

BOOK REVIEW

In a post-Trump world, can writing cure our politics?

Teddy Wayne's latest features a manifesto inside a novel.

By **Dan Kubis** Globe Correspondent, Updated July 7, 2022, 7:19 p.m.



PATRIC SANDRI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

[“The Great Man Theory”](#) is Teddy Wayne’s fifth novel. Like the previous four, its plot follows a central male character and its narrative voice never strays far from that character’s thoughts. Like the previous two, the central character is a well-educated white man in an academic setting.

In his past work, Wayne has been able to create complex, engaging novels within this framework. His first novel, [“Kapitoil,”](#) was a compelling portrait of a Qatari computer programmer who moves to New York to work in finance. [“Apartment,”](#) his most recent novel before this one, features an unnamed narrator who tests the limits of male relationships while enrolled in Columbia’s graduate writing program in the ’90s. These books demonstrate the possibilities (rather than the limitations) of contemporary novels focused on central male characters. But I’m not sure the same is true this time.

The central character of “The Great Man Theory” is Paul, a struggling, 46-year-old academic at a “third-rate private college in Manhattan.” Paul has published a few nonfiction essays over the years but never anything substantial. He’s divorced. His 11-year-old daughter is growing distant. His ex-wife has married someone she calls “good at life.” As the novel opens, we see Paul working on “The Luddite Manifesto,” a book that will finally get him the attention he deserves by diagnosing — and potentially helping cure — America’s addiction to technology and thus its polarized politics.

It’s clear from the opening pages that Paul cares deeply about language. Or at least he says he does. On the verge of writing that the stakes of his book’s argument “are a matter of life and death,” Paul stops and recognizes that he’s about to fall into a cliché. “Subtlety in language [is] paramount,” he thinks. But the few lines we see from “The Luddite Manifesto” are merely anti-technology platitudes, and we never see the edits to his “life and death” phrase.

A similar contradiction arises a few pages later when Paul’s department chair, Nathaniel,

calls to tell him he's being demoted for budgetary reasons. When Nathaniel asks if the new arrangement is "amenable," Paul recognizes that Nathaniel has misunderstood the word to mean "agreeable" instead of "willing to submit" and privately accuses his chair of inflating his language to obscure an ugly truth.

Yet Paul's language in the novel is consistently overinflated. He forbids his ex-wife from shopping online when she can "procure the desired item" locally. His post-date ritual of eating pizza allows him to "salvage a lackluster evening with a shot of gustatory pleasure." He bemoans the loss of childhood as "a secondary gestation period in which developing humans [can] remain cocooned without too much materialistic interference." At one point he quotes Schopenhauer in a debate with his daughter.

Maybe it's because Paul represents everything I try to avoid in life (I'm a 48-year-old white English professor), but the more time I spent with him, the harder I found it to take him seriously. And the less I wanted to. These feelings only intensified when Paul schemed his way into a romantic relationship with a senior producer on a Tucker Carlson-like cable news show and hatched a dramatic plan to reveal the duplicity and callousness of his right-wing enemies. I won't spoil the ending, but I will say that Paul's takeaway after executing his plan seems so delusional that when I went back and reread the novel from the beginning, it occurred to me that it might all be narrated from a psychiatric hospital.

Of course, it's possible this is the point. In interviews, Wayne has explained that the book grew from his outrage at Donald Trump. Instead of simply venting his rage in the novel, he turned inward and created an indictment of himself. This makes sense as a strategy for avoiding sanctimony and it may serve as a kind of warning to self-righteous liberals, but it may also point out the limits of basing a novel on an indictment. Thinking about this, I was reminded of Valeria Luiselli explaining that when she started writing her novel "[Lost Children Archive](#)," she found that she was killing it by packing it full of political rage and frustration, as well as attempts to make a broader point about Trump's border policies. It was only after she stepped away from fiction and wrote her nonfiction

border policies. It was only after she stepped away from fiction and wrote her nonfiction essay “[Tell Me How It Ends](#)” that she was able to return to her novel and write it with the clarity and nuance that she felt it deserved.

I was also reminded of Paul’s plan to “unmask” the Tucker Carlsons of the world, and how so many liberal responses to Trump and his supporters over the years have taken this shape — that is, assumed that there’s some deeper reality underneath the selfish, violent surface they present. Rebecca Solnit’s “The Loneliness of Donald Trump” from 2017 is a particularly eloquent example of this kind of response, and I have certainly taken comfort in thinking this way at various points since 2016. But every time I do, I wonder if I’m projecting my version of reality onto everyone else. If it’s a failure of imagination, in other words. And I really do wonder. Because if it is a failure of imagination then success would mean imagining Trump and his supporters “on their own terms,” and so far, that effort doesn’t seem to have produced much mutual understanding, either. Or even good novels.

THE GREAT MAN THEORY

By Teddy Wayne

Bloomsbury, 320 pages, \$27

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