

BOUNGING THE VOID

Ryan Smith

THE BLUE GUIDE TO INDIANA

Michael Martone

FC2

Florida State University
c/o English Department
Tallahassee, FL 32306-1580
120 pages; paper, \$12.95

THE COMPLETE TALES OF KETZIA GOLD

Kate Bernheimer

FC2

194 pages; paper, \$11.95

THE NOCTAMBULISTS & OTHER FICTIONS

Peter Spielberg

FC2

166 pages; paper, \$12.95

At the heart of *The Blue Guide to Indiana*, *The Complete Tales of Ketzia Gold*, and *The Noctambulists & Other Fictions* is the idea that there is a massive emptiness at the center of contemporary America, and this void is the foundation on which we've built our ideas of personal and cultural histories. These histories' functions are to conceal the existence of the very pit they reside over. So what happens when the thin crust separating us from the inevitable fall begins to crack? Each of the authors of these three books creates scenarios that explore the reactions of oh-so-Pomo Americans to the realization of the nature of their situations.

The slippery idea of American memory and history is something Michael Martone examines in his fictitious travel book, *The Blue Guide to Indiana*. Although parodying the well-known series of guidebooks by the same title, "Blue Guide" can also be

seen as referring to something sordid, something hollow. Like Mark Twain and Kurt Vonnegut, Martone is using a satirical eye to examine the multitude of artificial stories that we layer and layer on top of each other until they become a part of our collective myth system. He's built a complete structure here—including a fake list of previous works and laudatory quotes—that lights the illusion admirably. About the stop on The Death Tour that commemorates the site of ex-presidential candidate Wendell Willkie's Ascension into Heaven he writes, "Near the site, high-tension transmission towers converge on the sacred precinct of an Indiana Power and Light substation where mighty step-down transformers convert the mega-voltage to power the single 75-watt flame-shaped bulb of the eternal votive light." By skillfully overemphasizing the roadside grotesquerie of the American historical site, he allows us to see the whole of the dark announcements we're broadcasting as our communal stories, the slyly diabolic movies we play when we start to get a picture of the emptiness around us.



Detail from cover of
The Blue Guide to Indiana

In *The Complete Tales of Ketzia Gold*, Kate Bernheimer uses a different but no less effective method to examine the memory

machine and the ways we create meaning. In pirating a variety of German, Russian, and Yiddish fairytales (occasionally printed whole with twinned “updated” narrative paths that reflect her protagonist’s life), she returns us to the dark and violent nature of these early tales. Bernheimer rolls out the contemporary landscape as seen through the eerie and razor-edged reflective lens of Ketzia Gold, the middle child of the typically lurid and disturbed suburban Everyfamily. In weaving the fabric of Ketzia’s train-wreck life (a sadistic older sister, a husband who’s an artistic failure and emotional abuser, a series of men who physically and psychologically abuse her), Bernheimer shows us how Ketzia projects herself into the more malleable reality of fairytales, where she can recast herself into a role where she has slightly more control over the ever-deepening fissures surrounding her.

The opening of the novel finds Ketzia stranded in the desert, “in a warm place that on the map was always orange,” where she wanders through the wilderness and gives her clothes to the various people she meets in a recast version of the German tale, “The Star Talers.” By acting in a way that mirrors a fairytale, she can approximate an ending, seize the reins of her history, and claim a moment of understanding. Like Lynne Tillman’s retelling of “Beauty and the Beast,” these resculpted fairytales are delirious and violent, a vulgar spectacle that parades a nightmare of personal history in front of us. Through the impressive and sharply mordant illumination of the canvas of one woman’s attempted creation of an alternate, slightly more acceptable reality, we are shown the transformative power of imagining over the darkness of true memory.

Another way that characters shield themselves from a dawning emptiness is through

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using memory as a dike wall to hide behind that stems the flooding tide. In *The Noctambulists & Other Fictions*, Peter Spielberg gives stories of vivid and haunting nostalgia, the process that people use to redefine their present dilemmas by mining their past. In the story, “A Happening,” artist Matthew Mahler tries to kill himself. He has prepared everything: “The press release was in the mail....All his canvases shredded.” When his swan dive off Lover’s Leap fails to kill him, he finds himself washed ashore into the arms of his mistress, Diana, who proceeds to take him to a nearby artist’s retreat, Valhalla Colony. Once there, he begins to rethink his suicide attempt and wonders whether he should return to his wife and renounce everything as a hoax. But after a run-in with his oldest artistic friend and rival, he realizes that there is no returning to his memory, and that any attempt to reclaim life as it used to be would be fruitless.

“He’d never live it down. That’s what his old rival had been getting at. There was no going back.” This final epiphany reveals that there isn’t any way to avoid the looming climax; memories of past glories can’t secure a foothold over the void. In this case, Matthew willingly embraces his own collapse, his own history. In other stories, however, the protagonists rely on new loves, on the stories of their families or pasts to stave off the inevitable drop. Always absurd and touching, Spielberg reveals the hollowness his characters feel through the powerful evocation of their memories and their desires.

Fiction Collective 2 was conceived around the idea that there is a wealth of vibrant, innovative writing being produced that is too challenging or experimental for America’s mainstream publishing houses. These three books embody the type of writing that FC2 has always strived to showcase. They are formally innovative,



*Detail from cover of
The Complete Tales
of Ketzia Gold*

mixing ersatz truth, photography, literary appropriation, and cultural vehicles to show a cross section of an America devoid of content yet very, very complicated. When Baudrillard hit the road looking for his empty America, the characters of these books were the people he found, utterly human and desperate, sinister and desolate, trying to find a story that will allow them to keep moving towards some kind of blissful end.

Ryan Smith lives and writes in San Diego.