

McSweeney's Magazine Review.

This review, of a recent issue of *McSweeney's* literary magazine, was never published, probably because:

1. Hardly anyone ever writes, and no one ever reads, magazine reviews.
2. The magazine itself was so bizarre that most bookstores refused to carry it.
3. Many people would assume that either the magazine itself, or my review of it, was a hoax (neither is true.).
4. Even those who believed the magazine was real would see a review of it as a bit esoteric, if not utterly irrelevant.

So, in the spirit of bizarrely esoteric but somewhat amusing irrelevancy, I wrote, and inevitably failed to publish, this review anyway. If nothing else, it will ensure that the mandarins at *McSweeney's* will never, ever publish anything with my name on it, which is not entirely a bad thing for either one of us. Enjoy!

America's Leading Literary Magazine Goes Postal

by, Michael Antman

The latest issue of *McSweeney's*, the World's Cleverest Literary Magazine, isn't post-modernist, or post-post-modernist. It's just post. More to the point, it's the post. In the excessively puckish spirit of many of its previous issues (including one that came packaged with a handy pocket comb), issue Number 17 of *McSweeney's* has been, in the words of a bet-hedging cover sticker designed for puzzled newsstand browsers, "made to look like it came in your mailbox"; it's a loosely shrink-wrapped pile of mail-order catalogues, magazines, FSIs, legal notices and junk mail, most containing poker-faced parodies of the art forms they represent.

On the level of graphic design, this is a triumph. Consider, by way of contrast, the fleeting scene in a Hollywood movie when a character enters his house and flips through the day's "mail" as created by a propmaster; invariably, it's a neat collection of similarly shaped white envelopes that the protagonist shuffles through before arriving, in shock and via a helpful close-up, at the letter from the Long-Lost Child He Never Knew He Had, or the Scrawled Threat from the Improbably Competent Homicidal Stalker, or somesuch. Just as every moon in the movies is full, all movie mail arrives in business-size envelopes. (The computer corollary is that every e-mail critical to the furtherance of the movie's improbable plot arrives helpfully at the top of the queue, rather than never appearing at all because it's been mistakenly deleted by a Spam filter.)

No, the *McSweeney's* version of "mail" very nearly approximates the slippery, ill-assorted mess that arrives in a real person's mailbox every day. Indeed, according to a study conducted by the Arlington, Virginia-based Baudrillard Society for Simulated Research, of all the objects, or groups of objects, that Americans handle in their daily lives, the ones most likely to be dropped are pieces of mail: That's because small but slick magazines slip from between thicker envelopes on either side; and thinner envelopes, in turn, slip from between the pages of magazines, catalogues and advertising circulars. Additionally, everything's a different size, and therefore impossible to grip consistently.

McSweeney's, to its credit, gets this (in a literal sense; their assortment of mail is not only shrink-wrapped, it also comes with a thick rubber band to hold it all together) and, more important, they get the ephemeral, ill-assorted nature of life itself, of which our mail is only a hard-copy representation. That letter (or e-mail) that apologizes for past hurts, explains old mysteries, or makes sense of a senseless life – or just announces the news you've been so eagerly awaiting? It never ever comes, or at best is buried under an ever-increasing blizzard of bills, circulars, and junk, junk, junk, junk, junk, junk, and junk.

So, although the *McSweeney's* package contains no bills per se (other than, indirectly, the credit card bill I'll get in the real-world mail a month from now demonstrating indisputably that I paid \$22 for Issue No. 17), it does contain a faux-junk letter that in a convincingly unconvincing way urges the recipient to "Please Open Immediately"; a second piece of junk mail containing a come-on from a Bangladesh-based scamster; a copy of a monthly journal devoted to scholarly Bigfoot research; a small catalogue from a company called Tyrolian Harvest, featuring a wide assortment of sausage gift baskets, all of which, amusingly, appear to be virtually identical; a beautiful big envelope filled with surreal art prints; and a cheaply printed circular, reminiscent of (cribbed from?) a similar National Lampoon jape from several decades ago, that offers for sale various apparel absurdities, such as three-legged sweat pants to be worn by two people at once that's been "approved for school use by the Michiana Athletic Association," and a dress that triples as a couch.

So, beyond the transitory pleasures of parody, and the reminder that life itself is a slippery, ill-assorted mess, what does this expensive joke prove? The answer, if there is one, lies in one other item in *McSweeney's* pile of junk, a convincing-looking imitation of a (non-*McSweeney's*) literary magazine entitled *Unfamiliar*, which is, one gathers, intended to be the peanut at the bottom of the box of Cracker Jacks – the nugget that justifies the whole sticky endeavor.

More to the point, the purpose of this pony-in-a-pile-of-shit (to switch metaphors) seems to be an acknowledgment on *McSweeney's* part that \$22 is expensive for a joke, and that most readers want something real to read. So this simulacrum of a literary magazine contains actual literature. But it's real literature of a typically hedged and equivocal – one could even say cowardly – variety, like much of *McSweeney's* output. For example, the cover of *Unfamiliar*, as well as too many pages within, are graced by disgusting full-color photos of slimy offal, for no apparent reason other than to suggest, "hey, if you don't think these stories are very good, well, this was all a joke, too, just like the rest of our package."

Even some of the individual stories themselves have this quality of coiled irony, designed to deflect any legitimate criticism. There's a well-drawn but morally confused graphic story about human shields in Iraq, and several other fictions that are written in a flat, declarative anti-style, hence rendering them resistant to stylistic criticism, and that feature, in many cases, a deliberately absurd or childlike plot. If you like these stories, that's great; if you think them terrible or irrelevant, hey, we've engineered plausible deniability into the whole enterprise. (The only exception, a touching, memoiristic story about a young woman who died in a preventable auto accident, is insultingly stuffed into one of the junk envelopes and printed in the form of a fifth-generation photocopy of a letter.)

Not immune from criticism, however, is the copy-editing: "blond" instead of "blonde," "stationary" instead of "stationery," and "I kicked the garbage bag out of the away." Oddly enough, the other magazine, the one about Yeti and Sasquatch and Bigfoot, is a brilliantly written and edited, pitch-perfect parody of the kind of narrowly based, pseudo-scientific journals beloved of 15-year-old boys everywhere; I once subscribed to a similar publication called *Perpetual Motion Journal*, which one day announced that it was ceasing publication, via an abrupt mimeographed message mailed to subscribers relating how some "neighborhood boys" had broken into the editor's garage and destroyed all of his files as well as his "working perpetual motion machines."

Now, that's an entropic irony that even *McSweeney's* couldn't invent.

Like many lovers of literature, I would gladly probe through a thousand photos of human organs for a single unpublished Nabokov story. The good thing about *McSweeney's*, Nabokov-free though it may be, is that there are many incidental pleasures along the way, parody, prank, and insouciant idiocy among them.

The bad thing is that ephemerality – and even satires of ephemerality – by definition lasts only so long. It's hard enough to write beautifully, to get published, to move and influence readers who are busy and otherwise engaged, much less to be remembered, and all of this strenuous whimsy is just an expensive evasion of the real work of writing and editing. Thus, like most of my actual mail, this issue of *McSweeney's* is now scattered about my house, though principally residing, with the exception of the rubber band and the Yeti journal, in the wicker basket filled with items destined for recycling.

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