

Underground With Mirrors and Mermaids

John Crowley

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FROM THE REALM OF MORPHEUS

By Steven Millhauser.

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\$17.95.

STEVEN MILLHAUSER'S first novel, "Edwin Mullhouse," was a work of great originality that seemed, at the time, magically familiar. In "From the Realm of Morpheus," he seems bent on reversing that equation, producing a strange sport of a book, wholly odd yet purposefully unoriginal.

Carl Hausman, watching a baseball game on a sunny afternoon, follows a lost foul ball into the woods and discovers the opening to an underground world. As the heroes of such stories always do, he immediately plunges in, and so embarks on a series of adventures in the sunless realm of Morpheus, god of sleep.

Morpheus's realm is, in this book, a collection of stories and narrative ideas whose germs or originals are almost entirely derived from other books and stories. Mr. Millhauser is parodying a whole body of literature one would have thought it impossible to re-create: those old-fashioned guided tours of fanciful (as opposed to science-fictional or mythical) other worlds, complete with stories told within the story by the curious inhabitants. We are not near Jorge Luis Borges's mirror worlds or Italo Calvino's post-modern invisible cities; we are closer to Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* or James Branch Cabell's *Poictesme*, somewhere between Alice's underground and Gulliver's islands.

Thus we have the story of a shadow, one among the countless shadows who come to this realm when the bodies who used to cast them die. We overhear a conversation of mirrors, who are remembering the various women who have loved them. We tour a library in which are kept all the endings of books uncompleted in the world above, as well as all the books written by imaginary authors in other books, including Mr. Millhauser's own "Edwin Mullhouse."

Hausman's guide is Morpheus himself, like a painting by Magritte in derby, pipe and dressing gown, but talking incessantly in a pseudo-Falstaffian Elizabethan lingo that eventually infects Carl, who is himself a Morpheus in training. The god is jolly and self-indulgent, but his realm is not in fact ease, indulgence or sloth; the stories are largely about dissatisfaction, insufficiency, thwarted desire and love gone bad.

Morpheus tells two of these love stories about himself. One, despite the pastoral setting and the Rabelaisian tone, is a bitter and inconclusive fable about a tormented marriage; the other is set among mermaids, whom Morpheus loves and loses. Hausman is the object of a sad young giantess's love in another story whose only point is loss.

The best of the stories is the long "Tale of Ignotus," which is like something thought up by E. T. A. Hoffmann. The subject of a painting who has been accidentally invested with a life (there are many, he says, like himself) tells his story — a love story — in a Byronic prose style full of impatient dashes — so romantic. With his ebony curls and

flashing eyes and scornful laugh, he is in fact a stock character whose romantic agony it is to recognize himself as such, the work of a minor artist.

As he is led from tale to tale, Hausman struggles to take on some life of his own. He is only fitfully successful, but after all the narrator of a book of this kind needs little independent existence if the conceits he is made to record are good ones. THE danger, which Mr. Millhauser skirts throughout and does not entirely escape, is of being taken over by one's own skill at pastiche, enjoying for its own sake the re-creation of bypassed modes, and thus creating what is in effect one more book of a kind that few care to read any longer, even in the original versions.

It may be that some such apprehension struck the author, for he ends Carl Hausman's adventures underground in the middle of nowhere. The hero is not returned above ground. Every hint that has been dropped along the way to suggest that a unified allegory or single big story was being built (about the artist's need to resort to his unconscious? the tug of darkness over light?) is left unresolved. The thought is inescapable that the author just got bored, as the reader of a rambling Munchausen fantasy of this sort so often gets bored, and, like that reader, put his book down between one outlandish adventure and the next, and did not care to pick it up again.

John Crowley's fifth novel, "Aegypt," will appear in the spring.

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