

UnAmerica by Momus

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Central to my experience of Momus' *UnAmerica* were the intersections of its postmodern imagery with my own life and the world around me. Google had just posted its [Rubik's Cube doodle](#) for the 40th anniversary of the cube's invention when I read this line:

Too bitter and disappointed to converse with the guests, I take a Rubik's Cube from my briefcase and hand it back wordlessly.

Peculiar. Another case in point: just after my girlfriend texted me suggesting we go to Portugal in the summer of 2015, citing its low cost of travel among other western European nations (a random enough thought on its own), I read:

Now, this part of the house features Portuguese tiles...I visited Portugal in 2006 and was impressed by the bright, reverberant interiors, beautiful yet easy to clean. I had these tiles shipped in from a ceramics factory in Porto. It was cheaper than buying a job-lot of nothing-tiles at Lowe's.

Even weirder. Of course, it shouldn't have surprised me that at least something in *UnAmerica* would intersect with my own experience. The book is broadly horizontal in its orientation; it describes a great breadth of images while delving deeply into very few of them. The approach is that of a latter-day *White Noise*; if DeLillo inserted advertising slogans in the middle of the occasional paragraph, *UnAmerica* is an almost violent collage of very specific ephemera—"a Gockel RB3...a top notch piece of German kit used in wholesale butchery," "the newsletter of the Dorchester Presbyterian Church," and "[p]otassium bitartrate (cream of tartar)...a crystalline resin made in wine casks," to take three completely random examples—screaming for our attention. It is, in other words, like the internet.

This send-up of the oversaturation involved in contemporary capitalist life, I think, accounts for my own desire to seize on those objects (the Rubik's Cube and, especially, Portugal) that seemed to be of particular importance to me. I wanted badly some guide as to what to pay attention to as *UnAmerica's* rapidly shifting storyline barreled on. But that longing is indeed the point: what we are seeing here is America, and the reason for Brad's God-bidden quest. And it's not insuperable, the longing isn't; by the end of the book I had learned to enjoy the rapid passage by of images, and had begun to observe them kind of like you might watch the graffiti on a passing train.

Certainly, for all its broadness, it's not as if there is nothing binding *UnAmerica* together. The effects I

have been talking about all take place on the canvas of an attempted journey by narrator Brad Power (what an American name! you can hear Momus giggling), who has been called by God (an old man dressed like a janitor, who has late-onset Alzheimer's) to reverse the apocryphal [voyage of St. Brendan](#) in order to undiscover America.

Most of Brad's journey, unfortunately for him, consists of preparation, which takes place in America itself. His America is one of bizarre economies, in which employees are not paid for their labors but rather compensated with the opportunity to extort unwary customers, and in which months as we know them have given way to a new system of dating, introduced at the beginning of most chapters like this:

It is still Gamelion. The fairy spud extends from the herbaceous border a set of frightening nectariferous claws.

Sure it does. You can't help but start a dialogue with lines like these, difficult to read and provocative as they are. They make you want to find this Momus man and shake him ([this promotional video](#) might be a good start, if you do happen to be looking). But again: this sense of frustration is, in fact, the point. What we are really supposed to be finding and shaking is America. The book's moral purpose, as close as Momus gets to stating one explicitly, comes about three fourths of the way through, in a letter from (who else?) God. It reads thus:

Why have I commissioned you, Brad, to recreate in reverse the westward Wonder Voyage of Saint Brendan?

The answer is that partly it's because I am bored, and simply want something interesting to happen in these pages, like someone walking and talking while headless.

But I'm also a moralist, and it really upsets me that America has become a machine for creating unpleasant people. You don't need me to remind you of the sins of America. The gigantic eco-footprint, the far-flung military bases...

He goes on, then conjuring the thought-experiment our protagonist Brad Power is trying to undertake. The last few chapters, following God's letter, are narrated in future tense, detailing the adventures Brad and his crew will undergo while at sea, trying to uninvent America. But it is terribly fitting that these adventures seem almost an afterthought, a footnote to the proliferation of images in the first 120 pages, which can't help but dwarf the imaginative reach of the last, more earnest chapters of *UnAmerica*.

It couldn't be any other way, I imagine Momus claiming. You can't have *UnAmerica* without America. And as the back cover of this beautiful, almost pocket-sized paperback seems to imply—"God doesn't love America," it says, "Quite the reverse"—without America, perhaps you can't even have God. Nor this book. I suspect that the joke's on us there, although I'm not sure precisely what it is. It has something to do with the fact that I'm American, and Penny-Ante Editions is American, and Momus is a mischeivous Scot living in Japan.

Then again, I might get on that boat too, if the journey hadn't already begun.