

**THE WORLD'S SMALLEST BIBLE. Dennis Must. Red Hen Press, 2014.**

In this debut novel, set in Pennsylvania's Rust Belt, one encounters, as in much of Must's short fiction, a pervasive and persistent darkness, manifested by the forces of inertia and decay—and a strong strain of human depravity and degeneracy. As a child, Ethan Mueller, the novel's protagonist, struggles to control his own demons in a disordered world, but as Must shows, his prospects are slim, at best, given the stultifying confines of Hebron, Pennsylvania. Must's novel is a tour de force in capturing this setting and its pernicious effects on Ethan and other inhabitants of this grim mill town.

Ethan lives on the edge of a creek running to a quarry, where trash fires burn perpetually, a hellish, Dantean conflagration. Yet Ethan can see, in his mind's eye, beyond this toxic environment to the region's invigorating rivers that run in opposite directions: west, to the Ohio River, where Jim and Huck had intended to escape to free territory, and east, to the sea. In Must's skillful hands, these water-routes take on multiple, dual meanings—suggesting release and safety as well as danger, life as well as death. The cracks on his bedroom ceiling—leading from his parents' room to his own—become, in Ethan's active imagination, these rivers and others. These ceiling cracks, then, transcend ordinary house disrepair; by virtue of his naming them, Adam-like, Ethan exacts order over chaos in a room haunted by ghosts and things sinister—forces which function on one level as childish creative imaginings, but on another as the darker side of human existence, the metaphysical nature of moral evil.

With graphic imagery, Must portrays the eerie, sinister entities that disturb Ethan's daily existence. His sense of unease is due partly to the death of his best friend, Jimmy Tinsley, who recently died of polio, but whose death in Ethan's own mind must surely have resulted from the rancid mayo he'd flung at his face

during an escapade of rat shooting at the quarry trash dump. Ghostly Tinsley now and then raps on Ethan's window, pricking the guilt alive. Into Ethan's bedroom, Ethan's mother consigns his younger brother, Jeremiah, to Ethan's mentoring. Jeremiah soon proves to be even more imaginative than Ethan, embroidering on Ethan's stories to the degree that fantasy and reality become utterly blurred. Among the ghosts that populate the room is Josef Mengele, Dr. Death, who at Auschwitz decides who will live or die. It's in the thick of World War Two, and Must powerfully evokes the devastating bleakness of this period, the unnerving horror of the Nazi threat, and Ethan's sense of loss at the death of a generation of young men, not much older than he.

If Ethan is troubled by various ghostly forms of malevolence, he becomes even more troubled by the precarious condition of his mother, driven to the brink of madness by his philandering father. An emblem of Christian piety, Rose Mueller expresses her hurt and anger through a bizarre double identity, one Lee Ann Daugherty, who lasciviously dances naked in nightly theatrical hall performances, reviling her husband, who is ensconced in bed behind the closed bedroom door. Worse is when she threatens to jump off the town's Cement Dam “into the waterless rubble below” and when she comes close to killing herself on the gas grill in the cellar. Ethan feels compelled to intervene, to save her. Only when his father checks his lustful pursuit of women does his mother begin to recover her sanity.

One cannot help but see Must's novel as part of the rich vein of literary naturalism, represented by such masters as Crane, Dreiser, and Zola. As Crane declared, even if it is not everything, causally speaking, the environment is indeed a powerful thing. Hebron, with its squalor and its mind-numbing career opportunities, is like a “sentence,” thinks Ethan. It's a lid clamped over the citizenry, confining choices, destroying creativity. Add to this is the town's seamy side, its underbelly: the gas station where

Jeremiah works with depraved men with their sexual crudities; their aunt, longtime whore and stripper, performing before a gawking, libidinous crowd; and the carnival that comes to town with its odd mix of learned lecturers and crude sexuality. With Must's incisive black humor, it is here where Ethan obtains a copy of the *World's Smallest Bible*, a delight to his religious mother, a disappointment to his father, and containing the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept." Indeed this verse seems a fitting coda for the visionless, rank, and debauched world of Hebron.

No one escapes this Pennsylvania mill town, though some dream of it. Ethan's dashing, debonair father perhaps dreams of earthly bliss through continual womanizing. Stanley Cuzack, an illiterate foundry welder, dreams of creating a perpetual motion machine. If successful, he will gain immortality with a write-up in the encyclopedia. Ethan can see beyond Stanley's drunken follies with his cronies from the local tavern, for Stanley's marvelous dream gives this ordinary, crude man a strong measure of personal dignity. Yet Stanley is an over-reacher, and he dies in his attempt to pull it off. The lid closes on him and, as a result, on his fervent believer and supporter, Ethan, as well. Ethan decides nihilistically that "Stanley Cusack was a drunk who comically longed to be written up in an Atlantic & Pacific Enclyopedio."

The lid closes on Jeremiah, with his bizarre dream of flying a Piper Cub over Hebron, strafing the town's key buildings and businesses and dive bombing the statue of Ulysses S. Grant, causing a horrific conflagration. If Jeremiah doesn't manage to do this, he comes close in an alternative fiery scenario that just about costs him his life—but he's dead anyway, and knows it. It is clear that the lid is fastened down on both Jeremiah and Ethan when, as adults, they reflect back on their boyhood as more satisfactory than their present middle-aged lives, for in youth there was, at least, the possibility of myth-making and struggle. Now, for both Ethan and Jeremiah, there is a deadening sense of inertia.

If there is a glimmer of hope in Must's novel, it is in the very act of over-reaching, however bizarre the attempt. But it is also in our capacity to understand our own existence, and this takes the ability to reflect and critically examine. We have in Ethan a marvelous center of consciousness who reflectively analyzes his own life and that of others, of a whole town's hellish decadence. Others in this novel do not have such capacity for critical examination. Ethan, for all his bleakness, understands the troubling nature of human existence—and that's sufficient. We do not expect a happy ending to this novel, nor should we. This is hardcore literary naturalism at its rawest and best.

Jack Smith