

the futility of living in this . . .

Century, by Ray Smith, Stoddart, \$12.95, 160pp

In *Century*, Ray Smith tries to come to grips with his feelings of despair and the futility of living in this century. The result is a collection of stories that seem disturbingly distant from the reader, and even distant from the characters participating in and narrating them.

This is Smith's first book since the acclaimed *Lord Nelson Tavern* of 1974. And while *Century* is as well crafted in its use of language and attention to detail, its tone is not conducive to reading. The characters are numbed by events, feel disengaged from their lives, don't know what to do, and in their private ways sell themselves short.

In the first story, about a young feminist who eventually commits suicide after Heinrich Himmler enters her dreams, the writer interjects to explain that the character is a composite of several real women, and ends off confessing to two failed novels and feeling helpless.

CENTURY

Helpless about why the women are the victims "... preyed upon, threatened, beaten, raped..." Smith has no answer but these stories. In these stories Smith's women are, for the most part, aggressive, narcissistic women or prostitutes. Even the city of Venice is a whore and the merchants are pimps trying to satisfy her. In "Continental," Impressionist painter Henri Toulouse-Lautrec says, "Paris is as much a harlot as the girls at Madame Eugenie's. The gaiety is assumed... But the artist sees beneath the flesh to the quivering jelly within." Lautrec then talks about painting as a surface medium and essences, yet exemplifies a nearby woman's "self-absorption of the face, the shoulders, the waist and hips. Look... mortal woman in love with eternity, the eternity that lives within her dance. That, Monsieur, is what I shall paint."

This, too, seems to be what Ray Smith is painting — and both the 20th century and women with the same brush. Men are victims unable to satisfy the cravings of modernism or women. They are not rapists but raped and abandoned, out of touch with even themselves. If this is Smith's answer to the problems posed in "In the Night, Heinrich Himmler..." then he has failed.

Last spring, Ray Smith gave a reading at Saint Mary's to promote *Century*. He read "Serenissima," which the back cover blurb describes as beautiful "stunning visual imagery," a story of jaded love in Venice. And we were stunned. Stunned by the insensitivity of the characters' power struggles, the deception of defeat. I was disturbed listening to it and that has not been lessened by reading it. Much of this is because of how Smith presents the story through female personae. There is a dangerous naivete about these women which limits the appeal.

Smith is not alone with these problems, but *Century* seems to entrench rather than shed light upon our understanding of them.

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