

Singular Pleasures

Harry Mathews

Illustrated by Francesco Clemente

"Like seeds of closeness, like some always penultimate leisure to make it up out
of an alphabet of selves, these glimpses yield a gentle, conspiring privacy."
—Joseph McElroy —



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The subject of this unique book of short fiction is masturbation, a practice both universal and virtually taboo. In sixty-one vignettes, Mathews records the imaginative varieties of this solitary activity in prose that is playful, intimate, urgent, quirky, and humane.

Singular Pleasures Details

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MJ Nicholls says

I am drawn to Harry Mathews—eighty-year-old Anglo-French poet, essayist, novelist and American Oulipian—largely because the Dalkey Archive Press publish a large wedge of his novels, and I respect the Dalkey Archive Press more than I respect all the world's leaders and notable persons. So I am willing myself to love Mr. Mathews although his work is perched on the inscrutable side of potential literature—his games come with no instruction manual. Not so in this short collection of sixty-one vignettes of people masturbating across the world: here, these elegant little paragraphs are a characteristically (of the Oulipo) naughty formal experiment. Imagine that scene in *Amelie* where Ms. Tatou imagines everyone having sex in Paris at that precise moment, but in autoerotic terms. A lovely volume with watercolour illustrations from Francesco Clemente—it takes only twenty minutes to read, about as long as it takes to achieve climax. Or longer if you, you know.

Erik Sundblom says

Kärva, tillbakahållet mustiga små textbitar om mänsklig världen över som onaneras på alla möjliga vis. Varför inte? Å andra sidan: varför? Verkar som att det här kanske ses som ett verk med beundransvärt subversiva kvaliteter? Knappast 2018, väl. Men lite vackert är det ju, detta panorama som visar vad som förenar mänskligheten. Och vissa bitar är kul. Å andra sidan tycker jag det som helhet är lite intetsägande. Ett skoj upplägg som det inte görs så himla mycket av, egentligen. De utstuderat intetsägande och grådaskiga illustrationerna som ackompanjerar texterna i denna utgåva ger mig inget. Och det ska de väl inte heller; deras verkliga, konstnärliga syfte enligt efterordet är att helt enkelt inte ha någonting med texterna att göra, någon slags intellektuell uppvisning. Den här boken gjorde mig lite glad men också lite antiintellektuell.

Glyven says

Reading this sketchy (in all senses of the word) onanistic opus is, like its subject, an act that could be achieved in well under an hour--unless you're really bad at it, or deem it so delightful as to warrant immediate repetition.

Lee says

Deftly described private moments from all over the map (Bering Strait, Gaza Strip, Connecticut), each captured in its momentarily glorious one-ness, wonderfully complemented with stain-like illustrations. Thought it could've played more interconnective games than it did, but I guess each little section is necessarily solo? Many amusing images, if no LOLs, but still sort of formally inspiring for me (despite its nongenerative focus). Masturbatory, sure, but not self-indulgent. Unique, vital/virile, quick lil' pleasures.

Holden Szczyplka says

Ummmmmm.... I like this book

Michael says

Two excerpts from *Singular Pleasures* by Harry Mathews:

"In Naha, Okinawa, a woman sixty years old is masturbating in front of her favorite cat, a female Siamese. The look of the cat as it watches her, curled at the foot of the mat on which she lies, suggests faintly baleful indifference. It is this look which excites the woman and is responsible for the cat's presence. It suddenly yawns—she dips into orgasm like a battered shrimp dipped into sizzling oil."

"A man is masturbating as he contemplates a finely brushed poem by Wang Wei, seated on a straw mat in his garret in Mukden. An 'ascetic sensualist,' he has striven all his life to unite in one moment of revelation the pleasures of poetry and masturbation. On this warm spring morning in his sixtieth year, he senses that the sublime fusion may finally be at hand."

Brandon says

Either a collection of extremely short prose fiction, or otherwise a collection of prose poetry, *Singular Pleasures* is, in essence, a bunch of brief descriptions of various people masturbating.

Mathews's book is not perverse or pornographic in any sense. The pieces here are light, sincere portrayals of various people from various walks of life, masturbating. There is no discrimination here. Men masturbate with other men. Women with other women. There are pieces about underage girls, underage boys. People masturbating by hand, or with the assistance of external apparatus. People of all ages, various nationalities. The scope of the collection spans much of the known world. There is even a brief sequence chronicling the goings-on of an underground organization, *Masturbation and Its Discontents* (aka MAID), borderline-Pynchonian in its existence.

Like any book of poetry, this one may either be a quick read, cranking it out as fast as possible, just to get it over with, or could be postponed reading it in bursts, much like the concept of "edging." Regardless, there is something truly primal about this collection, its candid naturalism quite perfectly fitting its subject matter.

As a bonus, Joseph McElroy's blurb on the front cover is just exquisite, and I look forward to reading more of his actual work, having purchased this particular book after finding it from a keyword search for McElroy's name on Dalkey Archive's website haha.

Lee Foust says

Excellent read! Was reading about Oulipo and Harry Mathews' name came up so I ordered three of his books

to see what they are all about--I was rather embarrassed by the topic of this one--61 prose poems about people masturbating--but the reviewer that I was reading called the book charming and said it was hard to find--so, when I found it, being a collector, I couldn't resist snatching it up. And delightful it is, a real joy. Knowing Georges Perec's work--Mathews' friend and fellow Oulipoian--I'm assuming that there's a system at work here having to do with the age, gender and location of each onanist described (as these are the three constant facts that we are told of each 61)--but it was not necessary to unlock the system to feel the great humanity of our endless, boundless, and repetitive search for fulfillment, even if we have to go it on our own.

Josiah Morgan says

Incredibly, incredibly light - hence the star rating - but also one of the most profound narrative accomplishments I've ever come across; an accumulative build in free-association and memory (blank pages are potent, here), ideal for one sitting. One day I'll read this again, one vignette per day, just to see what changes. Or, you know, to "know what's going on."

Nanne Nauta says

Boekje voor het slapen gaan. Gekregen van een vriend. Daarmee is mijn Oulipo-verzameling weer een stap verder gekomen (Mathews is een lid van Oulipo). De illustraties slaan overigens helemaal nergens op.

K. says

semi-melted lardon

John says

the concept, as i read it, is that most of us are bound by a common secret--masturbation--and that the lengths we go to in order to achieve release are what makes us distinct from each other as individuals--our imaginations. to prove it, mathews has written 61 vignettes of people of all ages and nationalities doing whatever it takes to express themselves. for example: "A man of thirty-five is about to experience orgasm in one of the better condominiums in Gaza. He is masturbating, but neither hand nor object touches his taut penis: arranged in a circle, five hairblowers direct their streams of warm air toward that focal point. He has plugged his ears with wax balls." not all the vignettes are as funny; some are sad, some are touching, some make you tilt your head to one side, hoping for understanding; hoping in vain.

Lauren Floyd says

Short vignettes about worldwide masturbation scenes that make all of my masturbation seem dull.

Mike Kleine says

Terribly good. Too good even, perhaps.

Nothing else quite like it (that I've read, at least). Reminds me a bit of *My Uncle Oswald* a bit, which I read when I was 9 years old--not that *My Uncle Oswald* is anything like *Singular Pleasures*. A bit risqué probably, since the book is about masturbation and there's people of **all ages** in this text.

The most excellent bits featured members of MAID (Masturbation and Its Discontents), an organization encouraging "its members to invent obstacles to overcome while masturbating." For instance: jacking off while reciting Milton's "Il Pensero."

A fine addition to the OULIPO canon. Glad to have been able to enjoy it. [x]

Katy Derbyshire says

Not long before her 40th birthday, a woman in Berlin is lent a book by a mischievous friend. She finds it rather inspirational; as she recreates her own chapter, she imagines a different friend is watching.
