



The Knife Thrower and Other Stories

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The Knife Thrower introduces a series of distinctively Millhauserian worlds: tiny, fabulous, self-enclosed, like Fabergé eggs or like the short-story genre itself. Flying carpets; subterranean amusement parks; a band of teenage girls who meet secretly in the night in order to do "nothing at all"; a store with departments of Moorish courtyards, volcanoes, and Aztec temples: these are Millhauser's stock-in-trade as a storyteller, and he employs them to characteristically magical effect. As in Millhauser's other books, including *Edwin Mullhouse* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Martin Dressler*, his subject is nothing less than the faculty of imagination itself. Here, however, the flights of fancy are unencumbered by *Martin Dressler*'s wealth of period detail, and the result is fun-house prose whose pleasures and terrors are equally gossamer. Millhauser possesses the unique ability to render the quotidian strange, so that, emerging from his stories, the reader often feels the world itself an unfamiliar place--as do the shoppers at his department store, that marketplace of skillful illusion: "As we hurry along the sidewalk, we have the absurd sensation that we have entered still another department, composed of ingeniously lifelike streets with artful shadows and reflections--that our destinations lie in a far corner of the same department--that we are condemned to hurry forever through these artificial halls, bright with late afternoon light, in search of the way out."

The Knife Thrower and Other Stories Details

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From Reader Review The Knife Thrower and Other Stories for online ebook

Oscar says

Aun los que nos rendimos ante estas obras sentimos cierto desasosiego, pues nos perturban como placeres prohibidos, como crímenes secretos.

Steven Millhauser es todo un ilusionista. Te muestra una historia que no ha sido pero que pudo haber sido, y lo sabes, aunque al leerla estás más que satisfecho de que te *engañe* durante lo que dura uno de sus cuentos. Sus historias hablan de hechos, lugares y personajes que nunca existieron, con ciertos elementos de realismo mágico, o directamente elementos fantásticos. Y todo ello rodeado de un halo de nostalgia que lo impregna todo, de tal manera que querrías haber visto algunos de los autómatas de los que habla, por ejemplo. Pero si hay una característica que defina la prosa y las historias de Millhauser, esa es el desasosiego, impregnado de ciertos placeres oscuros como ese lanzador de cuchillos de uno de sus relatos.

No cabe duda de que Millhauser es un escritor que descende de clásicos como Poe y Hawthorne, lo que queda patente en su manera de escribir, elegante, nítida y elocuente. Otra característica a destacar de los cuentos de Millhauser es que no es de los que se guardan un golpe de efecto para el final de los mismos. Su maestría radica en ir calándonos con la trama durante todo su desarrollo, de tal modo que el cuento al completo es la sorpresa en sí. En mi opinión, esto no es nada fácil.

Estos son los doce relatos contenidos en '**El lanzador de cuchillos y otros cuentos**':

El lanzador de cuchillos, en el que asistimos al esperado espectáculo de Hensch, ¡el lanzador de cuchillos!, capaz de realizar las cosas más increíbles con sus afiladas dagas. Millhauser, con un pulso narrativo soberbio, no deja de perturbarnos.

Una visita, en el que el protagonista es invitado por el que fue su mejor amigo, al que no ve desde hace nueve años, a visitar su hogar y conocer a su esposa. Extraño cuento, donde el elemento fantástico es un pretexto para mostrarnos la peculiar vida del amigo.

La Hermandad de la Noche, en el que asistimos a la preocupación de toda una ciudad por el extraño comportamiento de algunas de sus muchachas. Y es que hay mucha confusión: ¿qué hacen durante esas noches en el bosque, rituales demoníacos, eróticos, estéticos? Poco a poco, con una particular estructura narrativa por parte de Millhauser, que casi parece un artículo periodístico (al más puro estilo 'Las vírgenes suicidas', de Eugenides), iremos sabiendo más sobre estas jóvenes. Magnífico relato.

La salida, en el que un hombre sorprende a Harter, el protagonista, con su mujer. ¿Qué decidirá hacer este hombrecillo? ¿Y Harter, qué salida tiene? Muy buen cuento.

Alfombras mágicas, en el que el mayor deseo del protagonista, así como de sus amigos, es tener una alfombra con la que surcar los cielos. Un cuento maravilloso, que destila pura nostalgia por una época pasada.

El nuevo teatro de autómatas, en el que sabremos de la pasión de toda una ciudad por la fabricación y el

espectáculo con autómatas, arte que está al alcance de unos pocos maestros. Hasta que aparece un genio atípico, Heinrich Graum, y sus nuevas ideas. Gran relato.

Clair de lune, en el que una noche de verano, un chico de quince años no puede conciliar el sueño, quizás debido a la extraordinaria luminosidad de la luna, así que decide salir a pasear. Buen cuento, también de corte nostálgico.

El sueño del consorcio, en el que un consorcio se hace con unos grandes almacenes, ante el escepticismo de algunos ciudadanos. Las extraordinarias ideas de los nuevos dueños no se harán esperar. Magnífico relato, que recuerda a su novela 'Martin Dressler', ganadora del Premio Pulitzer.

Vuelo en globo, 1870, en el que acompañamos a un soldado francés y a su piloto, mientras sobrevuelan en globo las líneas prusianas. Quizás el cuento más flojo.

Paradise Park, en el que conocemos la increíble historia del parque de atracciones *Paradise Park*, desde su inauguración en 1912, hasta su terrible destrucción a causa de un incendio en 1924. Sarabee, su artífice, fue todo un visionario, capaz de dar forma a las más fantásticas atracciones, con un único afán, superarse continuamente. Gran relato.

Habla Kaspar Hauser, en el que asistimos a la conferencia impartida en Nuremberg por Kaspar Hauser, en la que nos contará su historia, partiendo del hecho de su terrible encierro en una torre a oscuras durante años. Nueva versión del mito del pequeño salvaje. Buen relato.

Bajo los sótanos de nuestra ciudad, en el que se nos relata la afición que tiene una ciudad por sus túneles, de origen indio, que más que una curiosidad son un refugio, una obsesión. Buen cuento, donde brilla la imagen de esos ancianos faroleros alumbrando los pasadizos.

Solo puedo decir una cosa de Millhauser: haceros con cualquier libro que lleve su nombre. No os arrepentiréis.

En los largos veranos de mi infancia, los juegos estallaban súbitamente, ardían con un resplandor y desaparecían para siempre. Los veranos eran tan largos que poco a poco llegaban a durar más que el año entero, se estiraban lentamente más allá del borde de nuestras vidas, pero en cada instante de su vastedad estaban por terminar, pues eso hacían los veranos: nos acicateaban con el final, marchaban siempre hacia la larga sombra que arrojaba el final de las vacaciones.

Maureen says

[His little mocking rebuke irritated me, and I recalled how he had always irritated me, and made me retreat more deeply into myself, because of some little reproach, some little ironic look, and it seemed strange to me that someone who irritated me and made me retreat

Phil says

This is the first book by Millhauser that I've read, and I really enjoyed it. As others have mentioned, there are recurring themes in many of these stories - flight, underground passages and chambers, mysterious stage shows, scale models - most of which take place in small towns. Both "The New Automaton Theater" and "Paradise Park" seem like they could be, at least in part, allegories of cultural or art history.

Millhauser is often compared to Borges, and indeed both deal frequently with the nature of reality, verisimilitude, and representation, but Millhauser forgoes Borges' literary references in favor of exquisite description and dreamlike moods. "A Visit" and "Flying Carpets", each taking place in a setting that's ordinary save one fantastic aspect, are the stories most overtly similar to actual nocturnal visions. Who hasn't had dreams where everything seems normal with the exception of one bizarre or implausible element that everyone treats like an unremarkable matter of fact?

These stories also reminded me of those by the criminally obscure horror writer Thomas Ligotti, though Millhauser's aren't nearly as dark and pessimistic.

All in all, these well-crafted tales are definitely worth a read. The language is beautiful too, so if you're as voracious a reader as I am, it's worth slowing down to savor it. I'm definitely looking forward to reading more Millhauser.

craige says

So, I really had not read this book, or if I had, I utterly had forgotten it. I thought the stories all went on a bit too long and the 2nd and 3rd one were a bit rambling. The imagery was great, though. And I do tend to enjoy a new story that builds upon a legend, as the 2nd and 3rd stories do. But I have to wonder how come the first story was included with these two. I have to guess that it fits with them because of the house imagery as all three stories had interesting structures as part of them.

I guess I thought I had read this book before, but now that I'm reading it I don't think I had. I thought the first story went on too long and the second story is going in an odd direction, but the writing is compelling, so I'm still drawn in. Not sure if it will in fact merit the 5 stars I gave it before I read it, but I'll wait until I've read all the stories before I change my rating.

Melanie says

I'm reading this very slowly - a story or two every few weeks - and I'm finding that I'm enjoying it that way much more than if I sat down for one long read of it. This way, the fact that the voice of the stories is always so similar isn't bothering me at all, because I am reading them as completely separate entities. I always say I'm not a short story reader, but I'm wondering if that's because I've been reading them wrong all this time, and I should have been approaching them more like I'm approaching this set of stories...

Anyway, these are very weird and sometimes overly-serious, but interesting and full of those lines that really pop out at you and you re-read over again because they sound so gorgeous in your head. Really lovely writing and really interesting premises to each story. Nothing feels spelled out for you, there is a lot of thinking about what's actually happened and adding your own self to the story, trying to analyze it within

your brain. Good stuff!

Favorite 77 says

Millhauser es uno de los escritores más sugerentes y precisos que he leído, un auténtico estilista recreando mundos fascinantes. Supongo que una de las razones para que no sea más reconocido -sigo intentando explicármelo- reside en que es un escritor inclasificable, y estos relatos son una buena muestra. No son terror, pero son inquietantes de una manera imprecisa. No hay misterio y no hay, la mayor parte de las veces, emociones en juego. Lo que hay es una seducción fantástica, un embelesamiento, un cuento que encierra un mundo que uno se cree a pies juntillas, porque bajo el hechizo de Millhauser resultan muy plausibles los parques de atracciones de niveles subterráneos imposibles o los autómatas que dejan atrás a sus modelos humanos para convertirse en verdaderos autómatas. Hay cuentos muy sencillos en los que este hombre hace mucho con muy poco, como aquel en que un niño vuela con su alfombra mágica, un ensueño descriptivo de cuento, u otro en que el protagonista visita a una antigua amistad y descubre que éste está casado con una rana, todo narrado con naturalidad y veracidad. Pero la palma se la llevan Paradise Park, donde repite para llevar un paso más allá muchos de los planteamientos de su novela Martin Dressler, y lo logra sin resultar repetitivo, y todos los cuentos, son cuatro o cinco, escritos en primera persona del plural, ubicados en un contexto rural, donde se deja notar la influencia de Kafka, una influencia fagocitada por el sello de Millhauser, pero más que patente, creo yo. Esos cuentos de afamados lanzadores de cuchillos que visitan pueblos perdidos, extrañas y secretas ceremonias femeninas que tienen a un pueblo en vilo, revolucionarios fabricantes de autómatas que influyen en la vida de las personas... son absolutamente fascinantes. Mención especial para Bajo los sótanos de nuestra ciudad, quizás la alegoría sobre la vida interior más bonita que he leído.

Leer a Millhauser es siempre un deleite.

Chris says

Rating this one was tough, but that may be true of all short story collections. Some stories in this particular collection packed a punch for me (four stars), while there were others that seemed repetitive variations on a theme (for instance, the stories about an increasingly impossible marionette theater, an increasingly impossible department store, an increasingly impossible theme park, an increasingly impossible construction of underground tunnels in a small town). These I would rate as two stars. The stories that hit the mark for me took a blatantly extraordinary notion and lodged it into a ordinary world. What happens when a man marries a two or three foot tall frog, or flying carpets are real, but are marketed as kids' toys?

Plot is never a major consideration for the writer, as his target is the exploration of characters who find themselves in unexpected situations, and showing what their reactions will be. Perhaps the reasons I liked the stories that I did and that I disliked the ones that I did were that the stories I disliked had a rarely used characteristic and that was, I supposed I could it, a limited first person plural narrator. The story was told only using "we" and "our" for pronouns, as if an entire town was telling the tale of a brief portion of its history. This was an interesting experiment the first time I saw it, but as I read more stories told in this fashion, I became detached from them, and the emotional impact was lessened.

Amy (Other Amy) says

My father had taught me not to believe in stories about Martians and spaceships, and these tales were like those stories: even as you refused to believe them, you saw them, as if the sheer effort of not believing them made them glow in your mind.

-The Flying Carpets

In a world dense with understanding, oppressive with explanation and insight and love, the members of the silent sisterhood long to evade definition, to remain mysterious and ungraspable. Tell us! we cry, our voices shrill with love. Tell us everything! Then we will forgive you. But the girls do not wish to tell us anything, they don't wish to be heard at all.

- The Sisterhood of Night

I am having the hardest time pulling together what I want to say about this book, so I apologize in advance if any of this is unclear, and I will come back and do this better if better ever comes together.

Remember when albums mattered? When you had to buy music not song by song but as a collection of connected songs? How some artists would actually arrange the whole album as a piece of collective art above and beyond the particular songs themselves? That is this book. The whole work taken together comprises a meditation much greater than the parts. Some of the parts don't even work all that well without the whole.

The theme of the collection emerged with surprising clarity as I was fighting with "Paradise Park," which at first appeared to be a retread of "The Dream of the Consortium." But as I picked apart analogies and worked the puzzles, it turned out to be a revisit to "The New Automaton Theater" and "The Knife Thrower." Then after a brief WTH moment with "Kaspar Hauser Speaks," Millhauser turns full back to the thread of the theme and expands it out with "Beneath the Cellars of Our Town." By this point the book is no longer an anthology of short stories. It is an extended meditation on imagination, particularly the creation and consumption of art and the relationships between art, artist, and consumer (reader). It is one of those books that almost need to be reread as soon as finished, because once its theme emerges in the last pages, the whole work need re-examination with the new perspective in mind. (I am going to wait a bit on that myself, but I will do it eventually.) There is also a nice rhythm to this collection. The stories move from night to day and back again in an almost unbroken progression. There is also a pattern of rising and falling, from flights to explorations of subterranean worlds that begs for a closer examination. The seams of the work are showing in places, and the repetitive nature of the anthology is a little frustrating, but between the meat of the theme and the beauty of the writing (particularly "Flying Carpets," "Clair de Lune," "The Dream of the Consortium," and "Balloon Flight, 1870"), there is really very little to complain about here. I loved it even the moments of frustration.

(I see in other reviews that some have dismissed this as derivative of Italo Calvino and recommended Invisible Cities instead. I do very much want to read that (not just because I get Lorde's "Team" stuck in my head when I hear the title), but I think I will read Dangerous Laughter and Enchanted Night first. There is nothing new under the sun, and revisiting the same concepts from a different angle does not strike me as an immense burden.)

Blake says

It's a mistake to make a book comprised solely of this one man's stories. They start off seeming incredibly off-beat and unworldly, sucking you into their own bizarre world. BUT after a while the "sameness" of the stories gets to you. Sure, the setting and the actual happenings are different, but the mysterious "we", the circuitous and obsessive internal monologue, the acceptance of bizarreness and the total apathetic nature of everyone and everything, plus the incredibly over-the-top-ness of all the details. Singularly taken, some of the stories are brilliant! I loved the knife thrower and the toad story. But once they're laid side by side, the larger part of the glamour and mystique vanishes, which is a shame. Break this book up over a long time with a few other books in between and you might enjoy it more.

Zoe Brooks says

Millhauser's short stories fall in to two types: the dreamlike more poetic stories focused on individuals and often written in the first person and the more formal almost objective accounts of subtle alternative history. The stories often start out in an apparently normal mundane world before moving into the magical alternative realities, drawing the reader with them.

There are certain themes that run through the stories. His characters seem to be trying to escape the world, flying above it on a carpet or balloon, going underground into the tunnels under a town or into a theme park. In a way this is paralleled by our experience as readers. Indeed the theme of art/artifice gradually becoming larger, perhaps better than life but at the same time becoming disturbing appears in several of the stories. Other stories deal with adolescence as magical/dreamlike, alien to the adult world.

My favourite story was The Sisterhood of the Night in which the adults are worried by what they perceive as a secret society of teenage girls, who gather at night but seem to say and do nothing. At first one is fascinated by what the girls are up to, but after a while one suddenly realises that the action in the story is in the increasingly paranoid reactions of the adults. How easily it could slip into a witchhunt. We too have been guilty of speculating.

I am in awe at Steven Millhauser's stylistic mastery. He uses the first person point of view with great ease, even though he has little time in a short story to establish the voice. His descriptions are wonderful: poetic at times, exact at others. I particularly admire the subtle way he shifts the ground under the reader until suddenly, just like the audience in the title story, you are no longer sure what you are seeing.

This review first appeared on the Magic Realism blog: <http://magic-realism-books.blogspot.com> It is part of my Magic Realism Challenge in which I read and review 50 magic realism books in one year.

Tim Storm says

About half of these stories are kind of plotless; the other half are quite gripping plot-wise. His plotless stories are Borgesian philosophical fictions that end up being allegories for our postmodern world. "The Dream of the Consortium," for instance, is about an impossibly large department store that sells just about anything you could want, including full size replicas of ancient ruins. "The consortium was determined to satisfy the buyer's secret desire: to appropriate the world, to possess it entirely," Millhauser writes. He

renders his imagined worlds quite vividly; indeed, he's a master at concrete detail. And when he wants a plot, as he does in the title story (and in "A Visit," "The Sisterhood of Night," "The Way Out," "Flying Carpets," and "Claire de Lune"), he provides tension a-plenty as he conveys his strange scenarios. "A Visit" is about an old friend of the narrator's who has married a giant frog; "Flying Carpets" describes a children's fad of literal flying carpets; "The Sisterhood of Night" has a small town baffled by the secret society that has sprung up among teenaged girls--they sneak out of their houses and gather in the woods silently. They're fascinating premises, and Millhauser develops them adeptly, conveying complex motivation, mystery, and ambience galore. Several of them have first person plural narrators, a difficult undertaking in a story of any length but one that Millhauser pulls off over and over again.

Jeff Plewniak says

I loved the title story but really everything else seemed rather pointless. He's a good writer but most of the stories didn't feel like stories they were like brochures for wierd places and events. The title story was definitely fantastic though

Bandit says

I picked this one up because I couldn't resist the cover art and the fact that it might have something to do with circus. This book lived up to my expectations and then wildly exceeded them. Not all of the stories sung to me, but the ones that did were absolutely amazing. The author creates a magical array of worlds within worlds, dark and mysterious and stunning to explore. In 3 of the stories (which ended up being my favorite) he literally built from the ground up these absolutely incredible self contained architectural marvels that are completely out of this world, yet through exploring them we learn much about the explorers themselves. Here are the dazzling metaphors and meditations on human condition, on its essential inability to be satisfied yet occasionally getting stunned but what they find in their pursuits of the next best thing. There is a depth and beauty to the writing that has some gothic leanings as well as dark fantasy ones. Absolutely gorgeous short story collection, literary architecture at its finest. Highly recommended.

Sam says

If ever one writer had pet obsessions that he recycles, story after story, that writer is Steven Millhauser. The progression of artists towards stranger and stranger forms and obsessions or children growing up through psuedo-magical means form the basis of almost every story in this collection, and while the prose, as always, is quite strong, there's an equally strong sense of treading water. In "The Dream of the Consortium" we get a picture of an enormous department store selling the world's contents that can't help but bring to mind the final chapters of "Martin Dressler", and it's difficult to read "The New Automaton Theater" without remembering "August Eschenburg", another story about life-like clockwork creations in his much more interesting collection "In the Penny Arcade". The strongest stories here take flight when Millhauser takes a break from the conceptual and focuses on more realistic emotional matters, especially "Claire De Lune", about a teenage boy taking a walk on a summer night and stumbling upon a bunch of girls playing a secrete baseball game. While none of these stories are slouches, I'd suggest reading "In the Penny Arcade" first if you're interested in Millhauser's short fiction, and as always, I recommend "Edwin Mullhouse" to anyone with an interest in reading one of the finest American novels of the latter twentieth century.

Evan Leach says

I learned about Steven Millhauser after the New York Times selected *Dangerous Laughter* as one of the best books of 2008. I loved that book so much that I scooped up *The Knife Thrower* the second I saw it at the used bookstore. *The Knife Thrower* is a bit more uneven than *Dangerous Laughter*, which had at least one novel concept that really engaged me in each story. However, I think that the best stories in *The Knife Thrower* actually surpass *Dangerous Laughter*: two of the short stories in this collection are among the best that I have ever read. The 12 stories in this collection are:

The Knife Thrower: A fantastically entertaining description of an unorthodox travelling magician. **5 stars.**

A Visit: A man visits an eccentric friend he hasn't seen in almost a decade, with surprising results. This concept was a bit of a miss for me although Millhauser does a good job in spinning out the story. **3.5 stars**

The Sisterhood of Night: A disturbing account of a town where teenage girls join a mysterious and inexplicable cult. **4 stars.**

The Way Out: A man finds that his affair has unforeseen consequences. Not the strongest story in this book, but not bad. **3 stars.**

Flying Carpets: A look at a world where flying carpets are a real commodity and marketed as children's toys. **3.5 stars.**

The New Automaton Theater: The story of a village where clockwork automatons are admired as entertainment and the secretive manufacturers that create them. **4 stars.**

Claire de Lune: This short, dreamlike story of a young boy's nighttime adventure was probably my least favorite in the collection, but still intriguing. **3 stars.**

The Dream of the Consortium: A **spectacular** short story about a mysterious department store designed to cater to our every desire. This was quite simply one of the greatest short stories I have ever read. Thought provoking and incredibly entertaining. **6 stars.**

Balloon Flight, 1870: Journalistic account of a 19th century balloon flight during wartime. **3.5 stars.**

Paradise Park: The story of a bizarre and mysterious theme park. I don't want to give anything away, but suffice to say this is probably my favorite short story of **all time**. It features a mind-blowing concept, a perfectly designed structure, and Millhauser's usual top notch prose. It is worth buying this book just for these 41 pages. **6 stars** and I cannot recommend this story highly enough.

Kaspar Hauser Speaks: A man who grew up in bestial isolation addresses his adopted city after assimilating to human life. **3.5 stars.**

Beneath the Cellars of Our Town: The description of a town that has an extensive (and seemingly pointless) series of tunnels beneath its soil. Fascinating and classic Millhauser. **4.5 stars.**

There was not a single story in this collection that didn't offer *something* to think about, even if I thought some were weaker than others. And the highpoints are amazing. Steven Millhauser really is one of the most talented writers in the business right now and I wish he was more widely read. While I have reservations with some of the stories in this collection, they are outweighed by how incredible the top ones are and I would recommend this book to anyone. **4 stars.**
