



Review: Keith Gessen, *All The Sad Young Literary Men*

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Keith Gessen's *All the Sad Young Literary Men*

London: William Heinemann, 2008

by John Morton

All three of the central characters in *All the Sad Young Literary Men*, Keith Gessen's debut novel, are engaged in projects which involve writing of some sort — Sam is working on 'the first great Zionist novel', Mark is writing a doctoral dissertation on the Mensheviks, and Keith is an aspiring Democrat pundit who ends up writing short books on topics such as the Iraq war. However the important adjective in the title is not 'literary' (the word added by Gessen to the title of F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1926 collection, *All the Sad Young Men*), but rather 'young'. This is a novel equally concerned with the passing of time, the loss of youth, and, most importantly, the arrival of maturity.

It is easy to discern many instances of a lack of maturity in all three characters, who are loosely connected friends. Sam's literary aspirations are curtailed both by their very ambitiousness and by the fact that he seems more interested in tying himself in knots over the day-to-day political situation in Israel than in his fiction. Mark's Russian wife leaves him because she finds life in Syracuse, where they have relocated so he can write his dissertation, unbearable; whilst he becomes increasingly aware of his age, obsessing over internet pornography and embarrassing himself at the university gym in front of his students. Keith is ostensibly the most successful of the three — publishing actual books as well as blog pieces — and yet he still spends much of his time, even at the end of the novel, in a local Starbucks, reading the morning newspapers in the afternoon.

All three men are united by the embarrassingly ‘sad’ metaphors they use to interpret their lives. At an early stage of the narrative, Keith envisages the minutiae of his life mirrored in the events of Abraham Lincoln’s life, the man he is currently studying, Abraham Lincoln. The personal and the political are conflated to such an extent that he proposes to his girlfriend when the 2000 election is called for the Democrats. Sam, the most tragically misguided of all these young men, interprets his love life in terms of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. While Mark, in the most sustained metaphor, uses all manner of historical details from the Russian Revolution to find parallels with his own situation as a lonely, divorced postgraduate.

Gessen allows these clearly ridiculous comparisons to pass without authorial comment, even using the inappropriate phrase ‘Right of Return’ as the title of a chapter in which Sam is reunited with his ex-girlfriend. This may lead some readers to conclude that the author approves, in some way, of these apparent trivialisations of history. However, what the novel actually performs is the progression of all three literary young men to a much more self-aware and contented state of mind. Sam’s sadness seems to evaporate when he finally visits Israel and the West Bank, two places whose residents have better reason to feel ‘sad’, and having experienced both Israeli brutality and Palestinian celebration of terrorism, he concludes: ‘The Palestinians were idiots. But the Israelis — well, the Israelis were fuckers. And when Sam saw an idiot faced with his natural enemy, the fucker, he knew whose side he was on.’

If anything, this seems even *less* mature than the previous comparison of his love life with the fates of Israel and Palestine. And yet it comes at the end of the novel’s best-written chapter, ‘Jenin’, which finishes with Sam preparing for law school. Having sought to find the definitive answer to the problems in the Middle East and to express it in the form of an ‘epic’ novel, he is now content with the memory of his experiences in the Middle East: ‘It was important that he knew what he knew, though how exactly it would come into play he could not yet tell.’ This is genuine self-assurance, a world away from his earlier posturing where he is forced to ‘give up Jerusalem’ countless times

in arguments at parties, despite considering himself possessed of the ‘true’ interpretation of events. Sam is finally able move on with the knowledge that his experiences and opinions are robust enough not to need continual analysis and justification.

All the Sad Young Literary Men is a novel which enacts the early immaturity of its characters, even going so far as to include several pictures in its initial chapter which unsubtly announce points which would have been made more sophisticated through the nuance of writing. That these pictures only appear in the earliest part of the novel is testament to Gessen’s real interest in writing this impressive debut novel – to demonstrate that people in their mid-twenties are rarely mature; that youth continues even when the body appears to be ageing; and that the only true way to interpret one’s life is through traditional, and universal, ideas such as birth, youth, maturity, and death.