



THREE ANN QUIN

"A vivid, supple prose flashing with insights."
—New York Times Book Review

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-- Ruth and Leonard's young female boarder, S., disappears under circumstances that suggest suicide. As the couple pours over her diary, audio tapes, and movies, their obsession with the enigmatic young girl takes over their relationship. Three combines laconic dialogue with poetic impressionism in an incisive exploration of the hidden emotions and sexual undercurrents of the British middle class.

Three Details

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From Reader Review Three for online ebook

Eugene says

a fascinating but subtly disappointing book, ann quin's THREE is a formally radical novel. arguably more daring in form than her contemporary b. s. johnson--with whom she's often lumped partly because they committed suicide in the same year--she's here also more cagey and unfortunately more predictable.

the style innovations are daring. the book consists of several modes: a line-breaking poem-like stream of consciousness; a fast-cutting, alternating POV style that reminded me of donald breckenridge's 6/2/95; and, reminiscent of both sarraute and gaddis, a skillful use of dialogue alone to reveal character.

and yet this book, which focuses on the bizarre love triangle of one airless bourgeois marriage and an interloping free-spirit femme fatale, somehow rang hollow. maybe because it was unclear how much of it was a critique of the malaise of middle-class marriage and how much of it was a self-pitying confessional narrative from that state. or: somehow it's central content--which did seem central, not auxiliary--crippled the serious play of its language games. so i was left with a dull feeling, a disappointment at unfulfilled potential.

course i could be wrong. and the destabilized, unreliable narrative and narrators might have hidden reward which alluded me. plan to try her BERG soon down the line. despite what disappointed--another review called its style a "muted lyricism"--it's definitely worth checking out.

a good overview of her work.

and, from an interview quoted here:

"Form interests me, and the merging of content and form. I want to get away from the traditional form. . . . I write straight onto my typewriter, one thousand words an hour but half will in the end be cut out. When I write the first creating parts of my book I can go on for three hours without a stop. When revising I can work up to seven hours, with breaks."

Charlie Hill says

Three is a formally challenging work, an expressionistic piece of intentionally blurred precision during the course of which lines of speech run into one another and journal entries are the rocks around which streams of fragmented consciousness flow.

It is 'about' the disintegration of a middle class marriage. Nothing much happens, at least in the way of plot. In its preoccupation with what might be described as The Domestic, it is the sort of novel that has been historically derided for being 'narrow' in focus, which tells you a lot about historical derision. Because despite its subject matter, it is of more interest to the halfway serious reader than a thousand 'large canvas' 'state-of-the-nation' word-wasting 400 pagers. For one simple reason: it expands our understanding of what the novel can be.

Which begs a question: just why is it that 'experimental' writers such as Ann Quin, disappear? Or, I suspect, fail to make an appearance in the first place? Is it because – as individuals – we'd rather be spoon fed warm diarrhoea (with apologies to Stewart Lee), kept unthinking, bound in comfort, rendered insensate? Or is it

rather because a select few would rather the majority were kept that way and try to impose the condition on us?

Nick says

A very strong 4.5/5 - didn't pack the same punch as Berg.

Steven Felicelli says

Reminiscent of Krapp's Last Tape, added this one to my 2018 reading highlight reel. Another grossly underread author.

Pamster says

Tough. Did like. I know I'd get much more upon a second read. Pon de reread.

Marc Nash says

The diaries, photos and film reels of a young woman who has committed suicide and left the couple who she was lodging with looking for answers and exposing the tensions in their marriage and the triangle of relationships suggested by the title. When the diary entries are fragmented, they are at their most interesting, being highly lyrical, chockfull of symbolism and pregnant with meaning. When the entries are more full narratives of the three of them together on the beach or around the house, they are less interesting. The sections of the married couple together are also more conventional and though the bitterness and frustration reeks in these sections, it's not really something you haven't read or seen many times before. Reminded me of a Harold Pinter play in its understated violence.

Geoffrey says

I feel like I want to like Quin a lot more than I actually do. Berg was okay, but this one feels pretty darned thin to me. I suppose I'll read the other two hoping for a pleasant surprise, but I'm not massively optimistic.

Owen says

Not as good as Berg but well worth a read. The style takes a bit of getting used to, but once you do reading more "normal" books feels weird.

Sean says

Three displays a growth in complexity of both form and theme from Quin's first published novel *Berg*, while also laying the stylistic groundwork for her third novel *Passages*. Here, a middle-aged married couple, Ruth and Leonard, reflect on their relationship with a woman S who came to live with them after having worked briefly for Leonard, a translator, and has since died, perhaps a suicide, perhaps not. S has had a deep effect on both the couple as a unit and as individuals. In order to illustrate this, Quin takes the formal inventiveness of *Berg* up a notch, joining third person narrative that melds dialogue and description into single paragraphs with audiotape transcriptions and journal entries from the three characters.

The present narrative of the couple Ruth and Leonard anchors the text, allowing for multiple digressions via the couple's tandem and individual investigations into the documents S has left behind. Instead of burning off the mist of this mystery, though, these documents only thicken it further, offering up only vague hints in the staccato poetic prose employed by S in her audiotapes and her more straightforward, though no more revealing, journal entries. At the same time, diary entries written by Ruth and an audiorecording made by Leonard, happened upon and read/listened to without the other's knowledge, illuminate the couple's deepening divide, which lies hidden beneath the banal cloak of their constant day-to-day chatter. At the heart of this rift is a knot of sexual tension that Leonard persistently seeks to untie even as Ruth is pulling the ends tighter. Their individual surrogates—Ruth's cat and Leonard's orchids—each repel the other person, as if the two, perhaps subconsciously, each resent the beneficiary of the other's repressed passion. However, throughout the book, it is the ghostly presence of S that most loudly signals the couple's utter failure to meet on mutually pleasing sexual terms. Union with S could have been the culmination of a fantasy for both of them, or perhaps S may have just shown them what was possible when lives commingle to the point of full immersion. She herself clearly felt drawn to both of them in different ways, and seemed to struggle with how to cross their boundaries, both collective and individual, in order to fulfill her own desires, some of which are alluded to in her recordings and journals. The bisexual theme is clear, and in interviews Quin alluded to her own bisexual feelings, as well as her belief that all people are inherently bisexual. She also spoke of her fantasy of being with both another woman and a man. So these themes she explores in *Three* were certainly of personal significance to her.

While I found it a bit slow to get into, the book grew steadily more intriguing and I found myself wanting to reread parts of it in order to confirm suspicions or remind myself of prior allusions. As with *Passages*, it merits a complete reread in order to fully move through the text and capture all the signal markers. There are many secondary plot points I don't touch on above. For example, there are certain scenes that crop up more than once in the various forms of recollection Quin uses. In one scene in particular, Leonard is attacked by a menacing group of men while he, Ruth, and S are performing one of their mime plays (another point of interest) in the back yard. These men and other trespassers reappear at different times as revelers in the yard and on the beach, at one point trying to attract S's attention when she is out rowing. There is also the question of S's suicide and if that is really what happened to her. Quin has strewn hints and possible red herrings throughout, taking readers to the brink of what I found to be a very satisfactory conclusion.
