

The Arriviste

A Novel

JAMES WALLENSTEIN
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Neil Fox is a man of few worries. He has a big house on Long Island from which he can see water; his office schedule in the city is winding down; his dog, a "scaredy-cat mastiff" named Frances, asks little but the occasional pat, and McNeil Bros. Ltd, the holding company he has formed with his brother Mickey, continues to bring in the dough despite certain lawsuits that at this juncture, 1970, appear to be challenging Mickey's "heads-we-win-tails-you-lose" scenarios. True, his wife has walked and his teenage daughter, Vicky, regards him as a bore, but Neil's only real challenge appears to be looking out for the welfare of the most delicate of his automobiles.

He had put me on the spot. I owned three cars, but only my pleasure car was in its bay, an Alfa Romeo runabout in that red

PEN USA Emerging Voices

Emerging Voices is a literary fellowship program that aims to provide new writers, who lack access, with the tools they will need to launch a professional writing career. Over the course of the year, each Emerging Voices fellow participates in: a professional mentorship; hosted Q & A evenings with prominent local authors; a series of Master classes focused on genre; and two public readings. The fellowship includes a \$1,000 stipend.

The Mentorship Project grew out of PEN USA's forum "Writing the Immigrant Experience," held at the Los Angeles Central Library in March 1994, which explored the issues, problems and challenges faced by first and second generation immigrant writers. It was evident from the forum that many of the culturally diverse communities of writers in Southern California have special needs and are often isolated from the literary establishment. In the fall of 1995, PEN USA initiated Emerging Voices as a literary mentorship designed to launch potential professional writers from minority, immigrant and other underserved communities.

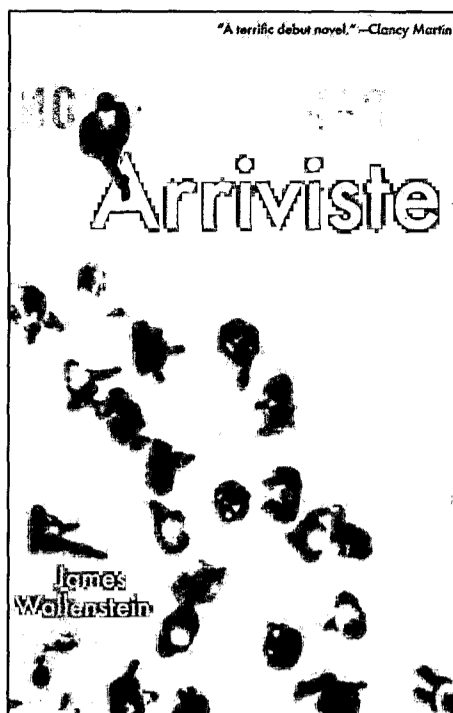
Participants need not be published, but the program is directed toward poets and writers of fiction and creative nonfiction with clear ideas of what they hope to accomplish through their writing. There are no age restrictions.

This project is supported in part by grants from the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, The James Irvine Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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that only the Italians seem to be able to get—vermilion luster with crimson depth—or that looks the way it does only beneath their enamel. I had lent the car out before, and it hadn't come back in the same shape. Even good drivers were prone to struggle with its tricky clutch. Who knew what a father racing off to save his daughter might do to it? The simplest thing would have been to drive him there myself. The fact that I'd put a few scotches under my belt wouldn't have stopped me, except that I'd recently been pulled over and couldn't risk its happening again.

"He" is Bud Younger, Neil's new neighbor, who lives on property that formerly belonged to Neil. Bud's five-year-old daughter is running a high fever, his wife has driven her to the emergency room as a precaution, and Bud wants to check on them. Unwilling to treat him badly, Neil throws on some clothes and sets off, Bud at the wheel, with the intention of keeping an eye out for damage, and drinking coffee at the hospital before the return trip. Bud has reassured him—"I used to sell them for a living, practically"—that he knows how to handle sports cars.

He did know how to handle the roadster, handled it so well that—despite the usual difficulty getting into reverse—I enjoyed the ride, a rare occurrence as a passenger in my own car.

This is the first concession of many Neil makes to Bud, glimpsed at a distance as a "broad, swarthy, well-groomed, well-dressed young businessman on the move." Later, after they have become more entangled than Neil can admit to himself, he observes that his neighbor is "either out of the way or in it."

Neil, too, is a relative newcomer to the village, earlier inhabitants having sacrificed their polo fields, stables, and fortunes in the crash of 1929. Neil is not a snob, but he finds Bud's assertiveness annoying. He doesn't want to talk business. He doesn't want to go to his neighbor's party. On the night, having resorted to the white lie of "being away," he discovers parked cars blocking his driveway. Angry, he trots over, and almost before he knows it he's being introduced around. Eventually, as he's trying to leave, an older man corners him.

"I'll tell you something," he said while I searched for my astrakhan. "Know what they say about power? It's a very tricky thing, tricky, tricky, trickee."

"What is?"

"Power."

...

"If you say so."

"That's all it takes as far as you're concerned, isn't it? You just walk to the other side of the desk. ... You think that's all there is to it. Well, it's not like that, not

for some of us. Some of us, we start on our way around, and what happens." He was looking me in the eye, trying to get me to look back into his. Behind him, on a silent television, a man in a yellow mackintosh riding a tricycle in fast motion hit a curb and fell over.

James Wallenstein—*The Arriviste* is his first novel—captivated a reader who would have expected to find little joy in watching two suits play tug-of-war. It is easy to sympathize with Neil, with his more or less harmless vices and his desire to be left in peace. Clearly the fates are stalking him, and not in a nice way. You don't need the name of his village, Dunsinane, to see that Birnam Wood is never far away.

Clouds part during a visit upstate to Neil and Mickey's mother, a woman of cultivated acerbity whose doctor, grave over the phone discussing her broken hip, turns out to be gloomy not from "the prognosis but at the likelihood of treating her for years to come." But the miasma is strong enough, and the evidence pervasive enough, to suggest that there is something of the monster in Neil, something of the big fish stationed at the mouth of an underwater cave, by nature motionless as smaller fry approach. If he is the passive party, does it follow that the active party must assume the blame? And for what? It seems to me that the crux of the book, and its considerable value as entertainment, depends on how you read the character of Neil.

Vicky may put it best. Incensed by the skimpiness of a tennis outfit he had insisted that she return but was now wearing in front of Bud and his son, Neil takes his daughter aside and, in an uncharacteristic display of temper, grabs at her hair and yanks it.

She staggered, and one of her barrettes landed on the twisted bolster.

She went over to get it and sat down on the bed. "Is that what you do?" she asked through tears. "I wonder why she waited so long?"

What Neil does is a good question. James Wallenstein is interested enough in him to make me interested too, and I look forward to discovering what interests him next. —Virginia Allen ■

Radiant Daughter

A Novel

PATRICIA GROSSMAN
TriQuarterly/Northwestern University,
\$29.95 cloth, ISBN 978-0-8101-5199-4

Patricia Grossman's *Radiant Daughter* initially attracted me because of its subject matter; mental illness is a topic that remains absent in many conversations among my own family and friends. Grossman bravely explores bipolar disorder through Elise, the "radiant daughter" of Czech immigrants Irena and Stepan Blazek, who live in a Czech-dominated suburb of Chicago. Academically talented and driven to achieve, Elise is on a path, laid by her mother, straight to Princeton.

The book opens in June 1969. Elise is preparing to leave for college at the end of the summer, and Irena proudly flaunts her daughter's talents, convinced that her careful teaching and planning have made her dreams come true. Elise, however, was not meant to stay on her mother's path; she is taken over by her first manic episode during a long weekend in Chicago. It is unclear whether Irena refuses to or cannot comprehend the gravity of this initial episode. For her, Elise is "the most exemplary member of their family. She was the achiever who had never let them down." Irena clings to this conviction throughout Elise's struggle with mental illness, making it that much harder for Elise to seek the medical intervention she so desperately



needs. The book closes 27 years later, in February 1996. Throughout the book, the narration shifts perspective from Elise to Irena and, later in the novel, to Miloslav, Elise's cousin who grows up in the Blazek household, raised by Irena and Stepan. These many perspectives allow Grossman to inhabit both the psyche of Elise's episodes and that of the people who watch her suffer.

Radiant Daughter intrigues on many levels: It is written spectacularly well, and Grossman uses many dichotomies to flesh out Elise's struggles. Most clearly, she parallels Elise's manic and depressive episodes with her passion for translating and analyzing Russian poetry:

Where her illness was concerned, Elise had a penchant for objectifying. If she pushed herself to the furthest degree, like an athlete straining beyond preset limits of endurance, Elise could read and interpret her symptoms as she read and analyzed Akhmatova's poems. She could sort her symptoms into categories as she once had the verb tenses of Serbo-Croatian, deciding which she had to master first. This time it was the business with the living room furniture.

Elise's brilliance makes her illness that much more tragic—and interesting.

Grossman also hints at the elusive Katrina throughout the novel. She is Stepan Blazek's sister, Miloslav's mother. We come to discover that she is trapped in a mental hospital in the Soviet bloc. Her illness is never openly discussed, only hinted at nervously. Katrina teaches us just how silent and terrifying mental illness is to the Blazeks. She plays the role of the constantly looming specter of mental illness, a specter that will confuse Irena, dominate Elise, and push all the characters into a deeper understanding of themselves.

This book allows us to fully immerse ourselves in mental illness in a way that readers and writers often shy away from. Instead of alluding to mania or using Elise as a scientific study, Grossman inhabits her thoughts and plays out her destructive impulses. This might seem a little intimidating, and it is. Our society often stigmatizes mental illness as either the fault of the individual or something to be treated and forgotten. Grossman powerfully confronts it, making me deeply grateful for the profoundly positive effect 10 milligrams of a generic antidepressant has on my daily life. It also empowered me to start a conversation with my grandmother and my mother about the ways in which mental illness operates in our family. What will this book teach you? ■

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