

Gevarry gets his point across, albeit at times in a somewhat cryptic way. Gavarry indulges in his own personal creative style throughout *Making a Novel* by offering innovative prompts for working with objects and words. His detailed account of his writing techniques serve more as inspiration than formula. Which is good because he is encouraging individual style above all else. He inspired me to carry on with my own projects. I've even started thinking about what stock material I would use for my first novel. Perhaps I will take salt, a freight train, and the cupacabra. Now all I have to figure out is if I want to use a biblical or other mythological story as the backbone.

KIRSTEN KASCHOCK, *SLEIGHT: A NOVEL*

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Reviewed by KRISTEN PARK

Sleight is a body of work born in rupture—a text of scarring. Kirsten Kaschock, in a stroke of prestidigitation, invites the reader to participate in an inter-dimensional-textual-disciplinary exploration of absence and presence in art, family, tragedy and language. We enter the inter as intra: the punctum—“a site of atrocity.”

In an interview on 10.11.11 with John Scalzi, blog proprietor for *Whatever*, Kaschock explores the challenge, the “chimera” in writing *Sleight*: “How do you make the ineffable visceral? *Sleight* needed a body. And I had to be the Frankenstein who would provide it.”

In a series of footnotes, Kaschock reveals to us the inception of sleight. She creates a history for an art that has never existed: discovered in 1628, a series of sacred geometries and poeties were scrolled and taken back to Europe from Santo Domingo. When the blueprints were set to bodies by Antonia Bugliesi in her Theater of Geometry, sleight was born. A precursor is the poet who writes and reads the list-poem during each performance of sleight. The hand is one who draws the sacred geometries. The sleightists perform the geometries. The precursors, hands, and sleightists must never meet, discuss, or engage in order to keep the art form pure. No questions can be asked. Doing doing doing in the space of absence becomes being being to be in the world of sleight. Kaschock shows how purity through distancing is unachievable: sex, murder, and pregnancy blur the line. Kaschock lets her beautiful creation crash and fail. She writes the mess.

The characters in *Sleight*, the bodies in the body of work, function like architecture—an existence of tension, pressure, and torque. The idea of character foil in a traditional novel becomes character mirror-paint-tubing in *Sleight*: it's “as if they shared a single body or phantom

abuser.” These characters reveal themselves through one another in interviews, diary entries, narrative, and performance of the sleights. The sleight—the art form—is made apparent in footnotes, Lark’s Book, and performance notes. The novel, thus, bridges the sleight and the sleightists, but it is this very relationship that subverts and redefines what a novel can, could, should be in 21st century fiction. When the experiment within the experiment starts to take on its own form—the Frankenstein—the beautiful monsters are created.

Beautiful Monster Enmeshment #1: Clef and Lark. The two sisters are sent to the school of sleight, which functions both as a boarding school and as a training center for future sleightists: think gymnasts pruned for Olympics or ballerinas housed in Joffrey. Lark, “one that flew or flew by,” is the eldest and comes of age in the school as evidenced in her diaries. She exemplifies the trauma of teenage girlhood: eating disorders, self-mutilation, and sexual confusion. Lark is obsessed with failure as feeling, and Clef is obsessed with success as living. Lark leaves sleight. Clef stays. Clef tells a reporter: “Most people are satisfied with half, not knowing what it is to hold a thousand hungers suspended and you not feeling the hunger.” Does Lark share this sentiment; will she return?

And the book begins here.

#2: Byrnnne and Marvel. The two brothers, doted on by mother and beat on by father, intersect with Lark and Clef’s relationship/struggle. A point of contact is made. A phrase in sleight is being built. Byrnnne becomes the precursor/poet for sleight and falls in unrequited love with an unavailable Lark. Lark becomes a hand (drawer of sleights) and she draws them like no other, from her Needs—Byrnnne sees this, wants this, does not know how to handle this. Byrnnne carries his own Need, a rock, in his hand at all times—since his father’s death, which he feels unduly responsible for. Byrnnne’s real rock is his obligation to protecting others from his brother Marvel, an artist and madman designing costumes for sleight. The art form loses its purity in the rocks and hands and Needs of the human beings who carry it.

#3: West and T. West is the catalyst. West is the agent that pushes the form, breaks the rules, and creates a “site of atrocity.” T is the soother,

the savior, the fresh soft lips and open body off of which the characters reverberate—the absorbability of sadness and sex. These two forces work to shape the sleight and the sleightists on and off the stage. How is needing and wanting the same push? How is a vector different than a sign?

When West decides to make his mark as a sleight director, he gets all of these characters (and 12 others) into the same space to start building with bodies, glass, and light. The physicality of the process keeps the reader present—a part of the action, one of the bodies invested in creation. When a murder, 24 children in the community, is solved during the sleightists’ rehearsal one day, West decides to push sleight and sleightists to a new place of darkness and suffering: building architectures of samsara. Lark’s Needs—her Needs as drawings—her hands, become the only way for him to express this suffering. He coerces her back into a life of sleight with the conspiratorial help of Clef, Byrnnne, and Marvel.

As the plot gives way to story, Kaschok becomes the “hand” she writes of, and so writes us through a sleight. *Sleight* is a sleight, and we become sleightists. Will we be Lark or Clef or T or Byrnnne or Marvel or West? Whose intentions are for goodness, for suffering, for *ars gratis artis*, for love, for hate, for unity, for division?

In the automation of our everyday lives, how does it feel to be dehabituated? To stand on our heads or on the shoulders of another—to fall? How does Kaschok’s use of de-re-orienting as both a theme and a literary technique remind us of our own stuck places, our own desire to create, our own fear of falling-failing-feeling?

How is availability and accessibility in art addressed? What of the contemporary gallery, experimental prose/poetry, and dance performance: who is included, excluded, invited—and who shows up?

Words function as signs, sentences override narratives, binaries are deconstructed, and in this post-modern linguistic dexterity, the narrative is an arché, constructed by the repurposing of sources: diaries, interviews, lists, poems, billboards, newsreels, footnotes, and story. The aberration in the prism. The apparition in the studio. The footnote chasing body.

Is sleight pure/impure, exclusive/inclusive, absent/present? Are Lark, Clef, Byrnnne, West, Marvel, and T good/bad, brilliant/savant, helpful/harmful, loving/hating? As the sleights evolve in the studio

during practice, do the sleightists evolve on the stage, in their lives, during performance? What is the relationship between change, flux, and revolution in art? Is it the same as in life? In *Sleight*, is art imitating life?

The architectures that make up a sleight and the sleights that make up sleightists create the thresholds for exploring family, body, and tragedy: relational space. Amidst the mathematics, dance patterns, and linguistic experiments, a thread of emotional truth holds the story and the characters together. The relationship between the two sisters, Clef and Lark, is described as “A family of trapezes. Horizontal bars with connective tissue everywhere indicating attempted and aborted support.” A swing keeps time between the binary nature of the characters: Byrne and Marvel, Clef and Lark, West and Nene. We ride the emotional tone of this periodic, hoping the net of family will still be there. A wick—disappearance during sleight—could happen at any time.

Kaschock amplifies the performativity present in sleight performance by having her characters challenge the very logic and creation she has constructed on the page. We become a part of the deconstruction—the process—the mess—in the commodification not just of body but body in trauma: tragedy. A haunting newsreel coupled by ghostly lists of dead children’s names is noticed by Clef: “[she] saw in West’s scenarios over and over again was an exploration of the idea victim.” The sleightists, after years of “ad absentia” are asked to engage. West is making the sleightists the victims. Kaschock is making the reader into the victim. What resistance do we supply that the sleightists do not?

In a dramatic turn, the sleightists internalize West’s challenge; however, the sisters find a path for repositing the challenge—recentering the decentered. As the art form falls apart, the book comes together: the reader can wick. Kaschock’s novel of transformation, resistance, performativity, abuse, and reclamation pushes the reader into and out of a discipline. We are present in our absence.

In a culture that sensationalizes crime in the media—a tool of control, a function of fear—how do we remember the victim? How is personhood lost in victimization? When does a person become a victim become a cause become a piece of art?

Where is truth; where is beauty; where is humanity when twenty-four missing children are found in bone fragments made into animal puppetry? Why does Kaschock go here in the space of art? Why does art go here in

the space of humanity? Can we be absent in the automation of newsreels; more importantly, can we be present? The broken has meaning—a fragment’s ability to be a whole. Projection and performance; not so very different.

In the aforementioned blog post, Kaschock confirms: “This is its Big Idea: if looking for meaning is a profoundly human experience, then creating meaning out of shards of a broken world must also be—only even more so.”

The threshold is crossed in this transliteration: “You are now leaving the site of an atrocity—tell me, where will you go?” What will you read?