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From The Times

November 14, 2008

Eunoia: The good Bök

Giles Whittell meets Christian Bök, the Canadian writer behind Eunoia, the univocal bestseller



DURING THE SEVEN YEARS it took Christian Bök to write Eunoia he would often read to audiences from his work in progress. He preferred not to tell them what was coming so that he could see the look on their faces when they realised what was happening.

“It would suddenly start dawning on people that I was performing this very athletic and acrobatic feat,” he says. “You could see the light bulbs going on.”

Listeners' first instinct would be to “wait for the moment of failure, to see where I had screwed up. But their awestruck reaction would be all the more heightened by the fact that I didn't cheat.”

Similar reactions may account for a little piece of publishing history that occurred after a passage from Eunoia was read recently on the Today programme on BBC Radio 4. The book's entire British print run sold out within hours.

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Bök is a modest man (and, by now, a famously tidy one: he wears neat suits and talks in elegantly formed sentences, like an overeducated weatherman). But he has learnt to be immodest about his work for the simple reason that it would not otherwise be possible to describe people's reaction to it.

To say Eunoia is not like anything else you will ever read is not

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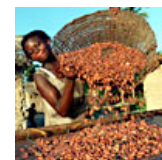
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nype. It's a statement of fact. Bök calls it a "univocal lipogram", but this does not convey its elemental madness. Each chapter uses only one vowel. Not one vowel once, but the same vowel over and over again, in real words that are almost never repeated, formed into real sentences with real meaning.

Force language through this horrifying meat grinder, season with ribald Canadian wit (not an oxymoron, as it turns out), and you get sentences such as this: "Slick pimps, bribing civic kingpins, distill gin in stills, spiking drinks with illicit pills which might bring bliss." Or this: "Porno shows folks lots of sordor - zoom-shots of Bjorn Borg's bottom or Snoop Dogg's crotch."

This is some of the milder rude stuff. It gives a flavour of the real smut that is a hilarious feature of each chapter, and which Bök, who takes his art seriously, says he included "to provide as many avenues of entry to the book as possible".

When Eunoia was first published in Canada, most mainstream critics wrote it off as a gimmick. Which it is, as Bök almost admits. "Everyone who writes a poem according to a formal constraint is accepting a contrivance," as he points out. But his contrivance was a hit. A bestseller from Toronto to Vancouver, it made its detractors look obtuse and turned its author into just the paradox he wanted to be - an infiltrator of the Canadian academic establishment as a professor at the University of Calgary, and a cult figure in the literary avant garde that he had revered since his own days as a student. It was sweet vindication of his ideas, but above all of his toil.

Despite the critical success of his first book, a slim volume of experimental poetry called Crystallography, no one gave Bök an advance for his second.

"So I was working 40 hours a week at the special orders desk of a big Toronto bookstore. Then after that job was done I'd spend 20 or more hours a week tutoring advanced high school students in science and mathematics. Then I'd go home and work on my PhD dissertation [on the French playwright Alfred Jarry, a major influence on Monty Python] to about 11 o'clock or midnight, then I'd open the files on Eunoia and work until 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning. And I did that every day, and I did it for seven years, and I would crash at the weekends trying to recuperate. So the book was written under a lot of duress. It was a pretty black time, financially and emotionally."

And the work itself? Get this: He read the 1.5 million-word, three-volume Webster's College Dictionary from beginning to end five times over, once for each vowel, each time listing by hand every univocal word that used the vowel of the moment. That took six months. It turned out to be the easy part. Those five long lists he then sorted by parts of speech, and sorted again into topical categories. And then he tried to write with them.

Occasionally, alone with his obsession in the dead of night, he would push back from his desk and howl with delight at a word sequence that seemed to have tumbled fully formed on to his screen. "Those were the great moments," he says, but they were rare. "For six and a half years it was like doing the Devil's crossword."

The question arises: why on earth did he bother? He calls himself an engineer at heart who decided to follow his bliss and be a poet "to have an excuse to be the most imaginative person in the room". Which is nice. But it doesn't come close to explaining his choice of self-torture.

Literary context helps, up to a point. Bök had admired Georges Perec's seminal e-less whodunnit of 1969, La Disparition, but had been disappointed by the sequel, Les Revenentes, in which he felt that Perec had cheated by inventing words. People doubted it was possible to write anything worth reading using only one vowel, and Bök, who calls himself obsessive compulsive, wanted to prove them wrong. He also wanted a challenge that would bring experimental writing level with the



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visual arts in terms of pushing its own limits.

So we can think of Eunoia as a diamond-encrusted skull made of words. But can we think of Damien Hirst working on anything for seven years?

Bök's stamina is monumental, and he sometimes seems prouder of it than of his conventional talents as a writer. In an interview with *The Ottawa Citizen* six years ago he confessed that he had dreamt of following the likes of Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje into the Canadian pantheon, but "realised quite early on that I could only aspire to a competent mediocrity" as a novelist.

Not about to let that hold him back, he embraced extreme constraint. Like any good sadomasochist's harness, it hasn't let him down - though he still has no publisher for his next project, a poem that he plans to encrypt as a gene sequence and implant into a very sturdy bacterium whose ancestors, he hopes, will still be alive when the Sun explodes.

Extract

A

Hassan balks at all sacral tasks - a mass at Sabbath, a fast at Ramadan: "what Kabbalah and Brahmana can match blackjack and baccarat?" Hassan brags that a crackjack champ at cards lacks what knack Hassan has at craps. A cardsharp, smart at canasta, has a scam: mark a pack, palm a jack. (A cardmatch can act as a starchart that maps fata arcana.) A shah hazards all cash, stands pat and calls. A fatal pall wracks a casbah, as a charlatan fans a grand slam hand ("damn, darn, drat" rants a braggart). A rascal salaams and thanks Allah that a bank can award a man a stash that dwarfs what alms a raj can amass.

Hassan drafts a Magna Carta and asks that a taxman pass a Tax Act - a cash grab that can tax all farmland and grant a dastard at cards what hard cash Hassan lacks.

E

The empress ... sheds her velvet dress; then she lets repellent men pet her tender flesh. Her lewdness renders even these lechers speechless. She resembles the lewdest jezebel.

Whenever Helen seeks these perverse excesses, her regretted deeds depress her; hence, Helen beseeches Ceres (the blessed Demeter): "let sweet Lethe bless me, lest these recent events be remembered" - then the empress feeds herself fermented hempseed, her preferred nepenthe. Whenever she chews these hell-bred seeds, the hempweed skews her senses. The hemp, when chewed, lessens her tenseness (hence, she feels serene); nevertheless, the weed, when needed, renders her dependent. She enters the deepest sleep - the nether sphere, where sleepers delve the secret depths.

I

Writing is inhibiting. Sighing, I sit, scribbling in ink this pidgin script. I sing with nihilistic witticism, disciplining signs with trifling gimmicks - impish hijinks which highlight stick sigils. Isn't it glib? Isn't it chic? I fit childish insights within rigid limits, writing shtick which might instill priggish misgivings in critics blind with hindsight. I dismiss nitpicking criticism which flirts with philistinism. I bitch; I kibitz - griping whilst criticizing dimwits, sniping whilst indicting nitwits, dismissing simplistic thinking, in which philippic wit is still illicit.

Pilgrims, digging in shifts, dig till midnight in mining pits, chipping flint with picks, drilling schist with drills, striking it rich mining zinc. Irish firms, hiring micks whilst firing Brits, bring in smiths with mining skills: kilnwrights grilling brick in brickkilns, millwrights grinding grist in gristmills.

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