

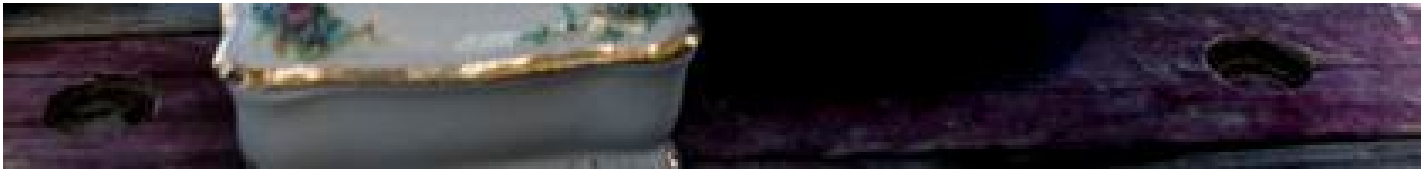
BOOK REVIEW

On a quest for art and riches in 'Less Is Lost'

A new 'Less' novel, this time in America

By Dan Kubis Globe Correspondent, Updated September 15, 2022, 6:10 p.m.





Novelist Andrew Sean Greer. SARA NAOMI LEWKOWICZ/NYT

In Andrew Sean Greer's 2017 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, "[Less](#)," novelist Arthur Less cobbles together a six-month trip around the world out of various speaking and teaching invitations so he can avoid attending his ex-partner's wedding. Unbeknownst to him, his ex-partner, Freddy Pelu, has ended his marriage after one day and returned from his honeymoon to be with Arthur. As the novel concludes, Freddy recalls his uncle questioning his ambition, asking him what he wants from life, and he finally has an answer: "Less!"

Greer's new novel, "[Less Is Lost](#)," begins roughly nine months after "Less" ends. As it opens, we learn that Arthur has become restless in his relationship with Freddy. This difficulty is compounded when Arthur discovers that he owes 10 years' back rent on their house, due in one month. As in "Less," this prompts him to accept a series of invitations he would normally decline: a profile of the prolific science fiction writer H.H.H. Mandern in Palm Springs and Santa Fe; a trip to see a Southern theater group perform one of his stories; an East Coast lecture tour. From this broad perspective, "Less Is Lost" reads like an American version of the previous novel.

Indeed, fans will be happy to know that the two novels have much in common. "Less Is Lost" is very funny, or at least offers the same style of jokes, observations, and wordplay as its predecessor. (My favorite involves a minor character's personal philosophy, which she has designed to help embrace the affirmative: "Know no *no*.") Both novels rely on Homer's "Odyssey" as a model for Less's voyage. Both feature surprise endings that may not surprise attentive readers.

But "Less Is Lost" also differs from "Less" in important ways, beginning with its slower, more reflective pace. Instead of opening with Less already on his journey, "Less Is Lost" begins with 50 pages of backstory; instead of seven countries in eight chapters, it

wanders across the US in four. Many of the opening pages in “Less Is Lost” involve Freddy’s first-person recollections of his life with Arthur, giving him an interior life that was largely missing from “Less.” Several passages in the new novel are written with a quiet, nostalgic tone that was absent from the earlier work.

In interviews, Greer has explained that “Less” began as a story about a gay man approaching 50 and realizing that he didn’t have any examples of how to grow old because so many of his would-be role models had been killed by AIDS. Greer struggled with this idea for some time before realizing that the novel needed to be funny. The writing came quickly after that, he says, as the comedy allowed him to show that while gay men might not have role models for how to grow older, their struggle to figure it out can include laughter and joy as well as pain.

“Less Is Lost” still asks questions about aging and love, but it also introduces a new emphasis on artistic creation: its cost to those who pursue it and its value in the world. Several scenes depict the struggles of literary lifestyles. Freddy frequently wonders whether it’s “worth it.”

At many points, the novel answers Freddy’s question affirmatively. Early in the book, Less’s longtime lover, the famous poet Robert Brownburn, recalls receiving comfort from the realistic depiction of tears in a painting by Giotto from 1305. At the end of his time with Mandern, Less watches the aging writer transport an audience to a space where “the only things in existence” are the reader, the writer, and the text. These moments recall art’s ability to create a sense of connection across space and time or lift people out of their contemporary reality.

But other moments doubt the value of aesthetic experience, or at least its ability to create connections across differences in present-day America. While traveling through the South, Less visits two different bars in which, improbably, the patrons end up singing “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’” from “Oklahoma.” Less loves musicals and even acted in

“Oklahoma” when he was young, but he abruptly leaves both bars feeling confused, if not fearful.

In Georgia, Arthur visits a place called Gillespie Plantation, where a Black tour guide assumes the role of a former slave as she leads him and five other white tourists around the grounds. She tells the group that when slaves tried to escape, others would sing to warn them that their owners were hunting them down. As she begins singing, Less has an out-of-body experience and looks down on himself from above. “He can see the expression on his face,” he thinks, “and what is one to do with pity?”

“Less Is Lost” is a generous, funny, deeply insightful novel and I recommend it to readers without hesitation, but it can’t answer this question. It doesn’t know what art can do about the divisions created by hundreds of years of slavery and oppression. It also doesn’t know how art can respond to the social and political divisions that have become so clear in the US since 2016. This leaves the novel with a lingering sense of uncertainty, as if it worries that it doesn’t have the tools to complete the task it set for itself. It may also leave readers feeling dissatisfied at the novel’s conclusion, but maybe this shouldn’t be considered a flaw. Having wondered what novels can do to address the legacy of slavery, why would we expect a tidy ending?

LESS IS LOST

By Andrew Sean Greer

Little, Brown, 272 pages, \$29

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