



Carpenter's Gothic

William Gaddis

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This story of raging comedy and despair centers on the tempestuous marriage of an heiress and a Vietnam veteran. From their "carpenter gothic" rented house, Paul sets himself up as a media consultant for Reverend Ude, an evangelist mounting a grand crusade that conveniently suits a mining combine bidding to take over an ore strike on the site of Ude's African mission. At the still center of the breakneck action--revealed in Gaddis's inimitable virtuoso dialogue--is Paul's wife, Liz, and over it all looms the shadowy figure of McCandless, a geologist from whom Paul and Liz rent their house. As Paul mishandles the situation, his wife takes the geologist to her bed and a fire and aborted assassination occur; Ude issues a call to arms as harrowing as any Jeremiad--and Armageddon comes rapidly closer. Displaying Gaddis's inimitable virtuoso dialogue, and his startling treatments of violence and sexuality, Carpenter's Gothic "shows again that Gaddis is among the first rank of contemporary American writers" (Malcolm Bradbury, "The Washington Post Book World").

"An unholy landmark of a novel--an extra turret added on to the ample, ingenious, audacious Gothic mansion Gaddis has been building in American letters" --Cynthia Ozick, "The New York Times Book Review" "Everything in this compelling and brilliant vision of America--the packaged sleaze, the incipient violence, the fundamentalist furor, the constricted sexuality--is charged with the force of a volcanic eruption. "Carpenter's Gothic" will reenergize and give shape to contemporary literature." --Walter Abish

Carpenter's Gothic Details

Date : Published February 1st 2010 by Atlantic Books (UK) (first published 1985)

ISBN : 9781843541677

Author : William Gaddis

Format : Paperback 262 pages

Genre : Fiction, Literature, American, Novels, Literary Fiction, The United States Of America



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From Reader Review Carpenter's Gothic for online ebook

David says

The most compact of the first four Gaddis books, though still longer than Agape Agape, Carpenter's Gothic may be the most accessible of all the Gaddis novels. It has links to JR and to A Frolic of His Own, and is written in the uncompromising style of William Gaddis novels; it is the limitation of the size of the canvas which promotes accessibility. It's a good starting point for the curious. This time around I was struck by the extent to which Paul Booth is just J R Vansant entered into adult life. Paul has all J R's worst traits and none of the childlike possibility that still existed in the grade-six protagonist of the earlier book. Gaddis even seems to authenticate such a reading when Liz reports Slotko's evaluation of Paul to Paul himself: "he said you go off half cocked just because you'd worked for my father you think you, that you can call the shots he said you know as much about finance as some snot nosed six grader that he's sick and tired of your swearing at him on the phone ..."

Russell says

Were the stars ever in doubt? Gaddis proves here that he doesn't need bulk to create a pristine piece of work. Don't get me wrong, his big boys are where it's at, but this is at the least equal to Frolic imo (if not above it). Gaddis has hit my top 3 for sure.

Justin Evans says

I must warn you, I have no qualms calling Gaddis the greatest novelist of the later twentieth century, and perhaps ever. I am an unrepentant fanboy. So my star rating is completely untrustworthy. Anyway, on to my thoughts.

This is the shortest and best titled of Gaddis' real books (I don't count Agape Agape). Carpenter's Gothic, one of the characters tells us, is a style of American architecture. The builders tried to imitate European neo-gothic, but did so from the outside in: the houses have turrets and towers, they're pointlessly tall but rarely spread out into all that land that American houses have to spread out into. The inside is a hodgepodge, because what the architects cared about was how it looked from the outside. So the rooms are divided in irrational, silly and unhelpful ways; there are false walls and weird shapes. Examples of neo-gothic include Westminster in London and the Cologne Cathedral. It's often considered to be an adjunct of political or theological conservatism, vs the liberalism of neo-classical architecture. You can't actually squash such buildings down into a house shape, and nor should you.

Gothic is a literary mode that Austen mocked wonderfully well in Northanger Abbey, and that lives on in various forms today (i.e., all that vampire and werewolf fiction). The original gothic novels often take place in a neo-gothic country manor, and involve (doomed) romance and fantastic or inexplicable events, with improbable, convoluted plots and twists.

You see where this is headed: CG takes place in a 'carpenter's gothic' (modern American analogue of the) country manor. It involves romance, an improbable, convoluted plot, and a mysterious concluding twist. But

whereas gothic authors will either leave the actual cause of the mysteries unclear (think: James' 'Turn of the Screw'), or explained them as simple natural phenomena, Gaddis explains the mysteries by way of American overseas neo-colonialism and general masculine stupidity. Using old literary forms in new ways to criticize real world things gets me very hot under the collar (compare also: McCarthy's use of epic tropes in 'Blood Meridian' and Robinson's use of spiritual autobiography in 'Gilead').

But I get positively *steamy* when a novel includes very little descriptive prose, a lot of dialogue, rants about the state (i.e., bad) of the world, and a high degree of irony about its own heart-felt rants. Check, check, check.

Liz sits in the middle of an awkward love quadrangle, between her husband Paul, drunken self-righteous mansplainer and general symbol for American litigiousness, fiscal religiosity, rapaciousness, and (borderline) rape; her landlord McCandless, a hopeless self-righteous liberal who owns the carpenter's gothic and knows everything but does nothing because everything's f*cked anyway, and whose rants about other people's guilt make very clear that he's as guilty as the rest of us if not more so; and her brother Billy, a grasping self-righteous post-hippy who is *totally* not to blame for his own failures. They all insist on being very, very different from each other but the differences are minimal to non-existent: they hector Liz at every opportunity, about different things, sure, but that makes no difference to her as she lies around more or less incapable of leaving her house except to see a doctor.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the United States of America, designed to look like a grand, albeit conservative Olde Europe, but from the inside nothing but a mess, inhabited by the sick/dying, and three kinds of self-righteous horror.

McCandless screams with rage that "the greatest source of anger is fear, the greatest source of hatred is anger and the greatest source of all of it is this mindless revealed religion anywhere you look", and, from within his locked room in the carpenter's gothic mansion, mocks "their deep religious convictions and that's what they are, they're convicts locked up in some shabby fiction doing life without parole". He's right that religious violence is revolting, right that the endemic conflicts of Africa are down to "money from the West and guns from the East," but won't do anything about it. As Liz finally tells him, "you're the one who wants Apocalypse... you're the one who can't wait! The brimstone and fire and your Rift like the day it really happened because they, because you despise their, not their stupidity, no, their hopes because you haven't any, because you haven't any left." Liberal America.

Paul is more or less incoherent and concerned only with greed and the conspiratorial liberal god-damned media who have all the power... with the powerless, useless McCandless as their representative. American Conservatives.

Billy hates his father, tries to solve the problems in African and (spoiler) dies in a plane crash. American Radicals.

So in short, Gaddis is smarter than us, writes better than almost anyone alive (if you even kind of like DFW, read Gaddis, who got in earlier, did it better, and knows much more about the world), and is funnier than almost everyone. Of his three first books, this is the worst. Just imagine that: this is just okay by Gaddis's standards.

Max Nemtsov says

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Hadrian says

One of Gaddis' shorter books, but one that still requires a Herculean effort to read. A gigantic sprawl of dialogue.

david blumenshine says

in regards to the structure i thought it was brilliant. the conversation as prose which breaks the mold of form while simultaneously showing true form of language as it is spoken offset by pauses of literary prose was as good as any i've crossed. however, no less than two of the main characters were absolutely intolerably obnoxious. as is life, i suppose, that half of the people one encounters go on and on in an annoying fashion, and this is the kind of subversion, on the surface at least, which gaddis uses to win each time out.

in regards to the story it felt like it didn't go far enough, or lingered in between idea and consummation, though, again, such is life, especially with the characters gaddis used. perhaps that is a literary cop out, but, it's gaddis, so he easily gets benefit of doubt. i just selfishly wanted more upfront action, and felt let down

upon conclusion. still very much worth my time, and rhythmically it moved at a good pace.

Thomas Jacob Jr. says

I'd like to take a moment to talk about 'postmodernism' and literature.

I read a book a few years back entitled 'Postmodern Culture'. Among the concepts contained therein, the author explained a bit about how the term itself is shiftable, especially when considering various different types of media, i.e. music, film, architecture, literature, etc.

When discussing classic literature, especially of the contemporary variety -- for my purposes, 20th and 21st century lit -- the term 'postmodern' is normally associated with those works that play with what we, as readers, understand as a 'standard' or 'typical' narrative form and structure. Generally speaking, a plot has a beginning, middle and an end, with various characters entering and exiting the fray who propel the plot through its various complications and climaxes before eventually coming to some kind of conclusion. A postmodern work (again, depending on who you ask, because I am still convinced that there isn't exactly a universally-accepted definition yet), will screw around with these conventions. For those ostensibly associated with that anomalous mass known as 'the academy', there are plenty of authors who exemplify this whole idea. A big one is Mark Z. Danielewski, who includes crazy typographical design, stories within stories (i.e. footnotes and appendices revealing parallel narratives to the main text), and a certain level of meta-ness to the plot, into his works, especially the outstanding 'House of Leaves'. On the other end of the spectrum would be guys like Thomas Pynchon, who merely tell their stories in a tangential manner, and seem to eschew the traditional manners of characterization and setting. I happen to consider both writers among the upper echelon of living authors.

William Gaddis gets lumped in with this 'postmodern' school of literature, and upon my completion of 'Carpenter's Gothic' (an arduous journey), I can respect and understand this association, even if the end result left me jaded. Let me explain. This was my first experience with Gaddis' work, and the primary reason I chose 'Gothic' as my introduction was the length. I have 'JR' and 'The Recognitions' sitting adjacent on my bookshelf, and after completing Pynchon's 'Against the Day' (one of the best things I've ever read), I felt that another 700+ page behemoth might be a bad idea. 'Gothic' clocks in at a relatively prim 280 pages, over 90% of which is made up of unattributed dialogue, although 'argument' may be a better term. Indeed, many other reviewers here have likened the form of the prose here to be much more in line with that of a play. Save for a handful of scenic descriptions which often bookend the long, loooooong chapters, the text consists primarily of an argument between two characters in a room.

Respect where respect is due -- this is a damn authentic representation of real-world dialogue. Therein lies the crux of the problem. The manner in which the plot is doled out is challenging at best and frustrating at worst, with small asides uttered by our small ensemble of characters alluding to the greater machinations propelling the background story forward. There are some really great ideas going on here, and in a different frame of mind I may have found the entire experience pretty thrilling. I like a challenge and I crave the unorthodox in literature. But I also need a good story. Paul and Liz, the two characters with the most screen time here, become borderline insufferable to listen to well before the halfway mark. Paul in particular will make you grind your teeth and get your heart pumping with the terrible way he talks to and treats Liz. Of course this can be interpreted as success by the writer in establishing a great antagonist. But it just didn't translate to an enjoyable reading experience -- which, at the end of the day, is how I will judge any literary work, regardless of its brilliant use of metaphor or distinction of style. My favorite part of the plot, oddly

enough, was the interlude halfway through between the owner of the house, the poetic and mysterious Mr. McCandless, and another mysterious figure and possible former student, Lester. Their exchange, taking place among the piles of artifacts, books and research cluttering up the garage of the house, is steeped in suspense, in contrast to much of the rest of the novel.

Style over substance seems to be the overhanging mantra here. I respect the hell out of Gaddis for his complicated and unique style of prose, and despite my relative misanthropy for 'Carpenter's Gothic', I have not given up entirely and still very much look forward to tackling 'The Recognitions' in due time. There are things I really enjoyed about this book. But it was a slog, plain and simple. Going back to my contextualization of the term postmodernism, the ambiguity of the novel's plot and its characters, for me, overrode the mastery of style, rendering my reading experience a mostly joyless one.

Simon Robs says

Good God it's more Gaddis! He's off to the races again in this one a hundred miles per hour dialogue tearing ass over teakettle telltale tidbits and mumbling hierarchies of madness it's pure joy, joy of reading joy. More to follow prob.

INTERVIEWER

Carpenter's Gothic?

GADDIS

Well, that was rather different. I cannot really work unless I set a problem for myself to solve. In Carpenter's Gothic the problems were largely of style and technique and form. I wanted to write a shorter book, one that observes the unities of time and place to the point that everything, even though it expands into the world, takes place in one house, and a country house at that, with a small number of characters, in a short span of time. It became really largely an exercise in style and technique. And also, I wanted to take all these clichés of fiction to bring them to life and make them work. So we have the older man and the younger woman, the marriage breaking up, the obligatory adultery, the locked room, the mysterious stranger, and so forth.

Sentimental Surrealist says

I'm of two minds about this book. As I discussed in my review of *A Frolic of His Own* (shameless self-promotion time: read it! <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>), I don't buy the conventional "major Gaddis/minor Gaddis" thing that puts his first two novels on top and his last two novels on the bottom; it suggests that Gaddis stopped growing as a novelist he got the two famous ones out of the way, which just plain isn't true. Yet if you check my Gaddis ratings, you'll notice I've given the first two fives and the second two fours, so in a way I as well have enforced this dynamic. Basically, I prefer Gaddis' first two as being these perfect convergences of plot, character, motifs, prose and form, but I wouldn't discount what his third and fourth novels have to offer as well.

Since Carpenter's Gothic and *A Frolic of His Own* are both presented in the mostly-dialog format Gaddis introduced with *JR*, it's tempting to compare the three to each other with an eye for how one led to the other led to the third. On the other hand, since Carpenter's Gothic is half the length of *Frolic*, a third the length of *JR*, and a quarter the length of *The Recognitions*, it's tempting to consider it the least ambitious of Gaddis' works. Yet because it's the next logical step after *JR*, I'd refute that. Carpenter's reveals its ambitions in other

ways. It's a book with a complex symbolic language; for starters, its setting seems to mirror its vision of America. Furthermore, it takes the capitalist system JR skewered and connects it to other systems, namely religion and imperialism, creating this complex net of world conflict. These conflicts parallel the conflicts of the characters, who are all of course wrapped up in these systems. Add these aspects to the apocalyptic undertones, and from there add the structure (accurately compared to a fugue, albeit a discordant one - the subplots never quite cohere, and that's the beauty of it), et voila! A huge novel embedded in a small one and an attempt on Gaddis' part to grow beyond what he'd already established.

Yet there's still something vaguely unsatisfying about this novel. Gaddis' first two novels are exemplary for several reasons, and his last two contain many of those same exemplary aspects - enviable prose, startling insight, formal daring, and oh those symbols and motifs. And I don't think a complex character is the be-all end-all of fiction, but the bottom line is that the *Recognitions* and JR had more complex characters than Carpenter's *Gothic* and *A Frolic of His Own*. Carpenter's *Gothic* is especially weak in that regard; the opportunistic TV preacher is worth skewering, but he's also just short of a stock satiric figure; the same goes for the Billy, the Buddhist hippie who doesn't get Buddhism. He has a few funny lines but never moves beyond the butt of jokes. Gaddis plays well with how antihero Paul is perceived - depending on which of the two unreliable characters you ask, he's either an idiot who's secretly pulling the strings or an idiot who's not-so-secretly along for the ride - but there isn't much to him, either. Liz is a little more complex, although her portrayal verges on misogynistic; there are moments where she seems stronger than she lets on. McCandless, who spends the first couple chapters of the novel cultivating mystique and the rest earning it, is the most compelling character here, and even then he's in some ways a stand-in for Gaddis, which makes it frustrating when he delivers a lengthy speech in the middle of a chapter which, while true and insightful, still kills the momentum.

So if I was gonna diagnose Gaddis' third, I'd say it was great at analyzing the big but missed out on the small, where the *Recognitions* and JR exemplified both. Still, as a broadening of JR's cultural critique and an example of how you incorporate symbols and structural experimentation into your fiction, it's as brilliant as anything else Gaddis wrote. Well worth the couple days it'll take to read, but held back in some ways.

Stephen Durrant says

Imagine three or four Thomas Bernhard characters talking to one another and you have the style of this Gaddis novel. Each character, but perhaps one, has a particular rant, with none of them really listening to the others (we've all been to dinner parties like this but they don't typically last more than maybe two hours). Moreover, since the speaker is rarely identified, one sometimes feels a bit lost, and since the novel is almost all dialogue, what has happened needs to be constantly reconstructed from the accounts of these unreliable, self-obsessed speakers. This is not an easy read, but it is definitely a work of talent. One can understand how some critics argued that early Pynchon works were really written by Gaddis under a pseudonym! The vision here is bleak, with the ranting characters representing different American voices. The two most important are Paul, a archetypal American con-man, who is trying to ride a wave of right-wing religious fanaticism to his own personal advantage, and McCandless, who feels that all religious belief can be dismissed as dangerous stupidity. Caught between these two voices is Paul's abused wife Liz, who is basically trying to keep some grasp on reality in a world gone mad. McCandless manages to strike some tones that will reverberate with readers of my background: "Revealed truth is the one weapon stupidity's got against intelligence and that's what the whole damned thing is about" (p183). For more direct attacks on my childhood religion see pp. 128, 157, 186 and elsewhere. Why only three stars? If one reads the strange labels that go with the "Goodreads" system, one discovers that three stars means "I liked it" and five stars "it was amazing." Well, in its own way

this books is "amazing" . . . but I was glad when it was over, can't say I liked it all that much . . . so what does one do?

Griffin Alexander says

And here we have Gaddis at it again: the falsity at the bottom of our pious surety; the hypocrisy beneath the headlines; the churning disgust we put outward and onto one another. But here, as opposed to the richness of *The Recognitions*, we have no struggle toward the meaningful, no moments that are necessarily funny without the indulgence in the caustics of cynicism, no actual human connection. We are left instead with the extended metaphor of the Carpenter's Gothic: that the belief systems of people are made like sketches asymptotically approaching the graceful archetype of the Old World's stone-and-mortar-Gothic permanence, but that the rooms of the ideological building itself are filled in shoddy and after-the-fact without forethought and with second-rate building materials. It is all about the appearance of organized grace, and none of the substantive or sustainable planning that goes into making a structure that is truly lasting.

All of the characters, and we as readers, are implicated in these motions of what Gaddis seems to see as intellectual failure and moral hypocrisy—our reading itself shifts along with whichever voice speaks as it spouts its own sketch of how the world comes together (all the details behind the architectural elevation are secondary to the niceties of the elevation itself, its own convincing sense of unity and solidity, really how *good* it sounds to the ear, and the dialogue here [of which the book mostly is] certainly sings). It makes for conspiratorial (and actually very gripping) reading trying to figure out who is fooling who in the backroom-deals of politics, business, and truth, but what it really ends up convincing you in its resolve is that it ultimately makes no difference who "wins" because they all eventually consume one another. The reader is left in mind with the emblem which began Gaddis' literary career: the Ouroboros. It is the selfsame Ouroboros of our shifting illusions which can always offer us a different perspective but can never deliver us from the hell we make for each other in the process.

As an addendum: this book is about so so SO much more than that America "really, really, really sucks" as Jonathan Franzen flippantly summarized this entire book in his infamous essay on Gaddis. It is worth reading, and its loss of a star on my part as reviewer is simply due to how bleak the whole thing ends up—it's disheartening! Franzen was correct in the above-mentioned essay in that regard: Gaddis never got soft, only more vitriolic and bitter—which is not to say he's any worse at what he does, just harder to swallow.

Tony says

A *Carpenter's Gothic*, we are told, is *all designed from the outside ... they drew a picture of it and squeezed the rooms in later*. Yes, I don't know either. *All I meant was ...having seen our puzzled looks, it's a hard house to hide in*. Thank you for clearing that up.

This is written in Gaddis' trademark style: primarily unattributed dialogue. As if he's so taken with his invented structure that this had to look a certain way, and, you know, he squeezed the rooms in later.

Gaddis skewers 1985 America: Vietnam vets, politicians, the CIA, the media. A lot of it resonated, although served in caricature form. Gaddis is too angry to display the humor found in most satire. It's almost as if the

reader isn't sure he's allowed to laugh. Here:

--*Oh! she pulled away, up on that damned elbow again --have you read Faulkner much?*

--*A long time ago. If then.*

--*What?*

--*Never mind. He'd sat straight up, one foot off to the floor.*

--*But, I mean don't you like Faulkner?*

--*I don't like Faulkner. I don't dislike Faulkner. He'd got hold of his trousers, --I just don't know why in the hell we're talking about Faulkner.*

.....

--*I mean I didn't mean to upset you about Faulkner I thought you were talking about Faulkner, and I mean I don't know if I've read Faulkner much either. Except *The Heart of Darkness*, I think I read that once.*

It's Elizabeth who, in that post-coital dialogue, is confounded. She is chatting and annoying McCandless, who is definitely not her husband Paul. Paul never hits her, but his bullying lashes harder. It was painful to watch, really.

--*Just asked you if there's any God damn mail, ask you if there's mail if there's been any calls we don't even know what time it is, here... he turned to obliterate Haydn's Notturno number five in C nagging at his back with a twist of the dial that brought them words of hope for hemorrhoid sufferers everywhere, --find out what the hell time it is... and he put down his glass but held to it, tight, against a sudden tremor in his hand.*

This novel is like a play, in that everything happens inside the Carpenter's Gothic house that Paul and Elizabeth are renting from McCandless. The rooms? They're where Americans go to unravel. McCandless, a geologist maybe, could tell you, and actually did tell you, that the unraveling is not new, and will not end when the house falls down.

Lee Foust says

Wow. Another amazing American classic from William Gaddis.

At first I admit I was a tad disappointed. The dialogue was quite similar (especially the blowhard character Paul and all of his self-centered, never-get-a-word-in-edgewise wheeling and dealing) to so much of/so many of the characters of *JR* that I thought, well, poor Gaddis, after writing the two greatest American novels of the 20th century, he was plumb out of ideas by the 1980s.

But, my bad--rather it's a slow burn, a handful of snow tossed down the side of Mt. Everest and it just keeps on building in intensity, ire, and bitter honesty until the series of wallops that make up the ending. Totally unlike either *The Recognitions* or *JR*. Superb. Dramatic. Politically perspicacious without being polemic--although patriots will hate it as it's about human beings instead of the tin idiots the Republican party keeps shoving illegitimately in our faces.

And, to coin a cliche, the problems it examines are still with us today only moreso (Groucho Marx), only deeper, only more desperate. Writing this on Memorial Day--or should I say, State-Sanctioned Terrorist day?

This little Iran-Contra novel would go well read side-by-side with *American Psycho*. The 1980's, the decade

of American psychosis at home and abroad. Despite Ronnie's Alzheimer's some of our authors remembered not to forget the decade that toyed with death as a distraction from materialism and, if possible, as a means of generating more revenue.

Jonathan says

I shall simply quote Cynthia Ozick in her wonderful review:

"We have run into these fictional scalawags before, rotted-out families, rotted-out corporations, seedy greedy preachers and poachers, either in cahoots with or victims of one another, and sometimes both. They are American staples; but "plot" is Mr. Gaddis's prey, and also his play. Triteness is his trap and toy. He has light-fingered all the detritus that pours through the news machines and the storytelling machines - the fake claims, fake Bible schools, fake holy water out of the Pee Dee River spreading typhus, a bought-and-paid-for senator, an armed "Christian survival camp," fake identities (Paul, pretending to be a WASP Southerner, is probably a Jew), the mugger Paul kills. Plot is what Mr. Gaddis travesties and teases and two-times and swindles."

Which can be found here: <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/07/07/boo...>

On a side note, if you are reading this and have not read any of her books, please rectify the situation immediately as she is a genius. The Puttermesser Papers is a masterpiece.

Anna says

dialogue constantly surges forward, relentless. I see now why they mention Gaddis when reviewing books by David Foster Wallace.

The novel as a whole is almost startlingly well-crafted. Images and phrases return sometimes like musical phrases echoing. Made me think of symphonies, or sewing, just the way it was so beautifully woven together. Often, the story felt devastating and desperate while the storytelling felt transcendent, brilliant.

I want to read this again, and more slowly.

Teresa Proença says

Gótico Americano (Carpenter's Gothic) é um estilo arquitectónico de casas rurais norte americanas. É no interior de uma dessas casas que decorre toda a ação do romance, construída através de diálogos, sendo a intervenção do narrador reduzida ao mínimo.

As personagens mais conversadoras são um casal, o irmão da senhora e o senhorio.

...o irmão entra e sai e irrita o cunhado que reclama com a mulher...

...a mulher cozinha as refeições, enquanto ouve os lamentos, reclamações e relatos insuportáveis e repetitivos do marido...

...o marido viaja muito e vem o senhorio que vai para a cama com a mulher e antes durante e depois fala fala fala....

(Coitada da senhora...)

Gostei da estrutura da narrativa, embora exija muita concentração, e gostei da escrita de Gaddis.

Aborreceu-me muito o teor das conversas das personagens: política, guerra, dinheiro, religião, corrupção,...

(Coitada de mim...)

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Given that William Gaddis towers among novelists of the variety postmodernist, next to whom only perhaps Pynchon and McElroy cast an equal shadow, one would like to know what it's all about, what's going on, what makes Gaddis the kind of Gaddis he is. *Carpenter's Gothic* is a tempting place to go for answers. It is short. Its action is confined to a typical kind of American fake dwelling structure, a cheap imitation (of wood) of the Gothic stone and iron, designed to be seen from the outside and with rooms placed any old where. But, yes, it is still Gaddis. He's in there. In spades. But if the bulk and density of *The Recognitions* or *J R* is found daunting, please do not believe that you are adequately prepared even for the precision of *Gothic*. And besides, the short is only a predictor of the long when the long is not worth reading.

And given that one should say something about the book. Yes. There are voices here. A dialoguing which would seem to be a hangover from *J R*, but it's not. Voices. Broken and shattered conversations, interrupting (continuously) telephones, an unfinished novel, a pornographic and an anthropological magazine, the radio, the television, the door, a toilet which tends to flood, an old man across the street with a dustpan containing a few leaves, a library of sorts in seemingly mid- and continual-collapse, a French speaking maid, and the newspaper with its headlines, the mail and bills and summonses and threats.

But you'll get a kick of out Gaddis' polished and precise prose tearing a new one upon the (willful, obstinate) *ignoranti* who would have us teach creationism in Texas and elsewhere. But you will notice, please, that unlike those new atheists, Gaddis won't smear all religion on account of association, but he goes directly for the cause of corrupted religiosity, i.e., stupidity, willed ignorance. "There's much more stupidity than there is malice in the world." But the attentive reader, the one not fascinated so much quite by the stupidity of the other person, will notice that the issues of imperialistic exploitation and extraction of the mineral wealth of Africa is not a thing of the past, but to which very imperialist practice I owe the computer upon which I am typing this review. The story of Africa is not being told, the wars of oil being rather a bit better rehearsed, this even despite the possibility of blaming the carnage of Africa upon the former European imperialists and present day (only recently official enemy) China. Warlordism won't go away so long as those warlords can fund their projects by selling mineral wealth to capitalists who are only too happy to not know things which citizens of a democratic society ought to know. Follow the money.

You'll maybe like to have the annotations at hand:

<http://www.williamgaddis.org/gothic/i...>

A supposedly silly thing I'd previously said and which rests here, dying, that comments below, numbered .1.

through .21. may have some reasonableness granted unto them:

What should have been the cover for *Carpenter's Gothic*.

~~[Leave that Like button alone [it's catching!] I've not read this yet. Instead of Liking this link, lambast me for having not yet read *Carpenter's Gothic*.]~~

Aiden Heavilin says

Carpenter's Gothic is a mean-spirited, dull novel. It is one of those books about arguing, where characters constantly storm up staircases, glowering and yelling at each other. Those few occasions where conversations take place without arguments are generally filled with long tirades against "stupid religious folks"; conversations whose bitterness and hatred I might assume was that of the characters, not the author, had William Gaddis not said in the interview that he considered titling the book "The Dark Continent" and claimed it was "Christian fundamentalists" who made the continent dark. In the end, Carpenter's Gothic is a book of complaining; Characters complain about each other, about life, about religion, about anything they can put their hands to. Worse, the "plot" as is contains an incredibly convoluted conspiracy that robs the book of the clarity which might have rescued it.

The book is told primarily in dialogue, and although Mr. Gaddis has been roundly praised for "realistic dialogue", I found it very difficult to believe. The characters are caricatures, cowering, oppressed wives or blustery, cantankerous husbands who are constantly lighting cigarettes and muttering to each other about money-problems. The dialogue struck me as having been sapped of all the life and strangeness that inhabits real world conversations.

I generally would say I read fiction to gain new experiences, such as the type offered in certain dreams, sensations I have truly not felt before. Carpenter's Gothic merely presents a cruel world lacking not merely hope, but also any ideas or reflections that might offer a new perspective on unhappy marriages and stress-filled modern life. In the end, this book does not present a new or interesting perspective on the world, it doesn't even attempt to present it realistically; instead it drains life of its energy and vivaciousness, leaving only a sad dead husk of empty dialogue and angry complaints against the forces they cannot control.

I think of David Foster Wallace's magnificent "The Pale King"; that book too presented harried, stressed people, unhappy marriages, and the drudgery of modern life. Yet rather than raging and complaining about these evils, Wallace sought to remedy them, to provide a way out, to show us how to navigate the shoals of boredom. Gaddis in "Carpenter's Gothic" only outlines (rather poorly), the problem; it never even attempts an answer.

MJ Nicholls says

There was no way I was going to start my Gaddis experience with his 976pp Olympic marathon *The Recognitions*, not having sampled his style first. Unfortunately, there is nothing in this short novel to repel me from said monolith except perhaps the disorienting dialogue and scene changes (of the four characters in this novel no one formally enters or exits, nor conducts the same conversation), but the man's prose is unique, mellifluous and (could it be?) *readable*. What! you say. You mean it isn't an even more densely

packed *Recognitions*, or like Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49*—all the extraneous readable prose cut completely, leaving only the cult-forming unintelligible gibberish? No, sir! This novel offers a series of brief interviews with hideous men, with heiress Elizabeth at the centre, whose life with her one-expletive-only husband, leeching brother and slippery landlord forms the “crux” of the piece—so much as this “piece” has a “crux”—taking us on an inventive satirical bus tour of American . . . greed? religious propaganda? men who behave like a world-class assfaces? dehumanised dudes in search of the dollar? All this and less. Mr. Salvage sums it up rather well, “bitter and loud.”

Marc Nash says

Almost entirely constructed of dialogue, and real dialogue of broken sentences, interruptions, sentences trailing off, reading so authentically as to how real people speak, although the characters that emerge from their speech are slightly parodic. A tour de force about American foreign policy, religious charlatanism, colonialism and race, Vietnam Vet Paul is married to heiress Elizabeth and they are renting a 'carpenter Gothic' style house in which the owner Mr Mccardless wanders in and out in search of things in his locked room and his extensive library. But he is not the only person disturbing their peace; the phone is perpetually ringing with people Paul is involved in dealings with as he tries to make bank to settle the legal claims on him with counter claims of his own. Other characters come and go, nobody is quite who they seem in this elaborate weave of conspiracy that reminded me a bit of Don Delillo's "Underworld", only updating the Kennedy era to a 1980's setting here.

And at the centre of these centrifugally flying forces, is Elizabeth, the one held and trapped at home by having to man the phone, dealing with Mr McCardless or his cleaning lady and the hectoring husband Paulie who apart from being an entrepreneurial dreamer, is a self-involved bully. Reading through Elizabeth's eyes, I came away concussed by her treatment mainly at Paulie's hands. Dialogue can do that to you.
