



Trenton Makes

Tadzio Koelb

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A vivid, brutal, razor-sharp debut about a woman who carves out her share of the American Dream by living as a man

1946: At the apogee of the American Century, the confidence inspired by victory in World War II has spawned a culture of suffocating conformity in thrall to the cult of masculine privilege.

In the hardscrabble industrial city of Trenton, New Jersey, a woman made strong by wartime factory work kills her army veteran husband in a domestic brawl, disposes of his body, and assumes his identity. As Abe Kunstler, he secures a job in a wire rope factory, buys a car, and successfully woos Inez, an alcoholic dime dancer. He makes a home with her, but for Abe, this is not enough: to complete his transformation, he needs a son.

1971: A very different war is under way. The certainties of mid-century triumphalism are a distant, bitter memory, and Trenton's heyday as a factory town is long past. As the sign on the famous bridge says, "Trenton Makes, the World Takes."

The family life Abe has so carefully constructed is crumbling under the intolerable pressures of his long ruse. Desperate to hold on to what he has left, Abe searches for solutions in the dying city.

Written in brilliantly stylized prose, this gripping narrative is a provocative and incisive exploration of the nature of identity, and a disturbing portrait of desperation. Tadzio Koelb has crafted a slim gut shot of a novel that heralds the arrival of a writer of startling talent and imagination.

Trenton Makes Details

Date : Published March 20th 2018 by Doubleday Books

ISBN : 9780385543385

Author : Tadzio Koelb

Format : Hardcover 224 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Literary Fiction, Contemporary

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From Reader Review Trenton Makes for online ebook

Donna Bijas says

2 stars. Not a fan but will say the first half of the book had a decent storyline, Woman accidentally kills abusive husband and assumes his life, life as a man after the war. That said, the second half of the story was absurd to me. Zigzagging all over the place with his job, his wife and his son (he's still pretending he's a man now mind you). Wanted to abandon it but at only 200 pages, I finished it. Would not recommend.

Robin says

I'm sorry but that was terrible.

Bianca says

To call the writing in this book beautiful would somehow not fit - but it is.
Also, as for a review or recommendation - to tell you anything is to ruin the thing.
Come for the post WWII gender fuckery, stay for the sweet sweaty tension.

Magen says

[racist and offensive language, violence, alcoholism, domestic abuse, non-consensual sex/ rape, mentions of sexual abuse, and murder (hide spoiler)]

Marshal (thebookishhowler) says

RTC.

Actual rating: 3.75 ?

Matt says

I really liked this very strange book, which it's hard to talk about without spoiling, since so much of this is a meld of technique and subject matter.... So we've got a very close third person narration which allows Koelb to call his protagonist "he" in spite of the fact that that protagonist, "Abe" is a woman. (There's something in here for gender folks, and I'd love to read something from the trans community on Abe, if it's fair to call Abe trans or not, but I feel like I don't know enough to say). This narrative closeness is effective, too, for shutting down some narrative questions that I think, if opened up, would undermine the book-- so, does Inez really

not know? Well, we don't know quite what Inez thinks, especially in the story present of 1971. The same kind of narrative closeness makes a startling point about family, that son Art accepts things that would be suspicious in others because it happened in his family.

I'm not sure I totally accept some of the writing about this book that it's an exploration of the diminished authority of masculine power. I can see, in my way, why reviewers would go there to find a theme to this book, but I'm not sure Abe ever exercised power in that way, even over Inez. Instead, I don't read this book as having those kinds of thematic aims. To me it was closer to Otessa Moshfegh's *Eileen*, a disturbing deep dive into a freakish psychology.

I really liked, as a writer, how Koelb made something out of maybe three or four scenes-- there's just a lot of planning, to trick a man into impregnating Inez, or for Abe to find Art or Art to find Inez. You can prep and practice and refine and wander and it all fills pages and lets Koelb get away with really peeling back his characters without a whole lot of import happening.

I thought the ending was a little unsatisfying, too ambiguous for me.... I sort of get it that we're bringing Abe to his apotheosis, where he reaches for violence as the solution to his problem. But I think I wanted something more decisive, where Abe is forced to develop some sort of new carapace? I just think what he came up with would be more interesting than what we get here....

Rob says

TRENTON MAKES (2018)

By Tadzio Koelb

Knopf, 224 pages

★★★★

If John Steinbeck had been born later, he might have tackled something akin to Trenton Makes. There are decided Steinbeck elements to Tadzio Koelb's debut novel, including the use of intercalary chapters, the elegiac sweep of his prose, and nods to the forgotten man. Except for Koelb, the forgotten "man" is a woman who assumes a male identity.

Trenton Makes unfolds in two acts, the first set between 1946 and 1952, the second occurring in 1971. This means the plot is bookended by the end of World War Two and surging disenchantment with the Vietnam War. Call it a metaphorical shift from triumphalism to the beginning of the end of the American Century, a major component of which was loss of America's near monopoly of global capitalism and its slide toward an uncertain economic future. Officially, stagflation and recession began in 1973, but Rust Belt cities such as Trenton, New Jersey were tragically precocious in their demise.

Koelb takes this a step further by casting doubt as to whether the American Century was real in the first place. If it was an illusion, perhaps so too is the American Dream. After all, that concept was always problematic for people of color, recent immigrants, those living near the margins, and women—all of whom had (in Langston Hughes' words) dreams deferred.

Questions of identity lie at the heart of Trenton Makes. Its protagonist is Abe Kunstler—both of them. The first Abe is a psychologically scarred World War Two veteran who wants his slice of the American Dream. Part of that Dream is economic—a good job—but a major part of it is rooted in prevailing social norms of male privilege. Abe probably would have been a bland, but decent guy, if only drink, financial frustration,

lust, and social scripts hadn't gotten in the way. He befriends and ultimately seeks to possess a taxi dancer named Inez, but allows his demons to overwhelm his better angels. During one of his frequent drunken, abusive, and libidinal moments, Inez fights back, murders Abe, butchers his body, and feeds it to the basement furnace. The parallel between Abe's burning and Trenton's industrial smoke is both poignant and a harbinger. Inez's own violence comes from pent up rage for which Abe is a sacrifice for past wrongs:

... until the war she was never allowed to do any but the most meaningless work and she was condemned to poverty, which seemed to her as much a feature of her women's form as any physical part. The only ladder meeting the wall of constraint was a man, so she traded the little she had, which was the still body beneath the one that bucked and jerked, and in return received as much or as little as these were able or willing to offer her.

Koelb uses this singular horror to infer the collective horrors of postwar women whose dreams were replaced by proscribed subservience. Departed Abe, of course, never really knew Inez, or other women like her. The taxi driver he tried to lord over had honed her strength on wartime assembly lines, preparation for future work as a factory wirepuller. The book's opening epigraph is from Nietzsche: "Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?" Inez's attempt is a radical one: she assumes Abe's identity and spends much of her time passing as a man.

However, Koelb's use of Nietzsche is more ironic than profound. It's one thing to take action, yet quite another to overcome. Like all double lives, that of Inez is fraught with logistical nightmares and the ever-present fear of exposure, not to mention a child and being so haunted by her bloody deed that Abe inhabits her as much as she inhabits him. How does one walk such a tightrope when the only lifeline is a wisp of factory smoke?

Part two delves into transference. Does inhabiting another mean you also host their demons? Can one hope to escape poverty in a place such as Trenton? It's hard with a mutilated hand, closed factories, and dead-end service industry alternatives. There's another transference that I will not reveal, but suffice it to say that the burden of secrets, indiscretion, estrangement, the rise of the counterculture, decaying conditions in Vietnam, and Trenton's concomitant decline aren't compatible with a happy ending.

This is a tough, but occasionally brilliant book. Earlier I alluded to Steinbeck, which is quite a load to ask someone to bear, and Koelb can't always hoist it. Steinbeck excelled at fusing elegant prose with masterful storytelling. Koelb is a superb wordsmith, but sometimes he's too clever for his own good. I suspect other writers will rank this book higher than the reading public, parts of which will find the story thread hard to stitch. The book has two parts, but it's not linear within them and careful focus is needed to keep straight when Koelb is writing about Abe, Inez as Abe, Abe/Inez as Inez, or perhaps another person altogether. The motives of secondary characters are often as clouded as the true paternity of Inez's child and, to be frank, part two often feels forced.

Maybe this is okay and Koelb has little interest in narrative for its own sake. He certainly has important things to say and infer about American society. An iconic Delaware River bridge in Trenton bears the slogan: "Trenton Makes, the World Takes." Koelb suggests we should emphasize the second part and be wary of what is made in the first. Whether the proverbial average reader will get this remains to be seen, but props to Koelb for trying.

Rob Weir
Off-Center Views

Paltia says

At times absorbing, while at other times the writing erected a barrier against my understanding. The author seems sure of his way yet I became lost in all that style. A dramatic and flat out weird story. The characters have been thrown together in gross misunderstandings and violence. How far will a person go to protect their assumed identity? It only becomes stranger when the father hunts his son. Currents the wife is not even somewhat aware of begin to flow with ferocity culminating in a pathetic end. Could it have progressed any other way? Troubling tale that borders on a nightmare.

Teri Stich says

I so wanted to like this. The premise of the story held such promise. The story of a woman who took on the persona of a man in order to escape the hard troubled life she knew. Having read other books of this theme, I was quick to begin it. Unfortunately, I just couldn't appreciate the writing style, for me it did not match the story. The author just could not bring the characters to life for me. I gave it a good try. I do hope someone else reads it, I would love to hear their opinion. Perhaps they can encourage me to give it another go, but for now, it is gone.

Janelle • She Reads with Cats says

Thank you so much to Doubleday Books for providing my copy of TRENTON MAKES by Tadzio Koelb - all opinions are my own.

During post-World War II, a woman factory worker accidentally kills her abusive husband during a domestic fight and then assumes his identity: Abe Kunstler. Abe moves out of town, finds a new job at a factory, and settles down with a woman named Inez. After so much time, Abe believes he needs a family to blend in. Jump to the second part of the book in 1971 where Abe has a son, Art, who might have figured out his secret. Abe is desperate to keep his secret and his life intact.

TRENTON MAKES is a very well-written and complex novel. This book may not be for everyone as there are triggers such as abuse and sexual assault, so proceed with caution. The writing style is sophisticated, unique and might be difficult to follow as there are some parts written in a stream of consciousness style. The prose is beautiful and the flashback scenes read like poetry. I am blown away by how well Koelb writes Abe's character and the constant inner-conflict between who he once was and who he has become. The novel's central themes are identity, gender, and social class. It is difficult to get completely invested in the protagonist as the novel is very short, but overall, this is an impressive piece of literature.

Brooke says

At the center of Trenton Makes is a woman made strong by factory work during World War II who kills her

abusive army veteran husband and assumes his identity. As Abe Kunstler, he secures a job in a wire rope factory, makes a home with a woman named Inez, and completes his transformation by "creating" a son.

Tadzio Koelb's novel brilliantly evades traditional ways of drawing readers into a story and forces us to engage with the ideas that propel it: ideas about power, desperation, identity, creation, and destruction. Through its main character, it renders societal shifts after World War II and in the early 70s bodily, sensual, sexual. It explores the death of traditional masculinity, and the possibilities and limitations of what can be built for oneself "in nature's clearings", against the grain of an oppressive society.

Readers are closest to Abe, whose internal conflicts are brilliantly rendered in italicized passages that echo the stream of consciousness flashbacks narrating Joe Christmas' early life in *Light in August*. Here it is possible to be both repulsed by the violence that Abe enacts to preserve his identity and to understand the desperation that drives him. Trapped in the straight jacket of masculine conformity, Abe denies himself any peace or genuine connection. These passages convey the liminal aspects of identity between the woman and the man she's constructed and it's here that the characterization and the ideas that fuel the novel are seamlessly melded.

Other characters—Inez, their son Art, Abe's friend Jacks, etc.—are rendered somewhat impressionistically and we are reminded that, from Abe's perspective, they are all his creation. It's no coincidence that his son is named "Art". You can see Koelb's background as a painter not only in the way he describes characters, but in the impressionistic strokes with which he paints a scene. After she murders her husband, the woman dreams she finds the dismantled parts of her husband in a clearing of trees near the war front. "She set about to reassemble him, but before the parts could be united the dream was broken its beauty gone, and she was awake again with across the room from her the empty broken flatness of his inanimate shell, the dark incisions of his eyes floating across his face." Koelb's prose is stylized and many of his sentences beautifully contain the novel's motifs.

"The transference of power, of kind, to overthrow him, even in his failure, had not been her place until the man her husband presented it to her... and she accepted, found it not just open but demanding, an emptiness wishing and whimpering to be filled," Koelb writes. This idea is threaded throughout the novel and beautifully embodied in the transfer of power at its culmination. The ending is stunning, an echo and extension of the paradox of violence being the only intimacy that Abe can offer, of realizing one's most powerful self in the moment of relinquishing that self.

Trenton Makes is utterly original and utterly itself and absolutely deserving of readers' attention.

Bandit says

This sounded very interesting. A woman living her life as a man in a post war uber masculine American culture of the 1940s and then a 25 year jump in time to revisit the same person in different circumstances and era. The book itself, though, didn't quite work for me. The narrative, while visceral and vivid, managed to maintain a sort of aloofness. Mainly, though, I just didn't care for any of the characters, including the protagonist, and with this sort of book you kind of really have to, because it's a personal journey sort of a story. Maybe this was meant to reflect on the gender and cultural limitations of the blue collar workers in a small town, but usually such stories of personal reinvention are more daring, more audacious, more exciting. And here the main character recreates herself as a factory worker named Abe who proceeds to pour copious amounts of alcohol on his muted rage and frustrations. So essentially the reader follows a story of a

charmless unpleasant drunk who isn't comfortable in his life and makes sure no one in his ersatz family is either. The character seems to not lack merely redeeming qualities, but also almost any dimensionality. It's just a one note self loathing descent into a drunken stupor of an existence. Quick enough of a reading, some good descriptive writing, but the story doesn't do the premise justice. Thanks Netgalley.

Kristen says

Spoilers below

A woman in post-WWII Trenton, NJ, accidentally kills her abusive husband, disposes of his body, and takes his identity. She can do this because he was apparently pretty small and she had worked in a factory during the war making wire rope and was strapping like Rosie the Riveter. She took on his identity as Abe Kunstler, moved to another part of town, went through a string of various odd jobs, and eventually is able to get work at another factory, making wire rope as he had done during the war. Abe has it pretty good until he decides that in order for his ruse to be complete, he needs a wife and child. He meets Inez, an alcoholic taxi dancer, and woos her away from her job at her dance hall. They marry and start to build a life together. In time, Abe takes steps to start a family. After one on-the-page attempt to get Inez pregnant, the narrative then jumps ahead about 25 years to 1971. Trying for a family apparently worked, because Abe has a son, Art, who has possibly figured out Abe's secret. Now Abe is determined to hold together everything he has struggled so hard to create.

OK. I want to start by saying this really was a well written book and there are a lot of good things about it. But it has a really odd writing style. It's something between 3rd person and 1st person. The book was barely 200 pp but it was more like 400 by the time I read and reread everything I didn't get or misunderstood because of the weird writing style. You do get used to it after a while, but it's kind of exhausting until then. I like books that challenge me and make me think, but this goes beyond that.

There were obvious issues of gender roles and identity that came into play as well. Honestly, I really don't know much about women who took on male identities in post-war society. I tried to do some basic research, but all I could turn up was stuff I already knew about how women who had filled men's roles during the war felt disenfranchised after it ended and they all came back and made them go back to being wives and mothers. Like, duh. One part of this is that, throughout the novel, the woman Abe was before had no identity of her own. She was never referred to by her given name. Whatever identity she had was totally overwritten by Abe's right from the start. Of course, she would want to have Abe' identity take over hers eventually, after her intentional transformation, but even prior to that, she had no identity. Additionally, I thought it was weird that NO ONE seems to have missed Inez once she married Abe and moved to another part of town, leaving behind everything from her former life. The book indicated she didn't have any family, but she still had friends. If one of my friends just disappeared and I never heard from her again, I would call the cops. I don't understand why no one did this for Inez. It begs the question of whether anyone would have noticed if it had been Abe who had gone missing. Would someone have noticed if it had been a man who went missing instead of a woman? Was this a common-ish thing that happened, women just disappearing because they took a man's ID and no one went looking to see what happened to them? In Civil War days, I could see that, but I have a hard time with it in the 1940s/1950s. Maybe I misunderstand how it happened, but since there

wasn't an author's note in the ARC I had to expand upon this, I'm assuming it probably wasn't as likely to happen as described here.

Also, there's a BIG question of consent. It isn't a thing that's repeated more than once in the book, but the way Abe and Inez conceive their child is just gross. Spoiler alert, but a shitfaced Inez basically gets raped, and a shitfaced random dude from a bar rapes her at Abe's urging. No one in that relationship has any ability to give lucid consent, not Inez nor the man Abe tricked. Why? Why was that necessary to include? They could have been one of many childless couples. It would have prevented a lot of problems and the novel could still have focused on Abe's struggle to live without being discovered. I don't know, just that one brief scene really turned me off on the whole rest of the book.

For all the issues I had with this, I do think it would be an interesting book club selection because there are a ton of things to discuss. I didn't touch on the issues of alcoholism, mental illness, how society treats disfigured people, how society treats veterans, or LGBT issues.

Kassandra says

I received this eARC from Doubleday books via Netgalley in exchange for an honest review

Tadzio Koelb's writing style is unique. I actually had to re-read the first few pages and it took me about 20% of the way through to fully adjust to his style. I'm going to tell you all now that this book won't be for everyone. Initially, I was struggling to get into this story. I didn't get fully immersed until the second half of this book.

This is not a light read! It's a quick read but this book contains many triggers (i.e domestic abuse, rape, alcoholism). Despite the heavy content, Koelb's words are beautiful (you'll understand what I mean if you read it). The ending was vague and it left me with more questions than answers. Overall, I enjoyed this book because of its complexity and uniqueness.

Jaime says

Review to follow.
