



The History Of Luminous Motion

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Phillip is eight years old. He experiences material reality as a hindrance, so he tries to stay in an inner realm composed only of abstract concepts like gravity, motion, sound and light. He lives with Mom, who stays alone in her bedroom. Once he killed a man with gleaming tools from a hardware store. He has a friend with whom he does burglary and drugs and seances. Then Dad comes to stay, and Phillip descends to a subterranean otherworld where he makes contact with "dead black things, obloid and featureless, like faintly disembodied laundry hampers." A sad, beautiful book.

The History Of Luminous Motion Details

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From Reader Review The History Of Luminous Motion for online ebook

mark monday says

Acid-washed gems drop from these characters' mouths each time each mouth is opened. Careful now, the acid lingers and will burn and eat through all of your layers, your clothing, your skin, muscle and fatty tissues, the life you dream you live in, your shape that has been forced upon you, the forces that shape you, your so-called identity. Ouch, that's bad acid! No good trip will come of it.

These acidic treats are like the musings of gods and geniuses, or at the very least, PhD candidates. These beings of extraordinary lucidity and deep intelligence ponder life and the forces that move lives forward. They contemplate these things while grinding each other and making out, while robbing houses, while nursing bottles of alcohol and sucking down various drugs, while conducting seances and satanic rituals, while mutilating and dismembering father figures. Oh, in case you think this novel is even remotely supposed to be "realistic" - whatever that even means - you should know that these hyper-articulate monsters of superlative intellect are an 8-year-old boy and a 12-year-old boy and girl. The author is not aiming for realism. This is a postmodern construct, among many things. A child of Kathy Acker without the purposeful plagiarism, a child of William S. Burroughs without the self-loathing sexuality. A smart child, certainly, but not a very pretty one. Nor a realistic one. This is a dream child, a wee little nightmare.

What's this deep dive into deadpan despair all about it? What is this coldblooded and malevolent fantasia on capitalist, fascist, and Oedipal longings actually trying to say? Well, first and foremost, it is talking about America. In particular, Southern California. But let's look at the bigger picture here. America is just a place. The book engages with the American Dream, but that's just a dream. The History of Luminous Motion is about all of the things that should make us into human beings but instead make us feel hollow, or hollowed-out. Families... gender... politics... consumption... etc et al. This is a poetic, beautifully written, darkly humorous book; it is also a pitiless, scouring therapy session. It comprehends you, what drives you, what makes you stand still, what forces movement. It understands you, fully. But in the end, it just doesn't like you very much.

Mary says

I found The History of Luminous Motion at a second-hand bookstore and picked it up knowing nothing about it, or the author. I'm so glad I did. I love this book. It's one of the best I've read in years, actually. I'm not quite sure how he managed to get away with this insanely brilliant eight-year-old narrator, but it only made it more interesting. I'm definitely going to reread it at some point.

Brent Legault says

Where are you, Scott? And more importantly, why don't you write? I miss you. I miss the little things you used to say. In your novels, I mean. The novels you used to write. Back in the good old 1990's. You were fast-tracked for Boy Wonderism but now you're not here anymore. Why don't you write? Where are you, Scott?

You're not *dead*, are you?

Mike Polizzi says

For a time, Philip Guston's work ran parallel to the abstract expressionists. He painted what some called abstract impressionism. It seems here that Scott Bradfield created the impressionist book of post-modern hyper-realism, collapsing the psychological novel, the bildungsroman, the novel of ideas, the road novel and the meta-novel into one exquisite, heartbreaking and unsettling paradox. It probes into the problems of postmodernity with high lucidity and intelligence, but reads, nearly, as a standard narrative, using its lacunae to great effect.

Narrated by a different Philip, the novel begins with a Badlands-esque road trip, but instead of two lovers we have Philip and his mother, a dazzling presence, equally unsettled and unsettling in her role as enabler. Taking the perspective of Philip's interior the book presents itself as the site of unsettled reality. Philip, our unreliable narrator, is presented as a precocious eight-year old. His intelligence and range are outside the standard domain of eight-year old precocity and he seems more a medium for the deeper essay of the author's play. Within the confines of literalism, Philip as a precocious eight-year-old would be pursuing subjects equal to the emotional range of a thirty-year-old, let alone the intellectual range-- which isn't to say such a child couldn't exist, it's part of the book's undertaking to make it plausible if not immediately realistic. This is one of the places the author has given the reader to question the tenacity of its narrator, but also to create a sense of simultaneity.

The specific type of simultaneity here is a form of expression, as parts of Philip may be autobiographical, the quality of thought is what comes through as authentic. Philip is the agent that allows the author to pursue a limitless fictional universe, a place where that Dostoyeskiian question (Is everything permissible?) can be explored. The truth of the particular form of this character may or may not arise from biographical facts from within the author's own life. It is the interest required to make Philip's world elegant in its duality and the capacity to plumb a character that is this intellectually disturbing, as an avatar for moral and perceptual relativism where light is the only true constant, that makes the book. It is the sadness imparted in unexpected way of Philip's condition, the inherent brokenness, that made this book great.

Elizabeth says

phillip is 8 years old and when you read this book you might be like me and have to keep remembering that. a precocious little boy living in the fast lane on the way to mayhem. everything about this book is interesting with a streak of chilling running through it. phillip's inner dialogue and ability to understand adults is beyond his years. job well done!

Nicolas Shump says

For several years before and during my undergraduate years at KU, I worked at the Town Crier in downtown Lawrence. It no longer exists, but it was a bookstore, pipe shop, and Hallmark card store. We sold magazines too. I worked there mostly for the books and the employee discount.

For me, one of the first things that attracts me to a book is its cover. Often with the books displayed with only the spine visible, I am drawn to titles. This was the case with Scott Bradfield's first novel, *The History*

of Luminous Motion. Bradfield had earned a PhD in English from Cal-Irvine, part time home of Jacques Derrida.

I have learned that Bradfield is now an American expat who lives in London. He has written several additional novels and has achieved a modicum of fame for an speech turned into in a essay titled "Why I Hate Toni Morrison's Beloved."

This is my first and probably last Bradfield novel I will read. The novel is the story of an 8-year old boy Phillip who lives with a mentally ill mother who makes a living by stealing the credit cards of men she sleeps with. Phillip's father comes in and out of his life throughout the novel. Phillip kills one of her mother's boyfriends who they had actually moved in with. The man, Pedro, according to Phillip is one of the few decent men his mother had met. From the grave, Pedro occasionally appears to counsel Phillip on a variety of topics.

Phillip's two friends in the novel are a pair of 12-year olds named Rodney and Beatrice.

From what I described so far, the novel is a bit odd, but I suppose there are 8 year olds who are capable of murder and probably women like Phillip's mother too. So that is not my primary beef with Bradfield's novel. It is the utter implausibility of the maturity and interests of the three kids. Now I'm a fan of Marquez and other magical realists. I don't mind the appearance of fantastical elements into a narrative, but I think Bradfield over does it.

To his credit, Bradfield is a gifted writer who has a true talent with his prose. Here is Phillip's mom explaining the concept of luminous motion:

“‘The history of motion is that luminous progress men and women make in the world alone,’ Mom said. ‘We’re moving into sudden history now, baby. That life men lead and women disavow, that sure and certain sense that nothing is wrong, that life does not beat or pause, that the universe expands relentlessly. You can feel the source of all the world’s light in your beating heart, in the map of your blood, in the vast range and pace of your brain. That’s the light, baby. You don’t need any other. Just that light beating forever inside of you.’” (42)

Bradfield also excels at creating vivid portraits of the inner landscape of his characters. This is a description of Phillip's mom and her darkness:

“‘Sometimes I even looked forward to having the darkness take me places. I took me down luminous rivers on large rotting rafts and barges. I saw strange birds flying overhead, and the eyes of other creatures emerging from the mucky water. I traveled down the river where twisted houses sat on shores filled with dark men who wouldn’t come outside. The dark men were inside whispering about me. They held heavy spears and weapons by their side while their addled women cooked large pots of gristly meat and hung their washing out to dry. The men wore loincloths and streaks of paint on their arms and faces. A few mangy dogs lay around outside the circle of men, contemplating the dim fire. One of the dark men was my father.’” (130)

We learn of Phillip's desire if not for love, then for an enveloping sense of affection: “‘I never wanted to be loved when I was eight years old. I wanted to be crushed by soft massive arms. I wanted to be lifted into some towering embrace. I wanted to be hugged so tight I couldn’t breathe. I wanted to be hugged until my eyes watered and my lungs collapsed and my heart popped.’” (140)

Though there is an implicit sense of violence in this description, there is also the presence of a deep longing in Phillip. Since Phillip does not find this embrace, he turns to drugs (taken from his parents, weed, and various types of beer and hard liquor. This is where the novel starts to leave a bad taste in my mouth. Because everyone knows of 3rd graders who can easily score good dope and cheap liquor. Phillip is kept out of school too, so he sits around stoned and drunk all day.

When he does go out, Phillip hangs with Beatrice and Rodney his 6th grade "mentors" for lack of a better term. Rodney at least has an ambition. “‘So that’s when I decided to become a warlock. To master the satanic arts of black magic. Devil worshipping, for you laymen. I want to learn to master what they call the black arts.’” (178)

Beatrice rounds out this odd triumvirate of boy murder and apprentice warlock by appearing to be the group intellectual.

Here's Beatrice lecturing Phillip on one of his intellectual shortcomings: “‘Man’s myth of intentionality. I do things to you. Prediction. Subject and object. The dream of perfect cosmic grammar.’” (170)

Is this the type of grammar they teach in schools now? It gets better though. Beatrice not to be outdone by Rodney's

aspirations of the dark arts embarks upon an ambitious reading project.

“I’ve been reading a lot lately, Phillip, since we broke up. French feminists, existential Marxists. I’m teaching myself French so I can read Sartre’s Critique of Dialectical Reason— much of which has been improperly translated, from what I understand.” (171) So the real question I suppose is what Beatrice would be doing if she and Phillip had not broken up? Heidegger, Camus or perhaps de Beauvoir?

For me, all it would have taken is for Bradfield to add ten years to the age of the protagonists to make me go along for the ride, but I don't know that even Garcia Marquez would try throwing in a prepubescent devotee of French existentialism!

Without spoiling the ending, Rodney and Phillip embark upon a violent course of action encouraged partially by the dead Pedro.

If you can imagine a trio of messed up, but hyperintellectual tweens with a passion for drugs, sex, and violence, this is the novel for you. I couldn't make it work.

herocious herocious says

I read this book after Mary Miller highly recommended it on Facebook.

I liked it a lot. Really couldn't put it down for too long.

There was a part, though, motivated by Black Magic that struck me as graphic and almost unnecessary, but not out of character. I wouldn't like watching this part in a movie.

Having said that, this novel absorbs and shocks and disgusts and leaves you suspended in a very familiar house that is no longer yours.

Breakzqueen says

I have read this book over 50 times. I think I first read in in '95.

It's poetry. Some of the most lyrical writing I've come across in modern fiction.

Haven't been impressed with the rest of Bradfield's oeuvre, unfortunately.

Will post more about this book soon.

Kandee says

I read this book 4 times, each time loving it more and more...until this 'friend' borrowed it and bitched about the over use of similes... and now that is all I can see, but my memory of it is solid, so I won't read it again

Forrest says

Simultaneously, some of the most beautiful, frustrating prose I've ever read. There's no doubt that Bradfield is a master craftsman when it comes to narration. This work is ethereal, smart, and evocative of some of my favorite writers (Brian Evenson, Rikki Ducornet, etc). But when Mary Gaitskill blurbs that the work is "Painfully beautiful writing," she is speaking more truth than she knows.

The narrator, Phillip, travels through a sort of dreamscape seeking the "History of Luminous Motion". We're not quite told what that *means* per se, but if pressed up against the wall, I'd say it's the need to keep moving, the need to feel empowered, that seeking for the feeling that one has control over his own life, his own agency. Phillip, along with his friends Rodney and Beatrice, seek power from the world of the spirits to . . . well, this is where things break down. You see, Phillip is psychotic. Not figuratively speaking, he really *is* psychotic. So his goals are . . . elusive, even to himself. He doesn't quite know what he wants until he's almost "on top" of it. Maybe this is part of the idea of motion, the stumbling on from event to event, from thought to thought, with no real notion of where things are going to end up until you're "there" wherever "there" is.

And they end up in a bad place. A very bad place for everyone involved.

But, see, Phillip, again, is psychotic. He can't be trusted. So how much of this is real? Having finished the novel, I can't even tell you if his friends are real or not. The only two people that seem real at all are Phillip and his dad.

Then there's his mom. Phillip has an obsession with connecting and disconnecting with his mother throughout the novel. I often wondered if his mother was just a figment of his imagination, if she had died when he was younger, if she was a dead body in the house, if . . . if she was even real. And the connection to his mother (and subsequent disconnections and reconnections) are what drive much of the philosophy forward in this book.

I must note that this book is full of philosophy. It will make you think. You might not agree with Phillip's (or Rodney's or Beatrice's) philosophies, but they will make you think.

The writing is dark, not for those who are seeking comforting prose and happy scenes. Rather, Phillip plunges deep inside himself to the dark places in his skull and between his ribs, where he ruminates on life's meaning or tries to escape from it:

For the first time in my life I was utterly alone. I examined the desultory, overinflated images of naked women in men's magazines. I bought a harmonica which I liked to hold in my hand and imagine myself playing. Sometimes I danced alone in my room, listening to Bruce Springsteen or Joe Cocker on my Sony Walkman. I preferred Jim Beam, but I cultivated a taste for gin as well. I drank and danced until I grew dizzy and surfeited with a thick, swollen stomach, and collapsed on my unsheeted mattress, beating my feet in the air, watching the room swirl around. When it started swirling I knew I might throw up at any moment. That's what the plastic-lined trash bin was for. I lay very still and tried to make the room stop moving. It required an act of intense concentration. It was as if this swirling room was itself a mockery of movement, pulling up through my stomach while the alcohol moved through my blood, lifted into my brain and skull and sinuses. I wanted more to drink and tried to sit up. I knocked over bottles and ashtrays. The gray ashes spilled across my clothes and sheets. There were beer cans everywhere. Everything reeked of gin and cigarettes. The floor of my room looked like the high school parking lot. The world seemed to be growing darker and more desperate. "I don't know where I'm trying to go, Mom," I whispered, as if she could hear me. "Maybe I'm already there and I don't even know it."

Pretty dark stuff, but probably what you'd expect from a person struggling with psychosis.

Only Phillip is eight years old . . .

Yeah, eight years old.

Okay.

Whatever.

This is what held this novel back from brilliance. NO eight year old uses words like "surfeit" or "desultory," and, I'm sorry, but a little boy who drinks that much (and later is smoking weed and sniffing glue with abandon, along with his 12-year-old friend, Rodney) is going to survive long. "Well," you say, "an eight-year-old could handle alcohol in small quantities." Fine. How many eight-year-olds enjoy drinking enough that they'll drink until they vomit? Really?

And that vocabulary, that beautiful, erudite vocabulary - eight? There's no way. I was an advanced reader and writer at that age, and I couldn't have told you what "desultory" meant. I might have figure out "surfeit" from the context of the sentence, but to construct a sentence using that word? No way! And the book is full of examples like this. Chock full.

I just couldn't swallow it. Had the book ended on a big "reveal" that this was written by someone in their twenties, looking back on a childhood riddled with mental illness, I could forgive the indulgence. But no . . . just no! The book ends . . . okay, I won't spoil it for you. But it's not as I would have wished, not by a long shot, not in a way that makes a modicum of sense vis-a-vis all the previous narration.

My suspension of disbelief was further shot down by Phillip's Mom's words and actions. She excuses her son for an (view spoiler), and possibly (though it's never quite clear) a (view spoiler) just chalking it up to her inability to understand her son. What??? She stands and watches as he (view spoiler) and does nothing to intercede? WHAT?!?!? Then it turns out, if I read correctly, that Phillip's Mom (view spoiler).

This could have been a gem. Should have been a gem. There are still shining moments, but it's like a pearl necklace that's been dropped into an outhouse hole. Yes, there are rewards, and yes, it's beautiful and valuable, but do you really want to have to put up with the stink to get it? Your call . . .

Robert says

I read this without knowing anything about it. As a result I experienced most of the story in a state of fascinated confusion and anxiety without expectation. This book was a huge influence on any efforts I've made to write something evocative.

Nathan says

The mental life of a precociously brilliant eight-year-old who departs from family and convention and along the way makes stops at fantasy, delusion, substance abuse, devil-worship and delinquency. Making sense of a world without a moral center. Chilling and sad.

Walter says

One of the odder books I have ever loved, but reading Justin Torres' *WE THE ANIMALS* made me pick this up again, as something in Torres' storytelling reminded me of Bradfield's. I am pleased to say it held up twenty years later. Give this to people who liked Emma Donohoe's *ROOM*, though that is by far the superior book.

Krok Zero says

Imagine if Don DeLillo and Oliver Stone collaborated on a remake of *Bugsy Malone*, except instead of kids-as-harmless-gangsters, you've got kids-as-philosophical-psychopaths. At its best, this novel achieves that wonderful effect I get from guys like Barry Hannah—the sense that every sentence is so thrillingly non-ordinary that I don't even have a context or a frame of reference for it. At its worst, this is an assortment of highly pretentious ideas about—oh, I don't know, "history" and "motion" and psychology and childhood and sex and whatever. But even then it's very readable. More people should know about this book—it got blurbed by Michael Chabon, fer chrissake! Seems to be out of print but *CYLL* (check your local library, natch).

Mari Gee says

I stumbled upon this in a used bookstore for a dollar or so in the very early 90s. It was before internet access was a house-hold thing, and for some bizarre reason I never read the jacket cover, so I had no preconceived notions. I miss that sometimes... knowing too much about a book before reading it is a bit like watching a million trailers for a movie... by the time you see it you've pretty much seen the best parts already. Which is mainly why most of my reviews don't give an outline synopsis of the story... you can look up painfully detailed previews for any given book, so I don't bother reinventing the wheel. My reviews are only to share my reactions.

Anyway, not knowing the narrator's age had a devastating impact on me when I came to the end of the book (I don't recall if his age was ever mentioned in the book, if it was I missed it, and all the better!). It is a nausea-inducing confession of the most disgusting aspects of humanity. An indescribably haunting *beautiful* confession. There's something about this tale that simultaneously gives the misanthrope fuel for their hatred of mankind *and* evokes pity for these tragically broken human beings. This book changed the way I look at broken people. I still feel the disgust and I still avoid them like the plague, but there's always the tiniest pang of pity for them now. how gorgeous is this animal... this human being, with the potential to be so beautiful and the unexplained urge to do such ugly things.

A must read.
