, an ordinary father, the only one I knew. He was a short, muscular man who spent most of his time at work. Later I'd learn that he was not ordinary—but what did I know about fathers? I thought they were all like that, compact, fussy men who reserved Friday afternoons to teach their children the customs of their native land.

As a non-Turk, I was sent home, and it was only when I came to the other side of the fence that separated our houses, and saw my grandmother kneeling in the garden, and heard my grandfather sawing in his workshop, that I remembered the bad blood.

"You'd better wash up," my grandmother called to me, although our dinner would not be for a while yet. I went to the bathroom and rubbed my hands under the faucet for a long time, thinking about blood, blood and fathers.

Kerem was four years older than I was; Yesim was a year older. He was skinny, a tall awkward spring; she was dark and plump. I wasn't in love with Yesim at first, that came later, but from the very beginning I liked the ordinariness of their lives. The furniture in the Regenzeits' house was all brand-new; they had a glass-topped dinner table which I found fascinating because you could see your legs as you ate, and a spotless white sofa where children were not allowed to sit. Kerem and Yesim had only one mother, the formidable Mrs. Regenzeit, who was barely five feet tall, wore a pink jogging suit, and spent her days talking on the telephone, which she held in long brown gold-ringed fingers. I don't know who she called, or who called her, but her remarks were merciless. "I don't give one shit about that," she said, stabbing the air with a long cigarette stained red with her lipstick.

"You tell him I am fucking pissed off." She had an accent that made shit into sheet and pissed into peaced, a Turkish accent I assumed, but later I learned that it was German. Mrs. Regenzeit wasn't fierce to us. She daubed iodine on the ordinary blood that welled up when we cut ourselves; she brought plates of strange Turkish cookies up to Kerem's room. Then there was Mr. Regenzeit, an ordinary father, the only one I knew, a small pink man who spent most of his time at work. Later I'd learn that he was not ordinary — but what did I know about fathers? I thought they were all like that, quiet, pudgy men who smelled of cologne, who, on weekends, wandered the house in a ruby tracksuit, and reserved an hour every Sunday to teach their children the customs of their native land. As a non-Turk, I was sent home, and it was only when I came to the other side of the fence that separated our houses, and saw my grandmother kneeling in the garden, blooming up the innocent plants, and heard my grandfather sawing in his workshop, that I remembered the

bad blood. “You’d better wash up,” my grandmother called to me, although our dinner would not be for a while yet. I went to the bathroom and rubbed my hands under the faucet for a long time, thinking about blood, blood and fathers.

melydia says

(unabridged audiobook read by Charles Carroll; 8.25 hrs on 7 discs): A 30-year-old man returns from what sounds a little like the Burning Man festival to learn that his grandfather has died and he missed the funeral. It’s the end of the 20th century and the internet bubble has burst. Facing dwindling employment in San Francisco, he journeys to the tiny town of Thebes, NY, to clean out his late grandfather’s house, where he spent his summers growing up. While he’s there he runs into childhood friends, reminisces about San Francisco of the mid-1990s, goes on about a strange homeless man named Swan, obsessively tries to dig up every scrap of information about the father who died before he was born, and generally lazes about. And that’s about it.

Alas, this book is pretty tremendously boring. For a while I was blaming the reader, whose repetitive cadence was awkward and unnatural, but I really think that’s only part of the problem. The bigger issue is that I simply could not sympathize with any of the characters. I don’t have daddy issues; I’ve never abandoned my family; I’m not a nymphomaniac; I think going through somebody else’s things is great fun; I don’t do drugs; I am not in a doomsday cult. In short, I did not care. I listened to the whole thing anyway, hoping that the plot would show up in the end. It didn’t.

Agatha says

Author is very talented but I just could not get myself to like this main character, a 31-year-old single male just sort of drifting along and letting things happen to him. Make a decision! Do something! I felt like shaking him and yelling at him. He gave up on an English PhD at Stanford and then waffled around for a while in the dot-com era of San Francisco. He kind of has a relationship with Alice but then that is on again, off again too. When his grandfather dies in a small town called Thebes in upstate New York, he trundles off in his old jalopy (apparently bought used from a friend of a friend of Normal Mailor) to go clean out Grandpa’s house. His mother Marie Celeste – scratch that – Marie Celeste has a twin sister named Celeste Marie and so they both consider themselves to be his mother and he considers them both to be his two mothers – live in NYC and refuse to come up to help clean out the house because they escaped that small town years ago when they were 17.5 and do not want to return. Once back in Thebes, he lets himself get drawn into a relationship with a Turkish-American childhood friend who has apparently become a nymphomaniac. He keeps trying to find out information about his father, Richard Ente, who had run away from his mothers once Marie found out she was pregnant. Do you see the pattern here? He just flubs from one thing to another, letting the flotsam and jetsam of life just swirl him around. This annoyed me. Even though the author is a good writer, the content makes me say, “Don’t waste your time on this one.”
