

KEVIN KILLIAN / Bowering's Fragments

You'd have to have a heart of stone to resist the amorous appeal of George Bowering's 1990 novel *Harry's Fragments*. An accomplished storyteller, Bowering surprised us yet again with this enigmatic, genre-bending blend of thriller and *nouvelle vague*. Throughout he plays the showman's ancient trick of never letting us see him sweat, combining a complex plot with a throwaway style, while finding room in the slim volume to evoke dozens of far-flung locations and many, many sexy women.

What's that Bond movie with the most Bond girls in it? *Harry's Fragments* makes that one look like a sexless sort of William Wellman actioner. (*Goldfinger* and *Thunderball* tie with five apiece, but in comparison *Harry's Fragments* makes them seem like chaste all-male retreats set in Mount Athos in northern Greece.)

The surplus of women in *Harry's Fragments* is perhaps a tip of the hat to Bond, or to Len Deighton's spy hero, Harry Palmer. Perhaps Harry Palmer or Harry Lime inspired the creation of Bowering's Harry, this mysterious traveler. I keep thinking he's Canadian, he's so critical of other nations, but I find that nowhere does the text actually say that Harry's a Canadian, though he lives in Vancouver certainly. No wait, in the last fifth of the book we are told that he is a "Canadian in a manner of speaking." His profession is similarly unclear, but we are told again and again he is neither a spy nor a writer, at least, not by nature. He's 49 and he's a white man. He's a cabdriver "for the moment" but also a merchant who spends a few days selling things he's bought and buying new things to sell later, but he takes to the life of accidental secret agent with a certain *savoir-faire*. His new handlers book him at a moment's notice on voyages to faraway lands so we get the impression that money isn't his big problem. As I see it, he's working out a midlife crisis, and it's taking him in the directions Jack Nicholson used to follow, dazed, hollowed out, in Jack's long-ago Antonioni/Polanski phase. He's not himself, and that's the point.

Harry's journey begins in Toronto, where a strange woman attracts him, and when he sees the same woman later in a dreary restaurant in Seattle he begins to think she's trying to get a message to him. And soon he is told to attend a cultural festival in Perth, and he goes. Like most novels of espionage and adventure, *Harry's Fragments* begins as an investigation into phenomenology and then devolves into sexual ritual.

He also plays a complicated symbolic role in Bowering's portrait of men under siege from an international regiment of women—of adepts, really. A beautiful, graying Englishwoman (or perhaps she's Canadian, like Alice Munro?) is being held hostage behind the Berlin Wall and it is up to Harry, as the agent for mysterious women of all nations, to rescue her so she can continue to write her famous short stories. Like the god Osiris, Harry allows himself to be torn to pieces, as his travels take him from Perth to Berlin to Rome, as he meets more mysterious women who know more than he, about his mission, about the world, about what he is all about at his sexual core. A "goddess of nightdisease" inspires these women to fuck Harry in ways that cause him increasing pain, but he continues to surrender, presumably to attain more meaning, perhaps to keep his sanity. When he awakes from one encounter he finds "specks of dried blood on the twisted sheets—not from her, but from the scratches she had made on him, when she had almost made him quit but forced him to go on, to proceed, he thought he remembered her saying, forced him partly with her filthy language, her brutal threats and vulgarities." As he travels from country to country, his cock is almost always sore, raw, because the women are so rough with him.

"The pain was excruciating, but he dare not tell her so, tell her to stop. She stopped when she forced an ambiguous climax from him."

Harry begins to wonder what has caused this strange sequence of events. He begins to suspect that at least one of these women was a boy or man to begin with, and has emerged from a Leipzig clinic. "Had the boy died then, when the woman was born, in that clinic in Leipzig?" I hesitate to ascribe the multiple genders Harry discerns to European decadence; perhaps they come from the fantasia of the cruel woman, like the bordello scenes in *Ulysses* in which the shadows leap back and forth from male to female, then back again, as Bloom grows more excited? Brian Busby's 2011 life of John Glassco (*A Gentleman of Pleasure*) reveals that Bowering and his first wife, Angela, knew Glassco at least casually, and I began to wonder if *Harry's Fragments* might not represent Bowering's tip of the hat to/ reboot of the elder poet's Sadeian softcore porn, his *Harriet Marwood, Governess*. This part of *Harry's Fragments* grows murky, and soon, like the recent Steve McQueen film *Shame*, he's finding a man's tough, hairy hand poking around in his underwear, while he's wearing it. I forgot to say that *Harry's Fragments* is set some time before 1990, the Wall is still up, and like most novels laid in this particular period, one

must resist on every page, "Jeez, Harry, turn on your cell phone," or "Google maps could have solved this in a minute." But perhaps what we have gained in speed we have lost in Catherine-Robbe-Grillet sexual enslavement and suspense.

It is a world ripe with competing nationalisms, and on every page a horrid American poisons life for decent Canadians. No matter where they turn up, Americans are cowardly, fat, pasty, ignorant no-necks, hooked on religious radio and bad faith, who go to Vancouver and ask where they can buy "seeds for a totem-pole tree." Germans are nearly as bad, with their godforsaken language, a conglomeration of broken fricatives adding up to verbal violence. "Germans! He wanted to shout. Fucking Germans!" At one point Harry asks Annalise, perhaps "*The Woman*" in his perplexing, Swinburnean spy ring, what he will have gained from partaking in this global chase. "You will be an initiate, she had said. Initiates are wiser, she had said. Wise people are those who have gone deeper into the mystery.... If the mystery truly exists, then death does not, she had said."

As Harry submits to sex pleasures that incorporate more penetration, more subjugation, Bowering's readers will start to worry for him. "She would not let him rest, but threw him onto the floor, grabbed at his buttocks with her large hands. She bit him and wiped drool over his shoulder." In the push and pull between sensation and meaning, my dear old Dad, a Jesuitical American, used to get all Socratic on me. He would pause, nod, rub his whiskers. "Ah I see, Kevin," he'd aver. "But we always must ask ourselves, is that a good thing or a bad thing?"