Beauty Plus Pity
by Kevin Chong

Reviewed by Bob Armstrong

Being beautiful is a lot less fun than you’d think. Not least of the challenges is that everybody assumes you’re shallow and soulless.

The challenge of reconciling a beautiful exterior with a painful interior is at the heart of the second novel by Vancouver’s Kevin Chong, Beauty Plus Pity. The title comes from an epigram by Vladimir Nabokov: “Beauty plus pity – that is the closest we can get to a definition of art.”

Chong’s novel combines beauty and pity; unexpectedly, the beauty in question is male. His protagonist, Malcolm, is a handsome young man who has accidentally drifted into a career as a model. And the pity turns out to be all around him. His father has recently died, his mother appears to be bipolar, he’s unlucky in love, and his newly discovered half-sister has things worse.

In many ways he’s the classic stalled post-university Gen X character that we’ve met in countless indie films. Imagine a younger, Asian Zach Braff as Malcolm, slowly waking up from his quarter-life crisis. But the novel has a strong moral core, as Malcolm goes through a moral awakening brought about by his encounters with pity, in the form of a half-sister he meets only when she crashes the funeral for their father in the first chapter.

In many cases the emotional impact of powerful events is intentionally understated. That’s because Beauty Plus Pity is a novel concerned with surfaces. Malcolm knows that there’s something shallow about being a model. In a twist on the belief that having your picture taken robs you of your soul, Malcolm says “Photos gave me a soul, or at least a complexity I didn't necessarily possess; they infused my vacant expressions with ponderousness.”

We know that Malcolm’s parents had a conflicted marriage and his mother is prone both to fits of rage and threats of suicide, but these seem to deflect off Malcolm’s surface, a surface that may well have been strengthened precisely because of this family environment. Chong shows us that Malcolm comes to care deeply for his half-sister, Hadley, but when her life takes a tragic turn in the second half of the novel, Chong quite intentionally keeps emotional reactions to a minimum. Not to say that Malcolm really is emotionally dead; far from it. We can see how the events of the novel affect him, but he is a controlled character in a novel that is written with great precision. Chong doesn’t want his book to become a pity party.

In fact, the first half of the novel, before the “pity” takes over, is quite funny. Here’s Malcolm’s assessment of the eulogy he has prepared for his father: “It was the worst-possible speech and could only have been more wretched if I’d used a laser pointer.” A pretentious romantic rival is said to have written a critically acclaimed novel called Eye [I] Chart, using only the letters on the eye-exam chart at his doctor’s office (does this remind anybody else of the poet Christian Bök, whose most famous book Eunoia uses only one vowel per chapter?). When Hadley follows Malcolm’s ex-girlfriend into a store to report on how she’s handling the break-up, she comes back with the bad news that the ex has bought a pack of condoms; then, to make Malcolm feel better, adds, “But only the regular size.”
Malcolm’s combination of comedy, beauty, and slightly flattened affect is reminiscent of the work of fellow West Coaster Douglas Coupland. Is there something about living in what is arguably the world’s most beautiful city that encourages writers to explore surfaces and makes them suspicious of attempts to depict emotional depth? It’s interesting to note that both Malcolm and his ex-girlfriend Sandrine make disparaging remarks about hiking. Could it be that nature, romanticism, and emotional displays are all suspect among writers living in a big, ultra-modern, glossy city that perches uncomfortably between the ocean and the rainforest?

With this second novel Chong takes a prominent place among the cadre of West Coast writers, including Coupland, Zsuzsi Gartner, and Timothy Taylor, who are carving out a place within Canadian literature for writing that tries not to wear its heart on its sleeve, maintains an ironic detachment from deep passion and explores how living in a world of shiny high-tech surfaces affects us all. 

Bob Armstrong is a playwright and author of the comic novel *Dadolescence*.

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