



The Verificationist

Donald Antrim

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With **The Verificationist**, Donald Antrim, acclaimed author of **The Hundred Brothers**, confirms his place as one of America's strangest and fiercely intelligent young writers.

One April night, a group of psychologists from the Krakower Institute meet at a pancake house, where they order breakfast foods and engage in shop talk and the occasional flirtation. At the center of this maelstrom of psychobabble and unrequited lust sits Tom, program coordinator for the Young Women of Strength, who has been known to sob uncontrollably at meetings. When Tom tries to initiate a food fight, a rival psychologist bear hugs him into submission, resulting in an out-of-body experience that leaves our Tom hovering over his colleagues. In the hands of Donald Antrim, this unique perspective becomes an exuberantly funny riff on our culture that does nothing less than expose the core of emotions underlying the most basic of human needs.

The Verificationist Details

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Author : Donald Antrim

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From Reader Review The Verificationist for online ebook

Peter Landau says

THE VERIFICATIONIST by Donald Antrim is a comic novel that spews from the mind of the psychologist narrator over the course of one night as he attends an annual pancake dinner with his colleagues. To say more about this sendup of baby men, psychology and sex would spoil the surprises within. Commit yourself!

Sabra Embury says

If the Postal Service's *Such Great Heights* pops into your head more than once while reading *The Verificationist* don't be surprised, since most of the story takes place in the cloud layer of a pancake house. The protagonist--whose lengthy astral projection is the result of a homoerotic bear hug: floats as he admires his server, thinks about his wife, picks apart his co-workers, all while provoking a few debates within his introspective search for a comfortable state of maturity.

Antrim's brand of meandering (in this third novel) is comparable to Nicholson Baker's *Room Temperature*, only a lot more analytical, opposed to Baker's tangents of mundanity dipped in gold leaf. It's a brief ride, too--at 179 pages. Reading it in one sitting is advisable to keep the momentum going, since everything happens in one long breath.

Marc Kozak says

This book happened to catch me at the exact point in my life where it would be the most uncomfortable.

I get pretty down on myself around my birthday, which I know is pretty ridiculous, but here we are. This most recent one was probably the toughest yet -- without wallowing too much in self-pity, I'll just say that I'm not exactly where I thought I'd be at 31 years of age in terms of my career, finances, creative goals, or most importantly, relationships. I'm acutely aware of time passing these days, and it bums me out. Meanwhile, in many ways, I still behave like a child. I want the comfort and security of adulthood without getting rid of the impetuousness and laziness of someone who just entered college. It's something I need to sort out.

I know I know, we all have our own problems, life is hard, get on with it! So very quickly, I'll say that this book is about a psychologist who is similarly trying to run away from the ledge of adulthood, and is painfully self-aware of the entire process. Antrim's usage of technical psychobabble and bizarre surrealism provides an atmosphere that alternates between hilarious and depressing. It's almost too much time spent inside this guy's head, and I wouldn't even recommend this to anyone.

But it just sounded all too similar to how I think. It's non-stop streams of analysis, on himself, on others, on everything -- his brain just doesn't switch off. Several times it hit too close to home, and I had to put the book down.

I'll end with this particular choice quote, because this review is all over the place and not at all fun: I think a

lot about long-term relationships. I've met tons of people who simply don't believe they are possible anymore. That marriage is destined to fail. That two people can't ever be happy together forever. I personally refuse to ever believe that. So I was really hit by the brutality of this section, as the main character's wife addresses their deteriorating relationship. It's long, but hang in there:

I used to love you so much, Tom. It was a simple thing, loving you. I didn't worry about us loving other people. I thought about that, the possibility, but I never worried. I thought I could care for somebody else and still love you. It didn't seem like a problem. You know? Why wouldn't we love other people? Loving other people isn't bad. But it's wrong to think everything won't change. You feel like a different person when you make love with someone new. Falling in love with a new person is a way of becoming a new person. Well, not a new person. A different version of yourself. It's true. That's the wonderful part, and it's the difficulty too, I suppose. I don't want you to be a new person. I always want you to be the man I fell in love with. We're different people and we haven't kept track of who we are. That's why we're in this room, isn't it? This is where we can come to find out who we want to be when things change and we feel strange to each other. I think we each have versions of ourselves that we don't know are in us. Are you scared? Don't be. You're a man and I'm not a girl. Do you remember how young we used to be? We were so young in our twenties. We were children. I was riding the enormous man's bike I used to have, remember? It was about a million billion sizes too big for me, and I was riding on the sidewalk, which you're not supposed to do, and then there you were in front of me and I ran into you. Well, I guess I didn't run into you, did I? You jumped out of the way. What happened? You tripped over the hedge, and that dog came tearing out of the yard on the hill. God. The dog's owner ran after the dog and yelled at us to leave his dog alone and get the hell off his property. All of a sudden, because of that man and his dog, we were united. We were a couple. Think of the ways people meet! I get off my bike and it felt like, "Oh, hello." We walked together, and you were sweet and took my bike and walked it for me, and we weren't paying any attention to where we were going, and the next thing we knew it was nighttime and we were in that scary part of town where the book factory is, so we went into that bar, remember, but we didn't drink anything, did we? We ordered club soda, and the bartender turned out to be the father of a kid who beat you up in high school, then later got killed in that terrible loading-dock accident. The father wouldn't stop talking about how death was everywhere, and he got impatient with us for drinking club soda, and we gave him a huge tip, because of his dead son, and just to get out of there. We went right to bed, that night, didn't we? I was afraid to take off my clothes. You kissed my back and told me it was beautiful, my back. I believed you. Do you ever want to be a different kind of man? Could you be a different man with a different woman if I were the woman? Don't be hurt, don't take it personally. Who else did you fuck, anyway? Tom? Actually, do you want me to tell you something? I'm not sure I want you to say. How would you feel about that? Would you think I don't care? Can you fuck me like I'm all the people you might ever love? Why am I telling you not to be hurt? It's because I want to fuck like I'm everybody and not just me. Is that a crazy thing to want?

Pat says

Insomma, paragonarlo a Calvino...

David says

Despite how much I look for strange fiction, this is one of the more unique novels I've managed to come

across in a long time. It's premise, it's style, it's language, it's characters, it's everything are as fresh and interesting as anything I've seen in a long time. It is a real pleasure to read. I just got into it right from the first page and remained just as interested all the way through. There is wonderful humor as well. Really, it is a wonderful book.

Marco Kaye says

Wild, funny and dreamlike in the truest sense (in that, at the end, you are left scratching your head, wondering what it means). But there are so many great moments. Antrim is clearly taking off the Saunders bong. If I had to guess at what this book is about, and it's one of those books where the author's genius is foregrounded, I would say the Verificationist is about the impossibility and subsequent infinite longing for human connection, as well as the sadness that results when someone looks at his or her life with a magnifying glass. Not for everyone. But for those who want unconventional, here is unconventional done well.

Adam says

And now, a scene from the Simpsons that encapsulates my feelings towards this book:

Moe has radically remodeled his bar, and it is now filled with assorted eurotrash, yuppies and pseudo-hipsters. Homer and friends appear at the grand re-opening and are taken aback by the crowd and environment. Looking up at a TV above the bar that is showing an image of an eyeball blinking and looking wildly around, they ask him what the hell it's for. "It's po-mo" says Moe. This elicits no reply from the guys. "You know, post-modern?" Silence. "Weird for the sake of weird."

Nathanimal says

I recommend this to the reader with a 2 to 3 hour flight because, like the compact little snack you'll probably get on the flight, this is a compact little book that you could probably finish off before you touch down to wherever you're going. Try starting the book in line at the airline consul and continue reading as you taxi around the runway for take off, then you should leave the ground at just about the same time the narrator does. It'll be like you're living the book! As the summary on the back explains, a little way into the story the narrator, a psychologist, gets bear hugged by his colleague, a kind of such physical and emotional duress that he leaves his body. So, if you time it just right, he'll be floating above his his companions at a pancake dinner (Antrim's idea) right at the same time you'll be floating above all the people and places you know and love (my idea). At altitude, in the pressurized airplane cabin with refined oxygen blasting down at you through your personalized little jet, your head will begin to feel taught and buoyant like a helium balloon. You'll become slightly dizzy and disoriented, but in a completely calm kind of way. And this will amplify the feeling of this very strange book. You may momentarily wonder about the symbols in you find along your way — Boy, the color blue sure seems to mean something here, and, How about the roof of that hospital floating all lit up like a spaceship in the sky? That might definitely mean something. But mostly you'll probably get the sense, as I did, with all the psychobabble of the characters and the exhaustive analyzing of every little thing that nothing is quite as crazy as an excess of rationality.

Jeb says

Antrim is one of my favorite writers, but he had more fun with this book than I did as a reader. George Saunders' intro nails it: the writer is like a dog rolling around in the grass without a care in the world. Which is both delightful and, ultimately, tiresome.

Still, I'm glad I read the book. Its humanity and humor are indispensable, and, like the Hundred Brothers, written amazingly in real time with only minor reflections on the past.

I don't resent being frustrated by a great writer like Antrim and don't take his exhausting playfulness personally. Books don't have to be perfect to be worthwhile.

Andrew says

This is one of the few American novels I've read more than once, and one of even fewer published in the last 30 years that doesn't make me want to hold my head under a massive magnet until it erases all knowledge I have of the language. I first read the excerpt that was published in the New Yorker in 99 or 2000 and couldn't believe that they actually published a decent piece of fiction. Astonishing. I waited for the book to come out and it far exceeded what the excerpt set up. So much humor plus intelligence, which always equals accurate absurdity for me. He paints a picture of day to day life as a vacillation between meaningful and meaningless failures.

Here are some nice quotes from it:

Choices between banalities are some of our more intimidating ordeals in life.

Best to understand Bernhardt's criticisms and complaints[...] as nothing more than self-administered medications against the man's own terror of vitality, autonomy, playfulness, the life force in any form.

I believe in unlikely and unexpected affinities transacted between objects in a room.

What is more quiet than that silence heard from skunks and raccoons before a downpour?

Jane is satisfied and happy, a condition she masks by acting fidgety and uncertain.

Mircalla64 says

o del surrealismo fatto arte

Tom è uno psicologo, e come molti che fanno questo mestiere tende a manipolare, analizzare e attribuire significati un po' a caso

una sera durante una cena coi colleghi in una tavola calda che serve solo pancakes la faccenda assume

connotati surreali, certo che se uno psicologo lancia briciole di pane è normale che i colleghi psicologi infantili, essendo lenti a capire i gesti ludici, alzino i menù tutti insieme come un sol uomo per ripararsi, del resto le farneticazioni sui seni della collega sanno un po' di ridondanza per un kleiniano, mentre le fantasie sulla scena primaria fanno tanto antica scuola viennese... :-P

divertissement d'autore, con una buona dose di psicoanalisi e un tocco di cattiveria nel finale, tutto sommato solo per amanti dell'argomento, tutti gli altri si potrebbero addormentare a pagina 35, o forse no, e potrebbero scoprire un'inaspettata passione per le seghe mentali della categoria più bistrattata e temuta delle scienze sociali :-P

Gary Barwin says

Life, I think, is like eating pancakes at night: full of compulsion, sweetness, regret, heaviness, strange incongruity, and, if the ingredients are just right, a surprising grace.

In this brilliant, witty, and insightful short novel by Donald Antrim, a group of psychologists meet for a pancake supper one evening. Not much happens. They talk both shop & gossip, they flirt and argue, and the narrator, whose narration is rich with astoundingly witty, inventive, insightful, sad, and hopeful language, is held in a bearhug for the almost the entire novel by another psychologist just as he's about to throw some cinnamon toast across the room. In the hug, he experiences a transcendent, melancholy, beautiful, and hilarious out-of-body – and eventually, out of pancake house – experience.

This modern fable, filled with longing, grief, psychobabble, and psychological insight, amazes on every page, and, despite its depth, leaves one laughing and filled with hope, both for humans and pancakes.

(reposted from my review on the AdventBookBlog.com)

Krok Zero says

I don't use the P-word lightly, so you can be assured of my certitude when I tell you that this book is some pretentious-ass bullshit.

Josh Friedlander says

Antrim is the master of the casually bizarre. In crisp, fact-laden descriptions, he gives the reader a perfectly ordinary world scarred by just one or two total strokes of insanity, making his short books both archly comic and deeply unsettling. A genealogy of his influencers could include Charlie Kaufmann, Woodie Allen's neurotic monologues, and Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, but you don't really need to go past Donald Barthelme (Antrim discusses this in a wonderful retrospective by John Jeremiah Sullivan in last week's NYT). Antrim takes the mischevious surrealism of Barthelme's *Sixty Stories* and extends it with meticulous, lapidary prose and (in this case) a heavy dose of psychoanalytic tradition.

The plot of this short novel concerns an insecure psychiatrist convening a meeting of his colleagues at a local breakfast restaurant. Intimidated by their seemingly greater confidence, anxious over his unravelling

marriage (and raising questions about his sexuality), he narrates the novel in tones of increasing hysteria (always, though, with witty and original language). The overbearing criticism of a father figure colleague, and the possibility of redemption glimpsed via a beautiful teenage waitress, bring him to some sort of critical decision point regarding his life. Saying any more about the plot would spoil it.

Going back to Kafka, what defines 'Kafkaesque' seems to be different to everyone, but to me it must include an oppressive yet genteel atmosphere: the suggestion of paranoia on the part of the protagonist. The uniquely Modern sensation of being out of the loop, unable to grow up and adjust to the exigencies of adult life, because the tools we were given no longer work. Confronted even by ordinary situations - choosing between eggs or pancake at a diner, say - the character feels alienated and inadequate. By this measure, *The Verificationist* positively oozes Kafka's vapors.

Most of my reading this year has been characterised by wild slashes at the overgrowth of world and experimental literature I have yet to cover, so it speaks to the weird, energetic appeal that Antrim casts that I was drawn to read another of his books just a month after reading his first, *Elect Mr Robinson For A Better World*. (He has a new book out, but I'm not made of money.) I wasn't disappointed.

John Pappas says

Regarded only through the lenses of magic realism or surrealism, this book is a hilarious (albeit in an entirely disturbing and discomfiting manner) and occasionally poignant story of an adult male trying to simultaneously avoid and claim his status as a man. But Antrim seems to not be writing a narrative only about this character's dream-like journey (or lack thereof). His deft use of these techniques to heighten the disassociative state of the narrator, to lend it greater realness and credence, creates a much more interesting character, yes, but also a character with much greater satirical power and function. As such, Antrim's book becomes a metafictional comment on the growing body of literature (I'm looking at you Russo, Walter, Delillo, et al.) featuring educated bumbles -- self-absorbed, self-sabotaging manchildren who use scholarship, not as a way to embrace the world, but as a means of avoidance. By poking fun at the tropes of these novels through the protagonist's sometimes prescient and sometimes misguided self-analysis (he is a psychologist, of course), overwrought rationalizations and compensation mechanisms, Antrim critiques the societal expectations of middle-aged men and the popular literature written about their struggles. Hysterical, in all senses of the word.
