

Milosz

by Cordelia Strube

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Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

In this her ninth novel, Cordelia Strube introduces us to Robertson, an eleven-year-old child with autism, then proceeds to build a world around him filled with twisted, broken people.

There is Milo, the protagonist of this dark world, a failed actor whose claim to fame is a commercial in which he stars. Here is how Strube describes his last role – as Konstantin in *The Seagull*:

Milo would arrive at the theatre three hours before curtain in an effort to inhabit Konstantin, to work up a desire for Nina and the compulsion to blow his brains out. He'd skip rope for an hour to induce Konstantin's weariness, drink black coffee to attain his edginess, dredge personal experience to suffer his despair. As the curtain rose and his cue came closer, he waited to exit Milo's world and enter Konstantin's. This had always happened in the past: he would forget who he was and become who he was supposed to be. But that was before his father deserted him, leaving Milo steeped in shame although clueless as to what he had done to make his father bail on him. (7)

Milo lives in a side-by-side along with a cast of squatters. The residence on the other side is occupied by Robertson and his mother, Tanis. Milo is treated every once in a while to the staccato of Robertson banging his head repeatedly against the shared wall.

"I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!" Strapped into his protective helmet, Robertson can go on like this for hours, spacing his words at regular intervals, using the same inflections. Tanis's response is inaudible through the wall but is probably, "You don't hate me, possum. You've just had a bad day." She will sit with her son for however long it takes, steadily offering soothing words. If she's lucky, he'll allow her to put her hand on his shoulder. (5)

Tanis's estranged husband, Christopher, and all the occupants of Milo's place except for Milo himself know that Milo is attracted to Tanis. Whether it is in furtherance of his interest in Tanis or as a result of his ability to relate to Robertson, Milo appoints himself Robertson's guardian. This allows Strube to sink her bucket into the well of black humour and retrieve it full.

One of Milo's squatters is Wallace, who believes he has inherited a genetic defect from his father that will lead to an early, distasteful death. Subconsciously, this has prevented him for some time from becoming involved with women. However, he lies to his mother, who lives in England, telling her he is involved in a serious relationship and that he is an accountant rather than the junk collector he actually is. All this backfires when his mother comes for an extended visit. Wallace prevails upon Milo to hire someone to play Wallace's girlfriend. At first reluctant, Milo eventually agrees to hire a painter, Fennel, whom he has gotten to know through his day job as a nude model. This plan is complicated when Fennel meets Pablo, another of Milo's squatters, and is attracted to his Latino good lucks and easygoing nature, leading to the following confrontation between Wallace and Pablo:

. . . “Me and Fenny can’t help what we feel for each other, Wallace.”
“You say another word and I’ll fucking kill you, you read me? You fucking sex addict.”
“He’s not a sex addict,” Fennel says.
“Oh no? He’s a fucking pussy junkie. Try talking to his ex, she got sick of putting out for him.”
“That’s a lie,” Pablo gasps.
“Enough!” Milo shouts. “Out, everybody.” He tries to shove them towards the door.
“I live here,” Wallace points out.
“Me too,” Pablo says. (86–7)

Both Wallace’s mother and Fennel join Milo’s menagerie.

Milo’s father, Gus, grew up in Poland under horrendous conditions, watching friends and neighbours being tortured and even murdered. He has not been much of a father, at least in Milo’s opinion, and Milo harbours a great deal of hate and resentment toward Gus. Thus, when Gus leaves home in the middle of a snowstorm, goes missing and is believed dead, Milo does not grieve but takes satisfaction in this. When Wallace tells Milo that he saw a person in an old folks’ home with a strong resemblance to Gus, Milo initially denies this as being impossible. He later relents and contacts a reality TV show to find his father and reunite them – just to put an end to the relentless pressure of his squatters. They do find Gus, who has forgotten how to speak English and speaks only Polish, which Milo doesn’t understand. Milo visits the home where Gus lives. The home informs Milo that, now that Gus has a living relative, they can no longer keep him and that Gus must go live with Milo. This leads to hilarious consequences, particularly as Gus is loved by everyone at Milo’s place except by Milo.

Somehow, everything works out in the end – sort of. You’ll have to see for yourself what that “sort of” entails. ❖

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for *The Malahat Review*, *Arc*, *The Antigonish Review*, *The Fiddlehead* and *The Danforth Review*, in the US for *Quarterly Conversations*, *Rain Taxi*, *Rattle*, *Big Bridge* and *Galatea Revisits*, and in Australia for *Jacket*.

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