

David Deaton Reviews:

Playing in the Dark

Playing In The Dark
Kent Thompson
Quarry Press
139 pp.

Playing In The Dark is a harrowing tale of love gone wrong, terribly wrong. It might be called a vicious entertainment. Part thriller, nihilistic romance, pitch black comedy, it ends in unrelieved tragedy.

Thompson gives us Stringy Keeler, a small-time hood not unlike Gary Gilmore, as the novel's anti-hero. Repellently fascinating, he captures our attention from the opening sentence:

"You could smell the drink on him when he entered the bank, he was dirty, his clothes were dirty. We left a space around him; we didn't want to look at him."

Thompson makes us take a good, hard look at Stringy. He makes us look until we come to regard him as something more than the subhuman sociopath who stalks into a bank and beats a woman unconscious.

Stringy is not the only character who could be described as bad news. There also is Sharon, a prim bank teller and veritable slut, who revenges herself on men for her father's desertion.

Sharon's father - bad news also - precipitates Stringy's criminal career when he slashes him in class with a metal-balded ruler.

For the rest of the novel, Stringy dedicates himself to slashing back - at Sharon, society, and, most of all, himself. Of Stringy's many tattoos, one proudly sums up his life: Born to Lose.

But everyone loses in this novel. As in Thompson's merry novella *Married Love*, everything that can go wrong,

does. Here, however, people pay a heavy price for the mistakes they make when they reach out for love or what passes for it.

Let it be noted that both Sharon and her mother quit university to take up with worthless men. "Vincent had very nearly ruined her life. She trembled when she thought of how she had dropped out of university for him. Yes, she

And her mother was all set to leap into the Failure lecture - 'You'll end up a waitress!' - which her mother thought was a fate worse than death (and in fact Sharon agreed with her although she wouldn't say so, she had no intention of ever waiting on tables), but Sharon topped her. She'd been waiting for this moment.

'I've got a job.' "

the colours can hardly be said to be pretty, they are breathtakingly vivid.

Thus our hero: "Stringy was failing arithmetic. He was failing everything, ask him if he gave a f--."

Sharon: "You poor darling," she said. Why was it you always had to give sympathy to men - her father, Vincent, now Stringy. It wasn't fair."

run to be deadly.

As might be guessed, this is not a book for the faint of heart. Sexual description is graphic, sometimes violent, and profanity abounds.

It's all necessary, too. The back cover does not lie when it says, "Never before has Kent Thompson taken so many risks - moral risks and technical risks - with such brilliant results."

Don't expect them to be popular, though. Too much harsh human truth settles on the reader for him to be grateful for the experience.

It's hard, indeed, to recommend a book so fearfully and wonderfully made. Read it if you dare, because you won't be able to forget it.

With *Playing In The Dark*, Thompson has worked a miracle of style, plotting, and economy. So much happens in so few pages! This one couldn't have been written in three days.

Tragedy doesn't usually attend the vivisection of such miserable, messed up lives. Thompson's greatest feat, ultimately, is not just to make us look, but to make us feel.

Pity we feel and terror, too, to wonder how little we know what we're doing or whom we're hurting. All of us are playing in the dark.

Ah Stringy? Ah humanity!

"Most of these kids' said one of the staff at the Training School, "have a completely unrealistic view of themselves. They have an unattainable dream of themselves, and then they blame everybody but themselves for their failure to attain the dream. I blame TV."

"For example, I said to Stringy, what do you want to be. You're not entirely stupid, I said. What do you want to be? What kind of job do you want?"

"I want to be a rock star," he says.

"I told him that it was the twelfth time today that I'd heard the same crazy wish."

"He said he wanted to be on TV: bang-bang-bang."

"Uh-huh, I said. What can you do?"

"I can do anything, man," he said. 'Anything.'

"Get real, I said. He couldn't do shit. Bluntly. No sense talking fancy to these kids. What kind of trade you want, I said. Small engine repair?"

had! He didn't have to believe that if he didn't want to, but he certainly expected a woman who accompanied him to look good, and to look good she needed clothes. How could she buy clothes and go to university both?

So for his sake she went to her mother and said she had decided university was not worth it, what did it get you anyway? She wasn't going to pretend she found it exciting. She thought she'd get a job for a while.

Her mother was predictably outraged because her mother had paid the tuition.

"I'm not failing," said Sharon. "Would you like to see the marks on my essays? I'm not even trying and I'm making B's. I write these on my way to class. So I can do it - I just don't want to. It's stupid."

"Well, what about the tuition?"

"I'll pay you back."

"O you will, will you?"

"Yes."

Sharon later takes up with Stringy, only to discover she can't get rid of him. Stringy won't let go. The final scenes of this novel unfold with nightmare precision, everything falling perfectly, horribly into place.

What elevates this ferociously depressing story is the manner in which it is told. The narration jumps from character to character, like sunlight glancing off a prism. Though

Elsewhere: "The nurses remarked that you never knew, did you. You thought somebody was just kind of quiet and ordinary - and all of a sudden you find out these secrets."

Playing In The Dark ends in an explosion of secrets. One of those secrets is incest.

Sharon will do anything for Daddy, and does. The tortured relationships in her family make Stringy's look comparatively sane. They turn out in the long

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