

Arrested Development

An SoA Grad Gets Clean and Grows up

BY DIANA CLARKE

Larceny in My Blood: A Memoir of Heroin, Handcuffs, and Higher Education

by Matthew Parker

Penguin Group

288 pp.

Matthew Parker, SoA '12, is neither a poet, an artist, or a philosopher and yet has composed and drawn a graphic novel laced with interrogations of German idealist philosophy and postmodernism. Parker's debut book, the graphic memoir *Larceny in My Blood: A Memoir of Heroin, Handcuffs, and Higher Education*, tells the story of the more than two decades Parker spent in and out of prison and on and off of heroin, and the story of how he got out. Yes, it's another addiction memoir. Yes, you should read it anyway.

First and foremost, Parker is a writer. For all its visuals, this book demands to be read. Its illustrations, and the handwriting accompanying them, are crude, even childish. The self-consciously simple and unreflective style is refreshing, with strong declarative sentences that allow the reader to tease out connections without too much prompting. Tales of addiction are generally ones of both redemption and maturity, and capture the writer as he sees himself in the throes of addiction, but the fact is that they're not much to look at. Neither is an addict's life, and Parker knows this. While drugs and the illicit thrills of dealing, sex, etc. that accompany them may seem glamorous, the story rarely ends anywhere but prison, and Parker's drawings of that life are often clunky, cartoonish, and spare. By contrast, the loveliest illustrations are sketches without a hint of cartoon to them, depicting natural scenery, and especially musicians. Parker conveys how important art was to him in prison, and how important it is now. The musical performances he saw are recorded with more tenderness and wonder than the high-

est of highs. This exaltation of art—almost as a mechanism of salvation—seems to legitimize the book itself, while elevating artists to the status of saviors.

Of course, there's a long history linking addiction and art. Parker explains this by calling attention to the Kantian thought process inherent to heroin addicts; wonderfully, he calls Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s writing, "a shot of nihilism to go along with the senseless absurdity of living in a postmodern world." Sometimes Parker takes that postmodernist riff too far, as when he alternates between scenes in the various prisons where he spent 11 years of his life, and the Columbia nonfiction MFA program. While he draws some very convincing (and highly satisfying) parallels between the American prison system and the Columbia University bureaucracy, the transitions are too abrupt: the turn of a page is all the preparation the reader is given. Trusting the reader too much is a classic first-book mistake, and can perhaps be forgiven, especially when the jolting transitions are read as a recreation of the disjointed effect that drugs have on a life—making the narrator unreliable not only in his telling, but in his character.

Or maybe, in classic Columbia student fashion, I'm overreading, thinking the signifier is the signified anywhere outside the classroom. Maybe Matthew Parker should have helped his reader a little more. At least he hates 1020 as much as I do.

In any case, in an environment as politically correct as Columbia, it's hugely refreshing to find someone willing to say what he sees. Matthew Parker may not be culturally sensitive in most environments, but he doesn't pretend to be. He's keenly aware of the perverse racial dynamics in prison—of the necessity of unquestioning alliance to a particular racial or ethnic group for protection, and of the swastikas tattooed on all the other white dudes, and how he

didn't want to be part of it—but he's surprisingly uncritical of his personal impulses, often relying on stereotypes to depict bikers and hippies, and reducing women to tits, tits, tits. But when he shows himself just after being released from prison, spending his newly free nights in New York jacking off in his room, it's clear that his callousness is not cool; it sucks, and that honesty about a junkie's life, that deglamorization, is really a relief. Parker is frank about the inaccessibility of the intimacy he craves far more than sex, and is willing to give his reader a veneer-free look at what a drug habit means, from the poor social skills to the shameful involuntary ejaculation that results from detox.

I had a difficult time reading the part where Parker describes his poor flirtation skills (understandably stunted by long periods of time in prison and on drugs), admitting that he's terrible at picking up women, and when he does (did) it's only for sex, even as he complains that women judge him too harshly for his criminal past.

I don't think I judged him; I think Parker puts up too strong a front. He articulates clearly and with empathy the hardships and prejudice (ex-)junkies face when reintegrating into society, and the unfair judgements based on education, background, and economics of which we all are guilty. (Why should the reader not judge him in return? Aren't the superficialities he articulates just one step up from wanting tits that fit in a martini glass—something else he desires?) That attitude is deeply connected to Parker's nihilistic, ironic bent. Considering that his book dwells on the humanity of addicts, I should cease blaming him for wanting what he did—but can I blame the many women featured in Parker's memoir for not wanting him?

The answer seems to be no. Towards the end of the book (page 215, to be exact) Parker allows the profundity of his failings to surface:

when he decided to get clean at the age of 40, he was trapped in his brain's adolescent mindset. In fighting his way out of a stunted brain, Parker commits the teenager's sin. He's so desperate for a subversion of authority that he refuses to succeed. Parker perfectly relates this tension, this intergenerational misunderstanding, in a conversation with his mother:

Mom: Can't you get laid in Brooklyn?
 Matthew: Fuck a hipster? I'd rather not.
 Mom: What's a hipster?
 Matthew: It's a...never mind.

What adult man talks about sex with his mom? What mother wants to discuss sex with her son? We know at least one aspect of this relationship could use alteration. Eventually Parker does move beyond the adolescent and learns to accept authority in the rigorously anti-post-modern prison system, where social hierarchies and (for him) dependence on heroin are the guiding order of things. It makes the reader understand that following the rules is sometimes necessary in order to achieve a larger kind of freedom, one that lets you spend your day outside a prison yard.

But what's particularly interesting is that, just as much as Parker needed heroin, he is addicted to intimacy—and in fact he calls himself an "intimacy junkie." Everyone wants to be wanted. There are a million different ways to mitigate loneliness. By exploring the interconnection of self-destructive impulses, from overspending to eating disorders to more ordinary crime to sex and love, Parker implicates the reader in his story—and allows the story itself to be not only deeply redemptive but also flawed and human. I may not shoot up, and I've never been to prison, but I do have to have feelings, and just that can be goddamn hard.♦

