

Tom Bradley's Family Romance reviewed by John Ivan-Palmer

Contributed by John Ivan-Palmer

Family Romance Jaded Ibis Productions, <http://jadedibisproductions.com> FAMILY ROMANCE Family Romance is the latest novel by Tom Bradley, notorious hermit of Kitakyushu, Japan. It's a monstrosity of the imagination as if a Burroughs virus hijacked the machinery of Finnigan's Wake and replicated itself as a litera-teratus. Illustrator Nick Patterson joins Bradley in the procedure with ninety disturbing images of Bosch-like detail you don't want to see on the way home from your local head shop. Bradley's trajectory of books, from the early Sam Edwine novels up through the mesmeric satire of Vital Fluid and essay collections like Put It Down In A Book, is toward a geist where categories have yet to be described. The fastenings and joineries of his new textual and graphic ubiety are measured in calibrations from some other dimension where the usual sockets and taper points of critical disassembly have to be replaced. Even with that, Family Romance is deviously structured to lead conclusion jumpers straight to the Hall of Laughter. By way of guidance I might advise the intrepid reader to follow first the theme of mutation, both in the nameless family the book portrays and the language that describes it. There's a father, mother, daughter and son. And don't forget the dog. The narrator is the son who combines self-image and family dynamics with this rhetorical question: "Am I Mom's former wart, an ex-ball of hair and teeth that sprouted like a pus-distended lymph node in the left armpit of her doubly prehensile arm?" Mom herself is "the fascist conjurers" who "scrounges the means to bring about lovely coiffures high upon our occupied heads, all the better for her unwellness vectors to perch and nest." Anything you can relate to? Or how about dear old Dad, "born with a cavalryman's plasma osmosing through his various connective tissues... his inborn lot in civic-caste life." So there you have it, parents in a military family "meant to kill and explode things, not frisk and frolic." Military families are known to have military brats like the narrator himself, or his unhinged sister, "a trans-species facial-fornicatory bastardette" and victim of degenerate "priestcrafters," who constitutes nothing more than "a medical waste problem." Sib rivalry? And then the dog. Well, the dog doesn't do too well either. The father deserts the family. He turncoats his post and joins a foreign insurgency in the "Middlingly Oriental homeland." One thinks right away of the Palestinians or the Muslim umma, but in Family Romance things can mutate before you get to the end of the analogy. Mother raises the kids in the father's absence and tries to keep them clean. Clean of what? Pathogens! A pathogen in this context is both an organism and a meme, always the other guy's. Infection with memic thought disorder fractures the family, as it often does, along religious lines. Mom buys into a "national-racial god" known as "the divine Krystelle Rex" (sounds like crystal meth?). Dad gangs up with the biblical-sounding "Relic Amalekites" on the "Judeuphrates." I'm going to make the astonishing assertion that Family Romance is a work of theology, if by theology we mean cryptophagic religious chagrin. Biblical quotes turn up frequently in epigraphs to Bradley's fiction and non-fiction where he dwells, sometimes in great Talmudic depth, on themes of sin, atonement, transcendence, holiness, Gnosticism and Mesopotamian history. You can jaw away your lauds on Bradley's concept of Jawhey (Yahweh) who, "in the septafold naves of his cathedralic heart... suppurates a special letch for Relic Amalekites." And the Relic Amalekites "are the self-styled Originally Selected Beings of this particular god, whom they adore and reverence as the Unitary Executive and Decider of the Present Solar Clump." If it's a clue to anything, the Amelakites, mentioned in the book's epigraph from I Samuel, were one of the ancient enemies of Israel, with no evidence of existing anywhere outside the Old Testament. I'm not sure if this leads to grace or the Hall of Laughter. I'll try another approach. There are three generations of Mormons in Bradley's own family and he has viciously excoriated their belief system (see chapter six of Fission Among the Fanatics before you send money to Mitt Romney). That may account for the distressed credos. I'd also aver that his preoccupation with teretogenic effects is from growing up in Utah downwind from nuclear test sights in Nevada, furthered by his current exile only a few train stops from Nagasaki (where he was an English professor until drummed out for mutating the syllabus). Pathogenesis of thought as well as body from nuclear radiation, runs through much of Bradley's work, especially in Bomb Baby, itself textually mutated from the novel Kara-Kun from his Dai-Nippon Trilogy. Family Romance may best be read within its own self-extruded scutum, beginning with the title. A romance is traditionally defined as an entertainment, and there's plenty of that in Nick Patterson's haunting illustrations of robotoids and autotrophs crawling out of tar pits. There's much to enjoy in Bradley's wordplay, such as describing toadstools as "the albino kind that hickeys lightless cave walls." There's stand-up comedy of the Martin Amis sort: "Talk about tattoo regret: trendy unblood-lust outpacing subcutaneous discolor." By definition, the romance occur in worlds (or word labs) far removed from the everyday. Its characters perform spectacular if not heroic deeds, in Bradley's case like whole-head engulfment of someone else's genome. Finally, there's a practical ending to Family Romance, which satisfies the form's didactic requirement. This book is not for those who pick their reading from eye-level in the check-out line, although for all its linguistic twistages it's easier to read than you might expect. At one point the narrator advises you to stop reading and engage in "an eight to twelve hour introspection... and look inside the stacked deck called yourself." If you're good at speed introspection this might take only a few moments. It might take longer to master the suggested hieroglyphics, "the kind scraped on hot sandstone cliffs by accident of wind." Whichever way you digest it, this bizarre story is ultimately a prophylaxis to thought perversion, the kind that results in the dreaded "Sneeze Catastrophic" that can blow off the whole front of your face.