



Focus on Desire

Modern Love And Other Tall Tales

by Greg Boyd

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[Lorraine Schein](#)

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* says the tall tale is "a narrative that depicts the wild adventures of extravagantly exaggerated folk heroes...the audience appreciates the imaginative invention rather than the literal meaning of the tales."

Greg Boyd, the author of two other collections and former editor of the eclectic literary magazine *Asylum*, gives us much to appreciate in his latest book, further evidence of his ability to craft inventive modern tall tales.

Of course, its title is ironic — these eight short fictions of the erotic are really about our modern lack of connection, both physical and mental. An off-beat, black humor enlivens the best of them. Closer to horror than fantasy, they share a simple surrealist logic gone awry. The exaggeration here, unlike in the traditional tall tale, is in the extravagantly unbalanced mental and emotional states of their narrators (heroes in their own minds, anti-heroes to us).

The shortest pieces in this book worked best for me, their brevity and compression serving to highlight the bizarreness of each story's central premise. Some of the stories seem strained — they don't have the lightness and wild imagination of, say, Don Webb, who also writes microfictions. But the best ones have a clever premise and conclusion that work the way the set-up and punch line to a good sick joke would.

Boyd's narrators, alone or deranged at the start of each story, become even more out of touch and grotesque as the story progresses. In the title story, "Modern Love," an elderly man living alone gets a mysterious phone call from a mysterious woman, perhaps his former wife, who wants to be his love slave and threatens to kill herself if he refuses. He keeps avoiding her calls but by the story's end, he succumbs and the positions of the caller and callee are chillingly reversed.

In "Unglued," the love object is the uncompleted magnificent sculpture of an artistic child prodigy. Obsessed with its creation and completion, he has a breakdown when his parents interfere with his work and ultimately destroy it. He is sent to a mental hospital for recovery. Like a lover remembering his first love, he spends the rest of his life remembering it and trying to recreate it. Love is as much a creation as a state of mind.

Even the prodigy's vision is supernaturally enhanced as he works on his masterpiece:

...I could simultaneously see details set within their widest context and could thus reflect upon the specific and the general at once. I saw, through the same lens, a black cat slinking within an entire city, a lost ring upon the vastness of the ocean floor, a grasping hand among the killing fields of history, a woman's lips hovering in the sky above the world. This remarkable facility made it so each of my choices built upon what had come before in an ever-deepening aesthetic progression. Somehow I had stumbled onto a secret world and through it discovered how beauty and love were all-inclusive; they were what held the universe together, what helped us make sense of it all.

Like the artist in this story, Boyd reflects upon the specific detail of his characters' obsessions, creating compact vignettes that give us a lens to see into their secret worlds that reveal the general and specific at once.

"Horny," which appeared in *Best American Erotica 1993*, is a darkly humorous look at a man so obsessed with his sexual thoughts he walks around with a heavy cross strapped to his back, hoping Christian suffering will distract him from them — which ultimately doesn't help.

"Listen" has the book's only female narrator, whose idea of the ultimate turn-on and kinky sex act would be for her lover do just that — listen to her. I suppose Boyd made the narrator female because this is a common complaint of women in relationships — still, he reverses expectations so consistently in his other tales, it would have been nice to see that here as well. Boyd seems to be saying here that emotional connection has replaced physical contact as the focus of desire.

The longest story in the book, "The Conference," starts with the line "next to me on the kitchen table is my landlady's head." It is narrated by Greg Body, a too-thinly designed alter-ego for Boyd — about a writer who gets accepted to a writer's conference and whose teacher tells him to start his story this

way. I found it self-conscious and contrived.

Another long piece, "The Further Adventures of Tom, Huck, and Jim," uses the river imagery and characters of *Tom Sawyer* in a clever way. In Boyd's story, an L.A. ad executive has his car stolen during a robbery. During the police investigation, he meets his old childhood friends who help him look for his car, which is later found floating in the river. This story was more enjoyable than "The Conference," yet when a Boyd narrative moves beyond vignette length, the characters seem less compelling, and the story loses its tight, concentrated focus.

Boyd's conceits work best in the briefest tales here, the brevity of which most clearly sets off their twisted, sharp points. They are truly modern tall tales and small witty morality tales as well, which tell us something about the current adventures of our deformed libidos' frantic search for love at the end of the millennium.

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