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Jerzy Kosinski was a great enigma of post-WWII literature. When he exploded onto the American literary scene in 1965 with his best-selling novel *The Painted Bird*, he was revered as a Holocaust survivor and refugee from the world hidden behind the Soviet Iron Curtain. He won major literary awards, befriended actor Peter Sellers, who appeared in the screen adaptation of his novel *Being There*, and was a guest on talk shows and at the Oscars. But soon the facade began to crack, and behind the public persona emerged a ruthless social climber, sexual libertine, and pathological liar who may have plagiarized his greatest works.

Jerome Charyn lends his unmistakable style to this most American story of personal disintegration, told through the voices of multiple narrators—a homicidal actor, a dominatrix, and Joseph Stalin’s daughter—who each provide insights into the shifting facets of Kosinski’s personality. The story unfolds like a Russian nesting doll, eventually revealing the lost child beneath layers of trauma, while touching on the nature of authenticity, the atrocities of WWII, the allure of sadomasochism, and the fickleness of celebrity.

Jerzy Details

Date : Published March 14th 2017 by Bellevue Literary Press

ISBN : 9781942658146

Author : Jerome Charyn

Format : Paperback 240 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Literature, Jewish, The United States Of America, War, World War II, 20th Century, Novels, Holocaust, Writing, Books About Books

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From Reader Review Jerzy for online ebook

Greg says

Because his persona was so strange and illusive, understanding Jerzy Kozinski was challenging for his biographer, James Park Sloan. In the final analysis, Sloan speculated that Kozinski suffered from alexithymia, a regression of feeling that "makes the affects useless in the processing of information." An alternative approach to the Kozinski story might be to imagine him in a work of historical fiction. This is what Jerome Charyn does in JERZY. In an interview, Charyn described Kozinski as "a shadow within a shadow within a shadow." He never mastered the English language, a fact that lead to his eventual downfall because of his extensive use of "editors." What he did master, however, was something he learned in Nazi-occupied Poland—the art of lying and dissembling. Charyn captures this quality admirably in his novel, but also portrays Kozinski as a gifted storyteller. Ultimately Kozinski used stories to once again survive. Only this time, it was not the Nazis, but a language and culture where he was never completely comfortable.

Charyn uses multiple narrators, some based on real people and others imagined, to tell Jerzy's story. His approach is to start at the end and work backward through his colorful life to the time when Kozinski's strange persona may have formed. He begins in the period of Kozinski's peak fame, when he derived much satisfaction from social climbing and hobnobbing with celebrities, including Princess Margaret and Lord Snowden. Ian worked for Peter Sellers at the time and relates the story of Sellers' intense interest in portraying Chauncey Gardner in a movie version of "Being There." Kozinski loved playing hard to get with Sellers, but eventually relented. Because Sellers comes across as just about a weird as Kozinski, this part of the novel is quite amusing. One of the more humorous anecdotes in this section tells of a meeting between Sellers and Stan Laurel, who is now living in a retirement home and missing his longtime partner, Oliver Hardy. Sellers manages to convince Stan that he is Hardy with delightful results.

Svetlana Alliluyeva was briefly Jerzy's neighbor on the faculty at Princeton. Jersy admired Stalin and was completely taken with Svetlana.

As the novel progresses backward, Charyn introduces Kozinski's alcoholic ex-wife. As a consummate social climber, Jerzy saw the obvious advantages in being married to the heir to the petroleum jelly fortune. However, he demonstrates little real affection for or loyalty to this bizarre woman.

Next up is Anna Karenina, a dominatrix who Kozinski meets while patronizing her sex club. Caryn uses this relationship to introduce his problems with eclectic storytelling encumbered by awkward writing in English. Anna provides Jerzy with an extremely talented and sexy young editor who manages to re-write his prose using Stalin's much loved green pencil.

The most revealing chapter deals with Jerzy's early life in Poland. He often told the story, related in "The Painted Bird", of abandonment by his parents during the war and being left to wander the countryside. Charyn sets that record straight by depicting Jerzy, surviving as a Jew in Nazi-occupied Poland, not by abandonment, but by dissembling. His father managed to hide him and his family right under the noses of the Germans by masquerading as Catholics.

The narrative deftly travels backward by carefully peeling away the layers of Kozinski's bizarre life, much like an archeologist would, to reveal a few shards of truth. We discover a traumatized boy who learned to survive and even succeed by his wits and imagination.

Charyn approaches his subject with a clear eye. At the height of his career, Kozinski did enjoy many successes. He was a major literary figure, winning prestigious awards. He made the acquaintance of famous and powerful people and was a darling of the talk show circuit. Charyn also gives us a ruthless social climber, sexual libertine, pathological liar and strange exhibitionist. On balance, he returns to where he started. "There is no meaning. He was a shadow within a shadow within a shadow."

Scott says

I tried, I couldn't get through this book. At 70 pages remaining, I abandoned it. Endless praise of an enigmatic writer whose intolerable behavior is loved and hated by others. And often. Usually in the same sentence. Over and over. I came off of this with the impression that Jerzy Kosinski was a rude, lying bore.

Sketchbook says

Author Charyn has written a dazzling novel - a literary "bio" - of the shadowy fakir Kosinski who ruled the NYC roost until it was discovered he didn't really exist. This smackdown is smart, inventive, provocative and, guess what?, extremely droll, which reviews do not suggest. Michael Chabon calls Charyn "one of the most important writers in American literature," and he may well be right. *"Before there was Kosinski, there was Peter Sellers"* is the ripe opening line. And we're off as Sellers, eager to film "Being There" is sick of playing Inspector Clouseau, though he's a royal family pet, as a result, like a toy dog. What's more, Princess Margaret, "something of a toy dog herself," is the object of his lust. Sellers had read that Chauncey Gardiner was one of "Ma'm's" favorite characters and Gardiner seems like a perfect vehicle for Sellers. Now the rights must be secured from Mr. K, "a bird-boy, a freak...forever secretive and cruel, with cunning as his protective color."

Soon we're at an NYC cocktail party given by Sen. Lionel Jaspers (ie, Jacob Javits) whose wife Annabelle (Marion Javits) rules Manhattan's High Culture: "There wasn't an emerging playwright, dancer, novelist, painter, architect or musician" who didn't wanna push into her penthouse. She's adopted Jerzy Kosinski : "He owned the authentic stink of *Mittel Europe*." What made him so popular? "He had survived the Holocaust as a bird-boy who had lost the power to sing or fly."

Charyn mixes fact-fiction with more spirit than Kosinski whose fantasy savagery gave readers of "The Painted Bird" (1965) wet panties, my god, how they got off about a Polish tot in W2 being hurled into a manure pile. They purred with S&M moans! Of course, it didn't happen to Jerzy, though he suggested it was all true -- until 1982 when Geoffrey Stokes & Eliot Fremont-Smith of NY's The Village Voice denounced him as a fakir. Possibly a CIA asset. Anyway, they reported that his novels were written by several "assistants" and some plots were plagiarized from old Polish tales unknown here. By now he was a social climbing Beau Brummel dining with film stars, publishers, politicians, tastemakers. His publicity was handled by NYT editors, Rosenthal & Gelb, who called him the ultimate survivor and they, after all, were proud connoisseurs of schlock. Jers gave 'em stiffies. They even had him pose half-naked for a NYT Magazine cover (Google: images). "Lies, lies, lies," Jers says here, "I'm a fraud. I cannot write without a helper."

Stalin's daughter, Svetlana, his neighbor in Princeton, offers a most captivating segment. Receiving tons of mail from good, kind people in Nebraska and Kansas, she signed her replies *Lana*. "I had the right to borrow it from Lana Turner. Couldn't I be a vamp and a witch even if I did not have all the Western wiles of seduction." Eventually they meet at the Nassau Inn, but, she asks, "What did he do all day? He didn't write, didn't teach, even though he was an honored lecturer, the genius who wrote 'The Painted Bird.' " He was always holding court at the Nassau Inn. They became friends and she keeps him company when he has a bout of depression and wants to do a prank, like robbing a bank. "They can't arrest you, Lana, you'll be on the cover of *Time*." Svetlana is not amused. "I dream of literature and wine, and all you can think about is the cover of *Time Magazine*," she scolds.

We also meet his millionairess wife and a dominatrix: "I order you to bite my nipples." Ah no, "I can't. My teeth are too soft. They'll fall out." She isn't appeased. "You should have worn your dentures. *Bite my nipples.*"

This is true. It wasn't easy being Jers Kosinski - a psycho with many personalities. He killed himself in 1991 after attending a book party at the home of Gay Talese whose recent fake-book was "The Voyeur's Motel." (That party was the last straw). Talese told the NYT obit writer, "We were laughing last night." I bet you were.

Jers, I think, envied Andy Warhol, which no one has mentioned. (Of course, Andy was gay and Jers dare not speak his name). Andy ran a "Factory," not a studio. In his Factory, he had multiple assistants making hundreds of silk-screens; no one complained. He was candid about his art process. Warhol became a "star" in the 60s as he polished his inarticulate persona. Jers couldn't stop talking or appearing on Talk Shows. And worse, he said he wrote his novels in English, a deadly lie. He is the author of his own catastrophe and herein author Charyn shows that he was either ludicrous or pathetic.

William says

Fictionalized bio of Jerzy Kozinski. Makes you wonder how much is real.

Told by having different narrators tell about specific times in Jerzy's life.

In all of them Jerzy comes across as an asshole but if you want to read about an interesting person, you might as well choose an asshole.

Adam Bricker says

This book describes the author Jerzy Kosinski through five different people's views/time periods in his life. It is highly entertaining with great detail and will keep you guessing...about what constitutes the truth. And just a random aside, when Jerzy speaks, I always imagined Holly Golightly telling stories in the setting of Dr. Zhivago.

Lauren says

I received this as a free ARC through Librarything from the publisher, Bellevue Literary Press, in exchange for an honest review.

If I'm being 100% honest, I had no idea who Jerzy Kosi?ski was prior to my reading this and, despite frequent references to his writing, I think, in the long run, it was better that way. It allowed me to go in without any preconceived notion of the man and let Jerome Charyn paint a picture of him in front of me, even if this is only a fictitious recreation of what may or may not have happened. In a way, it made him as mysterious to me as it did the people around him, telling the story.

That threw me for a loop at first, if I'm to be frank. Upon initially reading the description on Librarything, I thought the book would be from Kosi?ski's perspective, perhaps with him as an unreliable narrator, but it wasn't. Instead, it's broken up into sections and each voice is someone closer and closer to this mysterious man until, finally, we arrive at the segment pertaining to one of his beloved characters. Each acquaintance and confidant up to that point shed a different light on this mysterious man, but the final two sections are, possibly, the most telling.

The section, just before the end, entitled "Little Red" is from the perspective of a woman whom allegedly helped him write his novels as well as aided in finding him ghostwriters to round them out. This woman was also gives us an idea of what was going on as Kosi?ski's purported charade began to unravel. The final section takes the reader into an entirely new realm and allows a glimpse into the origin of Kosi?ski's stories. We finally meet Kosi?ski's father, his mother, and his idol and arguably his most popular character, Gavril. I have a feeling this section would make a lot more sense after reading *The Painted Bird*, which I intend to do, once I find a copy.

Overall, I'd definitely recommend this novel, though I really can't pinpoint an exact audience.

Rick says

Charyn takes a fictional look at the life of the controversial author of *The Painted Bird* and *Being There*. Jerzy Kosinski, if even a sliver of this book is true, must have been a hypnotic character. How much did he write? How much did he plagiarize? You will be challenged to come to a conclusion. But does it really matter?

Lenore Riegel says

I was fortunate enough to receive an ARC and read it immediately, then again after reading Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* and Svetlana Alliluyeva's *Twenty Letters to a Friend* ("Lana" was Stalin's daughter and Jerzy's best friend.) My favorite author's novel about one of his favorite authors. Absolutely amazing from the first word to the last.

Amanda says

It was hard to determine if this was completely fictional, or the author had actually spoken to people who had known Jerzy. It also wasn't my kind of genre, so it was difficult to get into.

PG says

Picked this off the shelf on a lark. The perfect-bound spine spoke past any skepticism and, woah, this Charyn is something else. Lesson: it is okay to prefer one book over another because of its cover. Excellent writing, commanding writing. Some proofreader's hiccups but this is without question a book that should develop a sustained buzz over time, or justice won't be done.

Lissette says

Jerzy Kosinski is a man of secrets. A man who is full of dreams, though sometimes he has a hard time expressing them to the world around him. To those who know him, he is an enigma. Deep inside, he knows what he wants, when he wants it. Despite the fact that so many obstacles cross his path every day, he is determined in making something of himself. He'll do anything to achieve his every goal, no matter the cost.

A fictitious biographical tale about such an intriguing man, Jerome Charyn tells the story of Jerzy Kosinski through a myriad of perspectives. Each perspective throws us deeper into Jerzy's life and the circumstances that surround his existence. This is a man who refused to sit on the sidelines while life passed him. He immersed himself in his hopes, his dreams, his desires, striving every day to overcome the uncertainties, the pain, and the heartache he experiences often.

We're given glimpses into the secrets Jerzy kept throughout his entire life. Language barriers often frustrated him, but he didn't let it deter him from climbing through the ranks. It was delightful to see him rub elbows with so many interesting characters. To also see him portrayed through the various perspectives used throughout the book allows us to envision the world he lives in, as well as who he truly is.

Jerzy never cared about the real truth that surrounded him and loved to keep people guessing. He'd do whatever he deemed necessary to get from point A to point B. Jerome shows us this with every turn of the page. Despite the fact that Jerzy was a ruthless, pathological liar who moved through the social circles that surrounded him, we also get to see his vulnerabilities. Mind you, this is a man who tried to hide those vulnerabilities whenever possible, often detesting the fact when his carefully constructed facade started to crumble. Nevertheless, he was able to make a name for himself, while always retaining a sense of mystery around him at all times.

Such a tumultuous story, Jerzy keeps the reader's attention from start to finish. The author's truly unique style of storytelling allows us to envision each character and the environments they find themselves. He truly does paint such vivid pictures! We can feel what the characters feel, and see what they see as they move forward throughout the lives they lead. I definitely recommend this book!

Hank Mishkoff says

Fascinating little gem of a book. A series of interrelated novellas, the "novel" presents five fictionalized slices of the life of enigmatic writer Jerzy Kosinski, each written from a dramatically different point of view.

I haven't read anything by Kosinski in decades, but I remember being captivated by his tense and energetic style, a unique style that seems to reflected in "Jerzy." I haven't read anything else by Charyn, so I don't know if that's just the way he writes, or if writing "Jerzy" in Jerzy's style is part of the literary package -- or if it's not really in Kosinski's style and I just have a bad memory. But it sure felt like I was given an unexpected chance to spend some time with an old friend.
