



Orphans

Charles D'Ambrosio

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These eleven essays span continents, culture, and class. Fiction writer and essayist Charles D'Ambrosio inspects manufactured homes in Washington state; tours the rooms of Hell House, a Pentecostal "haunted house" in Texas; visits the dormitories and hallways of a Russian orphanage in Svrstroy; and explored the textual space of family letters, at once expansive and claustrophobic. In these spaces, or the people who inhabit them, he unearths a kind of optimism, however guarded. He introduces us to a defender of gray whales; the creator of Biosquat, a utopian experiment in Austin, Texas; and a younger version of himself, searching for "culture" in Seattle in 1974. He analyzes the nuances of Mary Kay Letourneau's trial and contemplates the persistence of rain and of memory.

Orphans Details

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From Reader Review Orphans for online ebook

ds white says

Probably the most exciting read of 2004-2003 I can't remember. Knocked my boots off. These essays will change you. I was living in Seattle at the time and was fortunate enough to see him read from these essays on various occasions, each occasion even better than the previous, which seem impossible. Find this collection hold it dear to your heart

heather says

i'm wasn't done yet with my library copy, and i ordered a copy from clear cut press so i could keep it forever and ever and ever. (yes, i am done for real now). the end of "biosquat" just made me sigh with joy on the bus. really. the title essay made my heart break. so did "documents" (originally published in the new yorker), where he chronicles correspondence with his father and two brothers (one now dead), simultaneously establishing himself as the "sane" one in the family all while toeing that precarious line.

i want this man's ability to craft a sentence and to write so unflinchingly.

Olivia says

Stunning, from the first word to the last. Dense but accurate, these essays wretch visceral moments out of the most mundane to the rather epic. Haunted houses, whales, pedophiles, and orphans keep the reader holding on. References to philosophy, metaphysics, and poetry make the essays tastier but not snobbier. Hardly a word I didn't want to read. Spend your time on this one. Best 21st century literature I've read yet, and it was non-fiction. Amazing.

Anna says

You know D'Ambrosio as the author of extraordinary stories in *The Dead Fish Museum* and *The Point and Other Stories*. This collection of his essays--a delightfully solid and lovely volume, the size of my palm, from Clear Cut Press--isn't as ubiquitous. But it deserves to be.

The eleven essays are haunting, hallucinatory, and so sharp-eyed that it rattles the bones. D'Ambrosio moves among landscapes like a watchful ghost--from oddball modular homes in Washington state, to the infamous Hell House, from Seattle in 1974 to a Russian orphanage, from a tent on a cold ocean beach to a utopian experiment in small town Texas to a courthouse multiplex where a teacher's on trial for becoming pregnant by her 13-year-old student.

Sound strange? D'Ambrosio thinks so too ... or rather, he's rapt at the spaces of ambivalence, of fakery and rhetoric, the blurring of what we mean and the meaning we make.

Perhaps the rarest quality in *Orphans* is D'Ambrosio's fearlessness in taking a stance. These aren't essays of endearing observation. They stand for something.

Consider, from, 'Mary Kay Letourneau,'

"In the case of King Lear, the language that let's us see his magnificent ruin has outlasted Newtonian optics. Science deals with things, not human beings, and is speechless."

And, from 'Whaling,'

"Nowadays, it's just as likely the surface of life is what puzzles Pip and finally sends him around the bend, and today's cabin boy must go alone into the quiet depths to escape and find peace and recover for himself a measure of sanity. It's civilization that's raw and wild and full of scary monsters and grotesques and deformities crowding every bus and park bench and court of law, whereas we now believe our wilderness exhibits the high sweet harmony we hope for from life as well as offering the refuge and sanative balm we desire when our energies flag and the botch of civilization gets us down."

Also from 'Whaling,'

"... If you love abstractly, you're only a bad day away from hating abstractly."

I read Orphans along with a friend. As we moved through it we kept updating each other: "'Brick House' is my favorite one." "Okay, now 'Modular Homes' is my favorite. But it's tied with 'Degrees of Gray'..." Another remarkable piece of D'Ambrosio's essays is they are all good. Most essay collections have at least one, usually more, downbeats that act as filler around the more interesting title essay. To read many collections through is hit-or-miss. Not so, here. Your attention must be paid.

Throughout, D'Ambrosio's language is at once cuttngly personal--evoking at length even the words of a brother who committed suicide and a father who disappoints--and expansive. The reader is disarmed by his candid first-person voice ('The Crime That Never Was' begins: "This is totally false, but for the sake of the story let's say the events in question begin around 2am, just because that's when I show up on the scene.") It's a perfect preparation for his acutely sensitive insights and strong stances that might otherwise feel hollow or--egad--pretentious.

The strategy is syntactically mirrored: D'Ambrosio's language is simple, full of nouns, contractions, dialogue and scarcely any adjectives; yet it's punctuated by odd words that crackle in the mouth: mantic, saurian, asperse, ambuscade, echolucution. paladin. In context the words take shape--there's no serious linguistic difficulty--but I found myself copying the words out and saying them aloud to myself. Upon looking them up, I found that every single one of the words on my list were designated as 'archaic' or 'formal.'

Is it a case of D'Ambrosio showing off? (I recall Will Ferrell, in the brilliant Matrix spoof that originally aired at the MTV Movie Awards, desperately shouting 'ergo!' 'vis a vis!').

Hardly. The firecracker 'archaic' words in context of simple language are an expansive device--elevating D'Ambrosio's personalist narrative out of his body and into a space that transcends time. It parallels what the content of the essays do thematically--and makes for a reading of shivery brightness.

Orphans meets the collections Joan Didion and Ralph Waldo Emerson as the best short nonfiction you can read. Your hands should be all over it.

The book's publisher has an unusual story itself. Clear Cut Press's model runs like this:

"A \$65 subscription (US) provides the subscriber with a complete series edition of six beautiful paper-bound books delivered throughout North America. ... Subscribers will receive their books before the general public and enjoy special gifts and invitations to Clear Cut Press events. Subscribers also have the satisfaction of

knowing their purchase enables Clear Cut Press to continue its work.

"Clear Cut is inspired by early 20th-century subscription presses Hours Press and Contact Editions, and by the midcentury paperbacks of New Directions and City Lights. These historical models seem well-suited to the independent economies that emerge every generation or so around the cultural movements and new demands of global youth, whether punk, grunge, hip-hop, hippie, beatnik or flapper."

D'Ambrosio's book was but one installment. I'd say the Clear Cut deal is probably more than worth it.

UPDATE: A reader shared some disturbing news about Clear Cut Press and how it worked with Orphans. It goes something like this:

"Much as I agree with you (and do I ever) that Orphans is an unbelievably good book, did you know Clear Cut press fucked him with it? They were supposed to do a limited run that wouldn't conflict with the planned Knopf hardcover. Instead they rushed it out, got it reviewed, and effectively killed the hardback.

"Charlie wasn't too happy about this--it's still a sore point with him, I think, and who can blame him? Really a shitty thing to do. So much as I love this book and think it should be a part of everyone's home (I think there'll eventually be a Vintage paperback in the future) I try NOT to endorse Clear Cut Press when I recommend the book. In fact the opposite. ...

"We love Charlie. We love Orphans. But, uh, Fuck Clear Cut Press."

Indeed.

Savanna says

A wonderful, odd little collection of essays. D'Ambrosio is simultaneously self-deprecating and incisive. His ability to dive into and deconstruct a moment, a sentence, an opinion is remarkable. Two essays in here, "The Crime That Never Was" and "Mary Kay Letourneau," are worth the whole collection.

Hannah says

I liked some of the essays in this book much more than others- I think the distinction was something like "essays in which D'Ambrosio observes an event" vs. "essays in which D'Ambrosio THINKS about an event," although it certainly wasn't that black and white. Sometimes the prose rambles a bit more than my attention span could handle, and I haven't actually made an intrest/page-length comparison, but it's also possible that I preferred the shorter essays in general.

Anittah says

Simultaneously introspective and intellectually insecure. D'Ambrosio comes off as a quiet person whose relationship to the world and perhaps other humans is mediated via text. Loved the shape, feel, and look of this volume. I suspect it contributed to my enjoyment of his pieces which, while lacking a hit, were consistently thought-provoking and littered with pleasurable pivots. Will be interesting to see how the Tin

House version looks. A good read if you like to grapple but felt, say, the Book of Disquiet was a little repetitive/wet/whiny/annoying.

TinHouseBooks says

Jakob Vala (Graphic Designer): I'm designing Tin House's edition of Charles D'Ambrosio's Orphans so, for the past month, I've been reading and rereading the essays within. D'Ambrosio's style is a sort of confessional-academic journalism. One minute I'm reading personal letters and the next, passages from Joseph Brodsky that leave me thinking about ideas of falling as progress. It's all related, of course—the collection is heavy with threads of place, family, and loss and, in each piece, I feel like I'm gleaning bits from an extraordinary mind.

Bina says

Once in awhile, an illusion descends on me, like a cloud obscuring my vision, that I might be a species resembling writer. When I read CD'A, the fog instantly, painfully, impressively dissipates. The man is brilliant. His vocabulary comes from the sonnet and from the gutter, his allusions from myth and from hyperreality. I have never so admired anyone's use of adjectives, which is a strange thing to say, I realize. He has so many at his disposal, tossing them out as a seasoned blackjack dealer lays cards: casually, perfectly, without pretension about the perfection.

Somewhere along the way I realized that these essays are just long complaints about somewhat forgivable sins like 'save the whales' activism and media coverage of a pedophile. But his weird sense of compassion is seductive, as is the intoxicating cocktail of logic and humor – hilarity – with which he dissects the world. D'Ambrosio twists our language and wrings the best brackish water from the quotidian.

Audra says

D'Ambrosio writes as if he has read the Unabridged Oxford American English Dictionary, sat with it for a few years, and then was able to choose the most perfect word for any situation. His introspection was thoughtful without being overbearing, and his metaphoric descriptions are without parallel. I'm in love.

John says

Excellent short stories. The general feeling of these stories, which range from love stories to commentaries on justice, is that the author wants to honestly describe our country and he wants to do so by describing her people. I think he succeeds in depicting the slices that he has encountered. This book is especially worth reading if you are familiar with Chicago or Seattle as it particularly pierces these locales.

Nicole says

These essays are of a more personal nature than I expected when starting this book. They are thoughtful,

often insightful, and sometimes rambly, all of which is excellent and makes for a good read in my world. Because they are often unflattering to the first-person narrator, they also come across as honest, another thing that helps keep us firmly on the side of the narrator--it's hard to walk away from all that juicy disclosure.

A couple of D'Ambrosio quotes that caught my attention:

"The whisper and hiss and cranky dyspeptic sputter of a Coleman is as distinct and holy a music as the rev of a Harley. I like the celestial quality of the light, Venusian and green, the rounded simplicity of the mantle, the paint job, of course, and the way one sounds when swung by the bail."

"In fact he was an emphatic person the way other people are tenors or baritones, and because I had the window seat and felt trapped I began to get buggy. Everything he said stuck to my skin."

"The Crime That Never Was," "Orphans," and "Documents" stood out as my favorites of the bunch, although "Mary Kay Letourneau," "Whaling," "Hell House," and "Biosquat" were all good, too. There are a few other essays here that are already fading for me, but I don't remember any of them being dull while I was reading, so this probably just means they didn't strike me as much as the ones I do remember clearly, not that they weren't also good essays themselves.

There's a lot of isolation in these, explorations of different ways of being alone in the world. "Documents" in particular is heartbreaking, partly a view into strained father/son relationships and partly about how families deal with a tragedy that has affected the family as a unit and each member individually and how the different stories each person involved has to tell themselves to move through the tragedy can't always coexist.

My one sticking point by the end of the collection is that the tone and voice and cadence is similar between all of these essays (with the possible exception of "Documents," which has a slightly different format and that may be one reason it left such a strong impression on me) so that, by the end, they start to sound too much the same.

Ellen says

This guy knows what essays are all about. Sometimes I think he includes a little bit too much about himself, and the whole, "I'm a writer, I'm a loner, I'm a rebel" thing gets kind of old. But overall, his thoughts are wonderfully ambulatory. He's really taking you on a journey and you don't know what's going to be around the next bend. I especially like the way he dissected the media's use of language in the wake of the Mary Kay Letourneau trial. But even when his thinking isn't entirely original, his sentences are just so well put together. "Even punctuation isn't really about organizing or shaping the inherently horizontal character of prose. Periods, commas, and colons regulate the breath, and well-written prose always includes, in its long or short rhythms, a kind of pulmonary function; reaching into these vital rhythms, good prose can, like breathing exercises in yoga, inhabit the visceral life of a reader." Hell yeah.

Kae Cheatham says

Some of these essays had good imagery. But over all, reading the limited views and introspection of one person doesn't appeal to me. I didn't find a "universal" feeling in the presentations, and felt more I was reading someone's journal ramblings--eloquent, yes, but too entangled in the author to be truly interesting.

Courtney says

Between 3.5 and 4 stars. Charles D'Ambrosio has a very associative and expansive style, and some of his essays don't come together until the very end. His intelligence makes the meandering thoroughly rewarding. He has the vocabulary of someone who completes the New York Times Crossword in ink. More importantly, he nestles brilliant tangential insights into most of the pieces included here. I was especially impressed with "Documents," "Modular Homes," and "Mary Kay Letourneau."

D'Ambrosio turns his attention to a wide variety of topics and locales. However, there are recurring themes which create a sense of cohesion. For example, the absence of love is discussed in a variety of contexts. I think D'Ambrosio demonstrates that non-fiction essays can be simultaneously artistic, literary, autobiographical, topical, and theoretical. If you have the patience to follow his line(s) of thought, and a dictionary nearby, Orphans is a pretty great read.
