

Daydream Society by Evan Retzer

written by Tantra Bensko | April 17, 2014



Evan Retzer's *Daydream Society*, due out from [Civil Coping Mechanisms](#) in June, shares so much with Philip K. Dick's *Valis*, it's uncanny. Both books are about friends who take a lot of drugs which induce memory loss, ponder elaborate concepts about the nature of reality, suspecting time has become non-linear. They both relate to wanting to bring a girl back from the dead, and have a writer for a narrator who is sarcastic about the supposed mental illness of a major character. Each includes record store owners with unusual relationships to time. Horselover Fat in *Valis* resembles Marcel in feeling something or someone is beaming thoughts into their heads about time dislocation. Both books ignore conventional storytelling, favoring the characters' metaphysical discussions, with the characters' understanding about those ideas of reality being what could be considered the MacGuffin that drives the books.

However, nothing really drives the books in the expected way of a single protagonist focused intently on a project which is thwarted by an antagonist creating rising tension.. This comes partly from the lifestyle of the characters. In *Daydream*, as in *Valis*, they get bored, score some drugs, do them, philosophize, nod out, and react to the things that happen to them, mostly being passive characters rather than active. The structure is episodic until the last third of *Daydream*, there seems to be no plot. There is no inciting action for a three part structure. There is little tension established in the character dynamic, no antagonist to have progressively more dramatic encounters with.

This relaxed progression might not appeal to the majority of even innovative literary fiction readers. Normally, everything in a narrative moves the plot forward and if it does not do this, it is cut out in revision. Some degree of variance from this tradition is allowed in quirky books that aren't expected to have mass appeal, but a large degree risks making readers wonder where it's going, where the action is, why the details matter. *Daydream Society* is the rare book that made it through the gateway cracks which eschews the rules considered vital for keeping the attention of readers. But could these characters have been written about in a book that does require they be active, obsessively focused on obtaining a desired goal at all costs? The fact that they aren't defines them. Their small action of doing massive amounts of dangerous drugs daily has serious consequences, and the usual memory loss and psychosis that results from the chemicals, creates the expectation that their experiences are simply normal. But are they?

The episodic description of their daily life, which could be considered the first act set-up, takes up the first two-thirds of the book. I feel the book would have been stronger in keeping that to the usual first quarter length, paring down the extraneous. Something resembling a traditional conflict arc eventually creeps in as their conversations about the nature of time become more urgent due to the accumulation of strange events. This slowly solidifies

into their burning goal, qualifying as a second act by the last quarter of *Daydream Society*, fascinatingly combining the consequences of their drug use and the question about whether their strangely remembered experiences are simply side effects. The characters are shown to relate to each other strongly in intriguing ways by the end, bringing together the major events throughout the book into coherent meaning and a transformation of the main character. I'd suggest readers continue through the pace and digressions to get to it. That requires slowing down to inhabit the characters' non-goal-driven world. People who don't like poetic language as found in the book within the book (similar to the book and the movie within *Valis*), who aren't interested in youthful metaphysical ideas, or don't relate to addicts, might not find that very easy. On the other hand, some stories of young addicts have found massive audiences.

However, for the literary sensibility, the prose offers a lot of beauty. Straightforward passages that carry the message forward directly provide the right foil for the delicious language of other passages, such as: "Streetlights mistake us for ghosts." I greatly enjoyed the fresh, unexpected combinations of words throughout the novel as Retzer ambitiously reaches to capture new ways of thinking and feeling about a destabilized world. I admire the transcendent and surreal qualities of the writing as well as the mind-bending concepts.

Veering off from punctuation and linear sentence structures allows a new relationship to time to take the place of a forward moving plot. "Daydreamers are trapped in boxcars – end destination, death's embrace – lives flash by them – there's no time – the rushing sound of purposeless wind – iron fatality – karmic wheels on the rail – caught in this dance – there's no time – truck paralyzed, caught in the reflections of themselves in glass windows – we can't see out, really – comforted only by the insight that the worms who will eat them are not born yet –"

This book takes us into down into the void with the characters who seek the void out their their drugs, and plays with clips of non-linearity and juxtaposition somewhat similarly to *Nouveau Roman*. "The picture itself is a kind of motion capture of life in memorial. A still shot clipped from the unlimited reel of experience. Undoubtedly the moment between flash and photo capture could never accurately portray the totality of the existence of a being; and yet, we like to pretend. If we were geared to perceive our everyday experiences in the vein of obituaries, our memories would jump like stop action video. From one to the next; the space in between – the void – is something we can't allow ourselves to recognize."

As in *Valis*, Retzer's goal seems less about the emotional suspense of creating a page-turner than to subvert the socialized ideas that created that default narrative tradition and expand beyond it into a new approach to time. "Crow laughs again, shaking with mirth. 'The Daydream Society has no end. As it has no beginning. The text is cyclical – you can begin wherever you chose. Time, in case you haven't figured it out, is a relative thing – it moves at different speeds depending on perception – which means that I can chose a path of light, and poetry. If I need this world to slow down, then –" he pauses, eyeing me levelly "this moment could last forever."

Dick had a history of dozens of Sci Fi books before *Valis* that contained obvious plots. The narrator's sense of irony and voice carries *Valis* so it feels tight even in the sprawl, allowing Dick to branch out at the end of his life when he was mentally ill, making it work brilliantly for his die-hard fans. As much as I appreciate Retzer's experimentation, I'd like to see him embrace more literary tropes as his career progresses to strengthen the narrative spine. I appreciate our chance to read about a character who doesn't act like a protagonist, isn't driven throughout the book by the required goal to complete a project, doesn't encounter an antagonist to provide escalating tension in a book with a skewed structure. But I personally feel the resultant lack of tightness slows the pace so much it feels lax, and I'd prefer to see the words carry more power by being honed. That would heighten the effect of the incredibly beautiful prose and help readers make it all the way to the brilliant ending. People who come up with alternate methods of literary entertainment have to work extra hard and have ruthless editors who mediate their deviations with the needs of the readers. The gorgeous quotes provided in this review should capture the attention of people interested in contemporary innovative literature enough to realize Retzer is onto something very good with this debut novel. Let's see where he takes his fiction from here.