



BOOK REVIEW: Steve Martin, the Novelist

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by James Croak

The 1136 *History of Kings of Britain* mixed fact and fantasy in such a delightful way that it fooled historians for centuries, Geoffrey of Monmouth's frontispiece claimed that he translated it from an "ancient book into the British language". British chronicler Holinshed was taken in and included Monmouth's nonsense as truth in his seminal *Holinshed's Chronicles*, which Shakespeare used as source material for the history plays *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. In our own time this weave of history and fiction, a historical novel, or perhaps a novel history, became known as "faction" a conflation of real and imaginary so nimble that it is nay impossible to sort it out.



An Object of Beauty by Steve Martin.
304 pages. Grand Central Publishing.

Steve Martin has written a novel in this vein about the dramatic expansion of the New York art world over the past two decades. The book is brimming with real galleries, dealers, artists and critics so mixed with fictional ones that I foolishly went to Google to look up the fake ones.

There are insider descriptions of the Serra installation at Gagosian Gallery, tours through the Robert Miller stable, discussions of Exit Art and 303 Gallery. Dinner parties with Peter Schjeldahl expounding contemporary theory, treaties on the conceptual art of Robert Gober, a lament on the Cedar Tavern, discussions of Chuck Close, Florine Stettheimer, and the correct count of Joseph Beuys felt suits.

Who was the Tensing Norgay that showed Martin the steep path into our rarefied world? I have an inkling as the guest list seems approved by a certain player, but omertà Larry.

Comedian has been deleted from Martin's resume, there is mention of two Grammys for comedy albums, instead we read "writer, actor, musician, and performer," perhaps performer is how he memorializes his decade cracking up audiences with dance numbers of King Tut and Happy Feet or perhaps denotes the blue grass Banjo album that garnered still another Grammy.

His early goofy persona carried over into the memorable movie *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* written by comic genius Dale Launer wherein Mr. Martin plays a conman who gets conned. After *Scoundrels* Martin played a conman in the *Spanish Prisoner*, but this time "wild and crazy" is awol: when Martin appears as the arctic Jimmy Dell the first thought is "Who the hell is this? The real guy under the blanched Tom Wolfe disco suit tooling with animal balloons?

Martin would co-write the even more gravitas *Traitor* story about an operative so good he cons a gaggle of jihadists into annihilating each other. It is the conman subtext that appears again and again in “Martin’s steady drift toward seriousness,” as John Lanchester wrote about Martin’s novella *Shop Girl*, and prepares him for the subject at hand.

An Object is a maturation drama of one Lacey Yeager and her journey from reflective art historian to scheming Chelsea art dealer manipulating uptown auctions and downtown prices. Her name shares homophony with *Shop Girl* supporting character, Lisa Cramer who used sex “for attracting and discarding men” whereas Lacey sees men as “pesky annoyances, small dust-devils at her feet.” However this time the character clearly has a love and knowledge of painting, if not so much of people.

Lacey lands at Sotheby’s with a newly minted degree in art history, working in the basement, “Hades” as she names it, cataloging odd paintings of dubious value and provenance while lingering on the occasional Schiele or Milton Avery, all the while seeking advancement of some kind. In storytelling there is an initiating event, once the world of the players is described, that upends their world and to which the players respond using their unique character, *An Object*’s initiating event I dare say has occurred to many who will read this.

A single sentence, as Lacey calculates the auction price of a painting, she imagines moving from the lunch-counter of the poor to the dining table of the rich: “When Lacey began these computations her toe crossed ground from which it is difficult to return: she started converting objects of beauty into objects of value.”

Lacey has reservations about money but Martin sends her on a train ride next to John Updike who expounds about the necessity of money around art, a deus ex machina that works with two pages that could spared one wading through Gallic gift-exchange theory. She also takes a trip to the Hermitage to collect an Ivan Aivavzovsky giving Martin space to write about nineteenth century painting, which he does effectively.

Martin is best when wise cracking about the art scene in Chelsea “new galleries sprouted overnight lacking only fungi domes.” Any recognizable dealer, artist or collector, is shown respect, but he is brutal on his characters who he portrays as grifters, the artist Pilot Mouse—I mouse with the Pilot Mouse brand, I got it—smears truffle oil on his stretcher bars in case a collector smells for fresh paint with “an odor best discerned by a pig.”

Art jargon is included here with remarkable insider accuracy but brushed aside as the “smarty pants version of car dealer’s hustle.” At an art world dinner two dealers compete for the attention of a prominent collector, but one waits his chance knowing the thin one “will need to go throw up.” Brutal.

The storm of art world money dissipates in the third act dénouement as the recessions take hold and the “only thing missing in Chelsea were tumbleweeds,” and the book becomes a morality tale for those who pawned their *Object of Beauty*. It’s a bit sad, and a let down, similar to what happened.

It is common to see actors launch a side pursuit, Mickey Rourke became a boxer, Paul Newman a

race car driver, Dennis Hopper painted; but these are novelty acts carried by their primary fame on the screen. There is nothing like that here.

Steve Martin has written a good novel, a work of literature with the dalliance and delay and simile and lingering of word play and detours that distinguishes it from the blocked-out bore of amateur writing, Martin is writing on the level of an Ian McEwan whose *Chesil Beach* comes to mind as an equal living experience of a time and place. Comedian may be missing from Martin's vitae, but now novelist should be added.

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