

crooked letter 29

Hello Cruel World, a review of a reviewer, an indirect review

Bornstein, Kate. *Hello Cruel World: 101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks, and Other Outlaws*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006.

Today could be the last day of your life. Whether or not you're thinking of killing yourself, you could die at any moment.

Still here?

Excellent! That's called staying alive.

(Bornstein, 21)

Most reviewers of a book like Kate Bornstein's- a book about feeling suicidal and what to do instead of killing yourself- would not admit to being suicidal at the time they read the book. The reviews of Bornstein's book that I have read have not mentioned the reviewer's particular experience with this desire to be beyond all desire, beyond all despair.

Reviewers, depending on the overarching style, often write about their personal reaction to a book. But even in a somewhat personal review, the reviewer places the book in a larger context, critically examines it, assigns it positive or negative values. These are the tasks of the reviewer, and this provides useful information for potential readers for said book.

The discussion of the text is tinted by the color of the reviewers interpretive lens- conservative, Christian, activist, feminist, gonzo journalist. Does the reviewer find suicide beyond the pale, a selfish act, incomprehensible? Does the reviewer know it? Has the reviewer been trapped without hope of oasis in lonely sand storms of suicidal ideation? Has the reviewer every tried- half assed or whole heartedly- to wipe herself out of any future narratives except the how could she do such a thing, what could I have done to save her recriminations of survivors?

Consider my review a suicidal-bipolar two-gonzo-journalist reading of *Hello Cruel World*. I insert myself into the text; insert the text into my life, as Hunter S. Thompson inserted himself into *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*. I insert the *Kentucky Derby* into *Hello Cruel World*. Not as far a stretch as you might imagine, considering that both came/come at our culture from the outside, the edges. Both shock and stir. One killed him self. The other has thought time and again about killing the self, whether male, female or neither/both.

Hunter went out with a bang two years ago. Gun to head, bang, bang, he's dead. Kate Bornstein has stayed in with a bang. Bang, bang, she is alive.

Like the rascally imperfect Hunter, like the fantabulous and imperfect Kate Bornstein, I will take whatever trip I need to get at, over and through it. I review the reviewer to indirectly and briefly review *Hello Cruel World*.

I was in the midst of a bad episode of mixed states, an episode that lasted the better (the worst?) part of a month. I burst into tears- wracking, snotty sobs- six, seven, eight, nine, ten times a day. This was, no doubt about it, due to a chemical imbalance.

One day, I was driving home from Sonny's BBQ, where I go to people watch and feel both inside and outside of working class, Southern culture.

I watch some Fox News; notice how most everyone, myself included, is too fat. I am surrounded by people, people I know- literally and figuratively. One of the waitresses there went to high school with my mother, knew how awful Momma and her sisters had it. I run into people I've know or have known me since I was a child.

They do not understand much of what I have become. These are not the people I went to college with; these are not the people I have done activist work with; these are not the people who appreciate my avant guard performance art about sex and sexuality. Erotic photos of men dressed as women but still obviously men probably would not sit well with them, their pastors or their Mommas.

I often sit and read some lefty or intellectual book as I eat one of the not healthy but tasty lunch specials. I find a perverse pleasure in feeling both at home and alien at the same time, but I feel much more at home that I do in the land of middle class, standard American accents.

I'd rather be at Sonny's where the faces are white and black and working class, where most folks are Southerners, than round the corner at the oh so hip pizza joint that has carved out a niche on the East (black, white working class, Southern) side of town for the non-Southern whiteys to come spend their money and feel like they are helping the East side. The faces there are, with few exceptions, white. They are the faces of college professors and professionals, middle/upper middle class. Even the punky college types who mix in with the "squares" come primarily from middle class homes.

That day, I believe, though I am not positive, that I read *Hello Cruel World*, my book open over one of the many cartoony drawings of the Sonny of Sonny's that are trapped underneath a half an inch of easy to wipe down varnish.

As I drove home, a John Mellencamp song came on the radio. I'm not positive which one it was.

Memory is fuzzy; a nasty episode of mixed states leaves me hung over, forgetful, like after some serious drug and alcohol bender but without any memories of madcap fun and with regrets for what was not done instead of what was. Unlike Hunter, I always think of him as Hunter, precocious young male pseudo poet-intellectuals will not model their lives on me, even though Hunter's chaotic, all over the road at 90 miles an hour antics just as likely were fueled by being insane in the membrane.

The lyrics were about a woman, and there was something a bit mournful about them. It may have been these lines from Pink Houses:

And there's a woman in the kitchen cleanin' up the evening slop
And he looks at her and says: hey darling, I can remember when you could
stop a clock

I burst into tears. Not a glistening of moisture. Not a small watering. No. Big, big sobs from deep down. Not the safest thing to do while driving, but much, much safer than most the things Thompson or his fictional stand in did in that car in the desert.

Never in my life before have I had such a response to a Mellencamp song. I doubt I ever will again. This just goes to show how badly my mental states were out of balance- most definitely biochemical wacky hi-jinks.

During this up and down, round and round the merry-go-round, biochemical free fall, I often thought about turning the car into the lane of oncoming traffic. I wondered, but did not investigate, if there enough pills in the bottle of my anti-anxiety medication to help me exit stage right.

During all this, I read Kate Bornstein's *Hello Cruel World*. I read. I howled with laughter. I howled with sorrow. I, overcome by an inner world of hurt, put it down for a day or two, picked it up later to take myself a little further through.

I could tell you about Kate Bornstein's place in the radical-kinky-polyamorous-transgender-feminist community. It is an important part of why the book works for outsiders of all sorts. It is an important part of why it works for me. I could tell you about how the book masterfully/mistressfully aims to reach queer youth; young people at a much higher risk of suicide than the general teenage population, which already has an astonishingly high suicide rate. But other reviewers have covered much of that territory, and that is not what this trip through the text, this review of the reviewer, is about.

In *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*, Hunter S. Thompson and the illustrator, Ralph Steadman, search for the face to represent The Kentucky Derby. Hunter writes they were searching for

that special kind of face that I felt we would need for a lead drawing. It was a face I'd seen a thousand times at every Derby I'd ever been to. I saw it, in my head, as the mask of the whiskey gentry--a pretentious mix of booze, failed dreams and a terminal identity crisis; the inevitable result of too much inbreeding in a closed and ignorant culture.

They search for the face of my in few ways honorable paternal grandfather's generation; a generation not limited by time and space. The face of drunk rednecks racists, drunk genteel white folk, genteel until you really listened to them. I know these people; I descend from them. They are the sorts that inforce(d) harmful social norms out of ignorance, but often enough out of perverse pleasure. They were/are the sort who lynched a black man for looking at a white woman; drag a transgendered person off to slowly beat to death, sometimes rape.

Hunter and Steadman search in the press box, in the clubhouse and in the field, in bars and hotels, in drunken stupors full of increasing frenzy. In his reading of the Kentucky Derby, Hunter finds the face in his hotel room.

My eyes had finally opened enough for me to focus on the mirror across the room and I was stunned at the shock of recognition. For a confused instant I thought that Ralph had brought somebody with him--a model for that one special face we'd been looking for. There he was, by God--a puffy, drink-ravaged, disease-ridden caricature...like an awful cartoon version of an old snapshot in some once-proud mother's family photo album. It was the face we'd been looking for--and it was, of course, my own. Horrible, horrible...

In my reading of *Hello Cruel World*, I found my face, came face to face, did an about face. Hunter see a mix of booze and failed dreams. I see the suicidal outsider who has more times than I can count thought that I maybe should kick the bucket as hard as I can. But Hunter's reading of the Kentucky Derby, of his own person, focuses solely on the nasty, gruesome, violent, vomituous underbelly. There is no higher ground. It is all morass and misery and a barely contained disgust for his life and the lives around him.

Even the decadent and depraved Kentucky Derby, even the suicidal have moments of beauty. Horror is not the only narrative through line even when things really are nasty.

Hello Cruel World, without denying the awfulness of the world, the excruciating pain that drives me, people like me, to consider suicide, holds up a different mirror than the one in Hunter's hotel room. I see myself more in Bornstein's narrative than Hunter's.

Kate Bornstein reveals a fresh face, one of hope, of possibility, of life lived fully despite fuckers like the racist, narrow-minded sons of bitches that attended Hunter's Kentucky Derby.