

Accelerated Paces

Think of a favourite childhood memory. It's probably a bit fuzzy – a series of fleeting images conjured up with the help of stories told by your parents. For them, the memory gets a bit more elaborate and exaggerated with every retelling. For you, it grows ever distant.

Do you ever stop and wonder if what you're recalling is actually a memory, and not some dream you've fooled yourself into believing all these years? Or maybe some of it is real – the rest improvised in an effort to construct the perfect fantasy.

In *Accelerated Paces*, Jim Oaten plays with the fluidity of fact and fiction through his narration. The novel presents a series of vignettes from the protagonist's life; road trips in the backseat of his parents' car; wandering the congested streets of Mombasa; sitting in a hospital room watching his mother wither from Alzheimer's. Sometimes the accounts are fantastical, sometimes factual. Sometimes it's both, happening almost simultaneously with only the odd break in text to help the reader along.

Whatever the case, it creates a compelling and utterly engrossing story because it allows the reader to have an omniscient perspective: you're exposed to the real memories, the artistic inventions, and also the internal dialogue spurring within. In other words, boredom is not a concern with this one.

What really sold me on this novel is the perpetual exchange of humour and seriousness between the stories. One will serve up a one-liner that will have you doubling over, while the solemnity of that on the next page hits you like a wet rag.

Here's a wet rag – the narrator visiting his mother at the hospital:

About twenty minutes is all I can take. When I visit. Twenty minutes of feeding her grapes, seeing her stare, and ducking the slaps and scratches that slash out for no reason. And of watching the Alzheimer's, the disease that's ravaged my mother for the last six years, and learning once again that, in the end, what it finally takes away is you. After a while, all that's left is a familiar skin encasing something alien. A crumbling husk around a creeping unknown, and any truly human contact becomes as impossible as seeing Neil Armstrong walking on the moon with your naked eye.

I think I read that page six times. Now follow it up with some sugar. Here's what the narrator says when asked if he thinks Hello Kitty is cute:

Well, no, not really. Or at least not in my own grumpy-old-man aesthetic, more generally known as “good taste.” To be frank, the sight of a bow-ribboned, button-eyed, mouth-less, anthropomorphic kitten dressed in pink inspires me, and perhaps the SPCA, to shivers rather than smiles. Hello Kitty’s cuteness quotient alone is likely to induce a diabetic coma in anyone of legal driving age. Yet what’s equally clear, and more to the point, is that what I think doesn’t really matter. With over twenty-five years of success, and a billion dollars in worldwide sales last year, Hello Kitty doesn’t need to catch me in its claws. After all, it’s already got your kids.

And that’s why I’m sold. Two vastly different scenarios, each casting words with surgical precision. They cut where it hurts, be it in your belly or heart. Grab this book to embark upon one of the most surreal adventures a memoir can offer. Truly a captivating piece of work.

—Amy Greenwood