

# Bait and Switch



Christopher Coake

## *THE IMPOSSIBLY*

Laird Hunt

Coffee House Press  
27 North 4th Street, Suite 400  
Minneapolis, MN 55401-1718  
208 pages; cloth, \$23.95

Late in Laird Hunt's debut novel, *The Impossibly*, its anonymous narrator—an operative for an equally anonymous criminal organization—explains that he has been knocked unconscious, via blows to the head, upwards of a dozen times throughout his career. Given the nearly 200 pages of labyrinthine narrative that precede it, this admission doesn't come as much of a surprise. But—as is the case with much of Hunt's novel—a single admission can't explain anything, and in fact might *un*explain everything. Perhaps the narrator's most telling statement is this: "I was having trouble with real and not real." It's as succinct a summary of *The Impossibly* as its text provides.

From the title to the last, dreamlike passage, Hunt's novel is a deliberate, sometimes striking conundrum, one with its origins deep in the heart of traditional genres (in particular, hardboiled detective fiction and international spy thrillers), but with ambitions that extend into knotty problems of narrative, language, and meaning. Hunt, by trade a press officer for the United Nations, has admitted in interviews to a love of noir masters Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, but it's safe to assume he's also acquainted with other, more esoteric writers of mystery like Saussure and Derrida. For all its skullduggery and glimpses of tawdry violence (among the milder manifestations is a two-day period the narrator spends with his mouth stapled shut), *The Impossibly* is far more concerned with the cloak-and-dagger maneuverings of its own wordplay.

## *This is noir as told by an autistic.*

A plot summary of *The Impossibly* is difficult; events in the novel do not happen so much as they are leaked and then officially denied. But here goes: Our narrator floats between nameless European cities, doing sundry work for the malevolent organization, which views him as one of many disposable "organic assets." Sometimes he acts as a simple courier, but we see hints that he has disposed of dead bodies and perhaps had a hand in creating a few. Early in the book he meets a woman, also unnamed, with whom he falls immediately in love. But, like everyone the narrator meets, this woman seems somehow involved with his employers. After a carelessly botched assignment, he is forbidden from seeing her again. The long center section of the novel (told without a single paragraph break) takes place some indeterminate time later, when the narrator, attempting to regain his place with the organization, is tantalized by the seeming reappearance of his true love. Is it she? Maybe. Is he still forbidden to see her? Perhaps. Is he then asked to kill her? We're never sure—though it seems certain he kills *someone* very much like her, in a fiendish test of company loyalty. The book's third section concerns our narrator's retirement, in which he might be an old man—or might not. He's haunted by what he may or may not have done. He seems certain, however, that a more final retirement is coming soon—and, for reasons unexplained, his employers seem to require him to uncover the identity of his assassin. The novel's final section is fully surreal, recasting earlier events in a language and tone even more uncertain than what has come before and stubbornly resisting any kind of coherent conclusion.

If all of this sounds hard to parse, keep in mind that the narrator tells most of it out of sequence, and with an evenness of pitch that

results in scenes of murder and torture being given the same resonance as an analysis of what makes a really good pastry. True events and imagined ones are conflated and only occasionally sorted out later. Events are asserted and negated in the same sentence. (A representative example: “In all, we only stayed four days in the country, but it was enough, it was like a year, it was the best time of all, though not really. Never really.”) This is noir as told by an autistic.

Hunt’s underlying project, however, is relatively simple: he has taken the traditional mystery’s insistence on complicated plot and applied that complexity to language and narrative, in addition to action. In a sense, then, we’re asked to read two mysteries at once: the one in which we try, with our narrator, to stay a step ahead of his employers—and another, in which we try to keep pace with our addled narrator’s voice, to solve the textual mysteries his language creates. As the narrator himself admits, “To say anything is to complicate it.” Closure—like any good clandestine operative—always has an escape plan.

As improbable as all of this sounds, I must admit that for roughly half its length, Hunt’s novel works. Despite the darkness of *The Impossibly*’s subject matter, it maintains a sense of humor in its phrasings; many of the narrator’s disclaimers and non sequiturs are dryly, and often absurdly, funny. And everywhere is evidence that Hunt can *write*; even beyond the elegance of his sentences is our understanding that a book such as this does not appear without a singularity of vision impressive from any novelist, let alone a neophyte.

But *The Impossibly* is not a great novel; it sabotages itself too willfully. Of course, genre mysteries are hidebound, and I am all in favor of their conventions being twisted inside out. But to do so in an ultimately ambiguous, literary fiction like Hunt’s novel is to risk a level of real cruelty towards a reader: again and again we’re

shown hints of visceral enjoyment, only to have them whisked away. The second half of *The Impossibly* begins to seem at times like an interminable game of three-card monte, with the queen representing an old-fashioned Good Time.

I am certainly not opposed to high-stakes bait-and-switch games—the one that springs immediately to mind is David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, in which the bet on the table is several weeks of one’s life, but which, by dint of its author’s energy, intellect, and humor, manages to make the inevitable con job worth the stakes. *The Impossibly* offers certain small

delights, it’s true, but in the end I couldn’t help feeling I’d been taken. Of course not every novel is going to provide powerhouse entertainment, but if an author’s strategy is to deny traditional narrative pleasures, then in compensation he or she must provide an intellectual payoff, a thrill of understand-

ing worth the reader’s patience. And in the end, *The Impossibly*’s ideas—that closure is elusive, that storytelling is a constant dance away from the actual, etcetera—are hardly new. More importantly, they’re not made to *seem* new. Hunt trades the tired conventions of the mystery genre for what are becoming the tired conventions of postmodernism.

But this criticism shouldn’t lose sight of the good news, which is that *The Impossibly*’s flaws are nothing less than noble ones. They result from curiosity and ambition, from a talented and intriguing novelist taking a risk—but pushing the envelope only so far. If Laird Hunt ever chooses to go further, he might very well produce that rarest of enigmas: a novel whose secrets exceed the hazards of the chase.

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