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Wittgenstein's Mistress



Synopsis

Wittgenstein's Mistress is a novel unlike anything David Markson or anyone else has ever written before. It is the story of a woman who is convinced and, astonishingly, will ultimately convince the reader as well that she is the only person left on earth. Presumably she is mad. And yet so appealing is her character, and so witty and seductive her narrative voice, that we will follow her hypnotically as she unloads the intellectual baggage of a lifetime in a series of irreverent meditations on everything and everybody from Brahms to sex to Heidegger to Helen of Troy. And as she contemplates aspects of the troubled past which have brought her to her present state—obviously a metaphor for ultimate loneliness—so too will her drama become one of the few certifiably original fictions of our time. "The novel I liked best this year," said the Washington Times upon the book's publication; "one dizzying, delightful, funny passage after another . . . Wittgenstein's Mistress gives proof positive that the experimental novel can produce high, pure works of imagination."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Wittgenstein's Mistress" is a complex novel of simple sentences in short paragraphs describing thoughts that are all over the maps of history, the arts and the world itself. Presumably, the novel's structure is inspired by Wittgenstein's "Tractatus," a series of short propositions, sub-propositions, sub-sub etc. presented in a logical sequence culminating in the final proposition, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." Similarly, the narrator of "Wittgenstein's Mistress," a one-time artist who has come to believe she is completely alone in the world, presents a series of short descriptions of whatever pops into her head as she's typing. Places, people, works of art,

episodes of history give rise to anecdotes, apocrypha and tid-bits about other places, people, etc -often inaccurate but always illuminating both our world and hers. The narrator forms this jumble of information into innumerable weirdly wonderful, laugh-out-loud syntheses. For example, a story that Rembrandt's students painted on his studio's floor images of gold coins, which Rembrandt would stoop to pick up no matter how often the trick was repeated, leads to the recollection that Rembrandt eventually had to declare financial bankruptcy. The narrator then combines these two anecdotes with the fact that Rembrandt lived in Amsterdam as a contemporary of the philosopher Spinoza to produce an imagined conversation between the two famous men in a corner shop. " `Oh, hi, Rembrandt. How's the bankruptcy?' `Fine, Spinoza. How's the excommunication?' "Sprinkled among these fractured observations are obscure hints as to how and why the narrator has reached the point of what can only be madness.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, an Austrian born philosopher and Cambridge professor (1889-1951): "Was convinced that language creates a picture of the real world and that most philosophical problems are merely the result of philosophers' misuse of language; experience only seems complicated because of our confused descriptions of it, which represent knots in our understanding. Untangle the knots and, according to the theory, philosophical questions will simply dissolve. [p. 326. An Incomplete Education. (1987) Judy Jones & William Wilson.] It seems to me David Markson's novel Wittgenstein's Mistress (1988) is an attempt to untangle Wittgenstein's philosophy as laid down in his book (Wittgenstein's) Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, via the workings of the mind of a mid-aged woman, Kate, left alone in the world " all alone. Her mind's workings, or "inconsequential perplexities" (= anxiety); is the subject matter of the story. There is not really a plot in the conventional sense. Kate puzzles over (among many other things) a book she found in a carton of books, in the basement of a house she's taken to living in, on the beach of the northeast coast of Italy, sometime in modern times because there are cars and trucks for the taking and driving and playing of music in tape decks (electricity and all power energy is defunct.) There are tennis balls, rackets, and a court. Perhaps a domestic cat has survived with her. She remembers, if not always accurately, the history of writing, philosophy, art, and music. The book she puzzles over is titled Baseball When the Grass Was Green (a real book) which throws her for a loop, or ties her mind in knots.

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