



Dan

Joanna Ruocco

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Melba Zuzzo, erstwhile innocent of the male-heavy hamlet of Dan, a town located in the foothills of ... somewhere? ... finds herself in a rut. In fact she was probably born into this rut, but today, for some reason, she feels suddenly aware of it. Everything is changing, yet nothing is making sense. The people she might rely upon, the habits she should find comforting—everything is off. It's as if life, which has gone by largely unnoticed up to now, has been silently conspiring against her the whole time.

In Dan, Joanna Ruocco has created a slapstick parable that brings together the restless undercurrents and unabashed campiness of Thomas Pynchon with the meandering imaginative audacity of Raymond Roussel. Either Dan is a state of mind, beyond the reach of any physical map, or else it sits on every map unnoticed, tucked beneath the big red dot that tells us YOU ARE HERE.

Dan Details

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Author : Joanna Ruocco

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Nate D says

One for that peculiar literature of arbitrary and inescapable doom that I hadn't really grouped in my head until now: Aminadab, Frances Johnson, The Third Policeman. The narrative guides reader and protagonist towards despair by sequential underminings and denial of the pillars of one's day-to-day identity: family, mentor, work, home, self. It was difficult for me to make out the true contours of the novel until I neared the end -- only now in retrospect are all the silly names, words seemingly strung together for unexpected clashes of sound and tone, and nonsensical riffs of dialogue, at the time somewhat patience-trying, revealed as fully sinister, perhaps meaningful. As such, even as I write this, I feel a mounting sense of needing to revisit and reassess. Possibly from the start. I didn't really feel that I was enjoying this until after it was finished, but now I'm filled with mounting intrigue and appreciation.

Frances Chiem says

Like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* if Alice was a repressed 20-something and Wonderland was a conservative mountain town that actively spread wrongful knowledge among its young women.

Amy says

Weird little book about the isolated, potentially post-apocalyptic city of Dan, and one of the few female citizens - Melba Zuzzo.

Matthew says

The most playful little piece of fiction this year. If the neighborhoods of a Kathryn Davis novel ran into the fuck off intellect of a Thomas Pynchon narrator- one arrives in/at Dan. Beautiful prose that harasses your senses for the sheer fun of it. A loopy-loo bag of tricks.

Justin Evans says

Dan takes a long time to get going, I admit. It's entertaining enough for the first hundred pages or so, as Melba is accused by the various men of small town Dan, and in the process we learn a little bit about the place. But then, yowzers.

We turn out to be watching someone trying to piece together their consciousness as their self-consciousness falls to pieces. Melba is accused, among other things, of being or impersonating someone else, who may or may not have existed, but does have a grieving, insane husband. Her mother suggests that she's falling apart because she doesn't shop enough. If she shopped more, she'd have more things to build her personality with.

She would be able to hold herself more firmly in the flow of time; one of most remarkable passages in the book lightly parodies Benjamin's 'angel of history' (the school principal is Principal Benjamin, I'm not getting this from nowhere). Melba's mother tells her that, one day, Melba is "going to see something startling and not in a good way. You'll see a piece of straw driven like a skewer through a man's neck by gale force winds... you'll throw your arm across your eyes and those little hairs [on her arms] will act like Velcro on your eyeballs... that's the future, Melba. That's what not meaning gets you, eyeballs on your arm. Why won't you buy depilatory creams? They smell wonderful, like scorched lemons. They're cheap. You never shop, Melba. It's killing you, not just in the future, right now."

I admit, I'm a sucker for this kind of thing: theory-done-twee, irony with an emotional kick. I thought Ruocco might struggle to bring everything together at the end, but she succeeds perfectly, taking Melba back to her birth and the book, literally to its end. Dan turns out to be a kind of machine for making metaphors literally--including the idea, which I still find fascinating, that constructing a narrative in time, and constructing a self in history, have a lot in common. But most importantly, what could be a real snow-globe novel--self-enclosed, disturbing nothing outside itself--turns out to be constantly pointing at the world we actually have to live in.

Goatboy says

Finished last week and I honestly don't know what I think about this novel. On one hand, it's so totally weird and un-normal as to make it interesting on purely the level of not knowing what might happen. At various times it reminded me of Brautigan novels or Flann O'Brien's Third Policeman. But there was also a part of me that felt unsatisfied by the fact that none of it ever seems to resolve into anything tangible. I finished it and thought "what was the point of that"? Who knows, maybe that was the point. I guess I can see some people loving this novel and others completely hating it. I remain ambivalently in the middle of that spectrum.

Tobias says

Dreamlike novel of small-town unrest and shifting identities.

Hillary Humphreys says

This book was all over the place and incredibly bizarre. I do not think I really got it. Just the same, I absolutely loved every second I spent in its pages.

Curtainthief says

Everything we do, frantic activities, assignments of meaning to random gestures and grunts, succorings of our organisms and the organisms of those to whom we've developed attachments - it's all designed to distract us from the very abyss in which we formed, the formlessness that fills us.

Dan is told from the highly-associative perspective of Melba Zuzzo, who as of late has been grappling with the myriad mysteries of her town, Dan. As she wanders through the novel and the town, she begins to feel less and less at home, and as she tries to connect the dots her experiences summon memories and memories-within memories. For the reader time expands and compresses constantly. That Ruocco is able to simulate this effect and not once lose the thread is quite an achievement.

"I tried to think about time all at once, was that my problem?" Her voice was a whisper. "Was that what I was always doing wrong, over and over again, every moment?"

Ben Bush says

"Dan" belongs on a syllabus with Stacey Levine's "Frances Johnson" for a stellar lit class on surreal novels about odd intelligent women trapped in small towns + engaging inverted logic and malevolent doctors.

Brooks says

Dan is a town that shifts. People disappear without necessarily going anywhere. And it may be that the entire town is conspiring against Melba. The whole book kept trapping Melba further and further, and the narrative kept me off balance throughout. The lack of chapters just reinforced the way the book entwines the reader and keeps pulling you and her along.

Alicia says

like pynchon's crying of lot 39, but guys rewriting this female narrator's sense of self and reality. the epitome of mansplaining.

Jeff Raymond says

I've fully enjoyed much of the Dorothy Project books I've read up to this point. *Dan* is hailed as one of the early classics of their run, and I can see why - it has a pretty bizarre premise (a woman-out-of-place story in a male-dominated village in Europe) and has all the literary trappings to go with it.

I personally found the book to be a little impenetrable in some regards, and having read it some time before writing this review, I cannot say much of it stuck with me. That's two massive strikes against the book, and I'll overall just say that, in a series of hits for Dorothy, this is a rare miss.

Smoothw says

Pedro Paramo filtered through the kind of bratty 90's postmodernism, or possibly prairie home companion? Anyway, it's about Melba, who lives in the isolated town of Dan, who may or may not exist, and her various

reminisces about her strange childhood, odd situations she gets into, and looming existential dread. Diverting enough, but not quite funny or dense enough to really make much of an impression.
