

BOOK REVIEWS

THE NEXT BIG THING

Steve Tomasula

THE SAVAGE GIRL

Alex Shakar

HarperCollins

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“Never forget that style is an expression of who you are,” proclaims one ad for Target, that chain store devoted to the paradox of bringing high style to the masses. While such tight linkage between “who you are” and “what you wear” used to be trotted out for laughs (think Billy Crystal’s bit as Fernando Lamas on *Saturday Night Live*—“*dahling*, when you *look* marvelous, you *are* marvelous!”), today no one’s laughing. Indeed, patriotic shopping was proposed by even the President as a serious response to the attacks of September 11th, and that is the context in which we receive popular and completely unironic admonition to stand up and be counted through the use of Target’s patriotic wear: T-shirts with American flag motifs and sayings like “Home of the Brave” or “Unify,” specially designed by fashion luminaries Michael Graves, Mossimo, Todd Oldham, and Sonia Kashuk. A trio of runway-thin models look out demurely from this ad, low-slung pants (also available at Target) allowing the females to display in-vogue swatches of bare midriff, as well as the flag, while a male in the ad with a star-emblazoned chest looks skyward—with a concentrated expression of hope to the future? A subliminal plant suggesting fear of more planes? Especially if we don’t unify by shopping? In the end there is no difference, and this is the zeitgeist unpeeled by Alex Shakar’s novel, *The Savage Girl*.

Selling an idea seems to come so naturally to Shakar that it’s hard to not think of novelists as the ultimate ad copywriters.

Centered on trendspotting, that practice of identifying and then capitalizing on the eternal Next Big Thing, the novel opens with Ursula Van Urden as she takes to the field with her simple mandate: go out and “find the future.” In one of the parks of Middle City, she thinks she finds it: an urban savage who dresses in animal pelts and cut-off pants “from some defunct Eastern European army.” This original savage girl eats stray dogs and wears metal barbs through her piercings. Given how weary people are of being consumers, Ursula believes, selling people the non-saleable has to be the Next Big Thing: the logical progression of “the endlessly recursive ways in which...attempts” by the young “at rebellion are diverted back into the currents of the revenue stream.” That is, what readers see through Ursula’s eyes causes them to understand that the future she has found is our today. As hard as it is to parody the all-absorbing target that is pop culture (especially given the fact that we’ve long ago passed the watershed of clothes ads that picture

real patients dying of AIDS), Shakar repeatedly nails its essence through descriptions like one state-of-the-art ad for rum: “The lead image is of Fidel Castro, his perennial fatigues cashed in for a pink Hawaiian shirt and purple Bermuda shorts. He stands on a Florida beach, a make-shift raft pulled up on the sand behind him” as his eyes bug out at “a model in a string bikini stretched out on a blanket before him.” The ad reads, “IT’S MORE THAN REVOLUTIONARY. IT’S COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY!”

Shakar’s insightful descriptions of networking at parties, pitching ideas to venture capitalists, even how professionals manage to fall in and out of love as Ursula and her boss, Chas Lacouture, bring the Savage Girl line of products to market, hands us back a world mediated by media, including the Internet; a world where any distinctions between art and entertainment are so last century that they can only be the subject of cultural archaeologists, and advertising is the most influential, i.e. significant, art form. “You really believe fashions can change things that actually matter?” Ursula asks Javier, a fellow trendspotter and lover during a moment that passes for pillow talk in this novel. “They can and do. All the time,” Javier replies. The way an earlier generation might have characterized cubism’s contribution to the formation of a modern consciousness, he relates the history of moon boots, those puffy tennis shoes that the CEO of Tomorrow Limited spotted kids wearing several years back.

The next season silver jackets showed up in the nightclubs. Sci-fi movies boomed that year. Last year Congress approved an increase in NASA’s space-exploration budget. And this year in the nightclubs it’s sparkling neon polyester and transparent plastic. In their minds these people are already colonizing other planets. It’s part of the dawning of a global consciousness. Those outfits will lead to trade agreements with North Korea, international peace accords!

He concludes, “What can national boundaries possibly matter to people who wear sparkling pink jumpsuits?”

Shakar’s method of storytelling used to be referred to as slipstream realism: fiction that adheres to the conventions of realism even as it slides into surrealism or social parody of Paul Bunyanesque proportions. “Tomorrow Limited” is the name of the company focused on the future without seeing how a superficial present undermines anything lasting; Ursula’s schizophrenic sister, a fashion model who is named Ivy, appropriately enough for one of rhizomic fame; etc. Yet even when Shakar lets reportage and parody blur—as he does, for example, when Tomorrow Ltd. promotes the idea of diet water—he does it with such convincing ease that he makes even diet water seem not only plausible, but a good idea. In fact, selling an idea, any idea,

seems to come so naturally to Shakar that it’s hard to not think of novelists as the ultimate ad copywriters, creating commercial products that are appreciated as art, i.e., the novels themselves.

The success of this one is partly born by the beauty of its writing, and evocative moments such as one where trendspotters silently “watch...cabs spin by, bejeweled with cigarette ads on light-board displays, the drivers and passengers mere shadows underneath.” As the novel progresses, Shakar develops his love and envy triangles, allowing Ursula, Javier, and Ivy to bloom from icons for ideas into fully rounded characters. That is, despite the conceptualization of its subject, the pleasures of this novel are mainly of the humanist variety.



Shakar especially gets right moments where characters try to be human in the context of a domineering consumer society, as when Ursula and Javier begin to fall for each other and “he reaches over and takes her hand lightly in his, and her thoughts scatter. After a moment the warmth of his hand seeps into hers, and she watches, mesmerized, as their hands become the whole world.” When Ursula later humps her boss as a career move, Javier’s reaction is wholly believable.

It’s this traditional boy-meets-girl/girl-loses-boy structure that makes the novel elegantly simple, its plot and ultimate message as immediate and easy to grasp as a message from Target, even if, like an ad from Target, it carries more layers than can be grasped in a glance. Unlike most mainstream novels, however, it is these underlying layers that Shakar exposes, and not the love story, that make the book noteworthy. Though never didactic, the overarching message of the novel is conveyed to a large degree by Ursula and the other trendspotters performing semiotic readings of fashion, or shelf space. Close-reading of label/product design is the lingua franca of the book, in fact, and the characters are fluent to the point where, like old people who have lived together so long that a mere word can stand in for years of dialog, the mention of a brand name can serve as a shorthand for whole social orientations, or class standings. When Javier wants to get close to Ursula, he lets her in on the decor of his apartment, apparently knowing that it will reveal more about who he is than the banal details of any mere family history.

What emerges is the controlling theme of “paradessence,” the idea that at the heart of every product there is a central paradox, the paradox of both “stimulation and relaxation” offered by coffee, for example. “Every successful ad campaign for coffee will promise both of those mutually exclusive states,” Ursula’s boss tells her. His break-

through is in recognizing the dawning of a post-ironic consciousness. That is, Chas explains, the old formulation used to be: “CRITIQUE OF A, B, C = PURCHASE OF D, E, F.” By this logic, marketers were able to exploit the hippie critique of ostentatious American cars by persuading them to buy VW vans. Today, however, people like ostentatious cars. They like to sweat to the oldies, and all the old pleasures denied to hip consumers by irony. They like the authenticity of patriotic T-shirts, we might add, not the pretension of berets. Thus emerged a dawning postironic consciousness, which can be drawn up as “CRITIQUE OF A, B, C, D, E, F... = PURCHASE OF A, B, C, D, E, F...” This is why, Chas explains, people “spend all their free time trading and amassing video collections of the moronic TV sitcoms that oppressed them as children.”

Culture critic Mark Crispin Miller once applied this inability to get outside of irony to television, claiming that the knowing smirk of the TV anchor at the end of yet one more news story about a water-skiing poodle, or the commercial that mocks its own stupidity, continually lets viewers in on the know, convincing them that they are above TV, and thereby allowing viewers to give themselves permission to keep watching. Yet in this evolutionary stage, Shakar’s characters suggest, irony has become such a state of nature to us that it is beside the point. “Practitioners of postironic consciousness blur the boundaries between irony and earnestness in ways we traditional ironists can barely understand, creating a state of consciousness wherein critical and uncritical responses are indistinguishable.” Thus, consumers in this new universe no longer need the labels on a Lawrence Welk CD that informs them, “This Is Not Camp.” They get it. They see the joke. And they don’t. In either case, it no longer matters, and Shakar does much to put on stage what others have called the schizophrenic nature of culture today.

For example, the flared, low-slung pants worn by the models in the Target ad cited earlier used to be called bell-bottom hip-huggers, the American flag they were often coupled with sewn to the seat of the pants. When matched with the patriotic American flag T-shirts sold by Target today, though, they come off as some retro-60s fashion—without the irony. The young people get the joke. Or they don’t. Or they see the joke and

they don’t (in both senses of the sentence). So Ivy, Ursula’s schizophrenic model sister, is the perfect spokesmodel for Savage Girl wear/diet water: “she’s a glamorous model *and* she’s a powerful savage.” As drawn up in Ursula’s airbrushed prototype, “[h]er thighs are soft, while her haunches are muscular. Her legs are long but not overly thin....High-heeled moccasins. A fur loin-cloth over waxed legs. A midriff-baring animal-hide top that looks as light and comfortable as rough-woven silk....You can look and look and look and look, an endless whirligig of unsatiated desire.”

As part of the Savage Girl campaign, Ivy is kept in an apartment filled with surveillance cameras so people can watch her 24 hours a day. She becomes famous for being famous. People are invited to use the secure server of her Web site to send her money in order to see their money added to the pile of money that already fills her apartment, a portion of which she regularly destroys in view of the Web cams. For postirony, as Chas says, is ironic earnestness. It is “schizophrenia.”

A student of Wittgenstein once summed up his study of truth as: “First, to keep in mind that things are as they are; secondly, to seek illuminating comparisons to get an understanding of how they are.” Louis Sass quotes this student as a way to explain schizophrenia and modernism/postmodernism by using one to illuminate the other. And the same sort of analogy works well with *The Savage Girl*, both because of its schizophrenic model, Ivy, but also for the schizophrenic state of culture, including literature, evoked by this novel. That is, using a schizophrenic as a spokesmodel for a product that is essentially pure desire is an ingenious way to make visible the abstract formations and mindset that underlie our own cultural moment. The schizophrenic is our posterchild, Sass and other observers of the postmodern have written, just as the Saint or the Artist may have been able to speak for earlier cultures. Like all of us, Ivy lives with double coding, even triple or quadruple coding; she is a product of the cultural context she lives within and as such finds it difficult to say where she ends and the external world begins. She is, as Deleuze and Guattari would characterize her, a true hero of desire in that she is the embodiment of one who is outside the social codifying of desire, and the product of it. Ivy is the one who is closest to na-

ture, if nature equals capitalism, equals the machinery of desire production. When her life goes on-line and she begins stripping for the Web cameras, her identity literally becomes a body without organs, a dissipation of the self into a channel by which the desires of others are expressed.

Yet for all the articulation of the postmodern moment, especially its contradictory and unexplainable nature, Ivy’s story is held in the palm of the novel’s traditional structure: a rationalist cause-and-effect, linear plot; an emphasis on what we see, rather than an exploration of how we see, how we know; an attempt to draw the reader into a story, rather than the sort of self-awareness of much postmodern fiction that draws a reader’s attention to its own constructed nature. In literature, as in the social sciences, the rise of postmodern culture has caused authors to decide that they can write novels in which a contemporary world with all of its polyglot meaning is treated as an object to be depicted using traditional narrative techniques—just as an anthropologist might document the “bizarre” rituals of African natives. Or they can incorporate postmodern thinking into the body of their own narratives, questioning as they go along their own assumptions about finding a fixed point from which to view the world—just as an anthropological study might question how “savages” are depicted within the pages of *National Geographic*.

Shakar’s *The Savage Girl* is clearly of the first category. And by its methods readers may get an inkling of the novel’s end, as Ivy and Ursula both attempt to get back to the Garden. Which is to say that in *The Savage Girl*, Shakar has it both ways. Judging by the ubiquitous combination of authenticity and commercialism in the culture at large, judging by the turn against irony in a number of recent high-profile literary novels that have absorbed into their body the theories that so preoccupied earlier postmodern works, *The Savage Girl* may well be the best example of the Next Big Thing in literature as well.

Steve Tomasula’s short fiction has appeared most recently in The Iowa Review and McSweeney’s. His novel, VAS: An Opera in Flatland, is forthcoming from Station Hill Press.