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Making Believe

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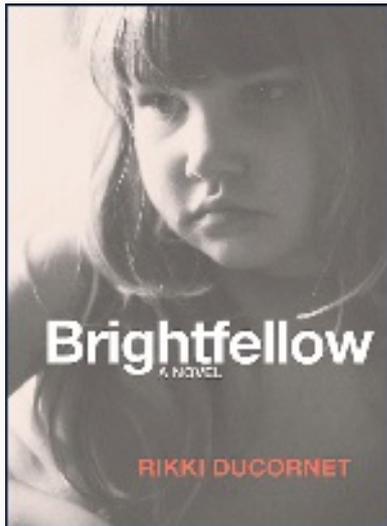
Making Believe

Daniel Green (bio)

BRIGHTFELLOW

Rikki Ducornet

Coffee House Press



Rikki Ducornet’s last three novels, *Gazelle* (2003), *Netsuke* (2011), and now *Brightfellow*, have discernibly evolved away from the more purely fabular kind of fiction—often veering into the surreal or fantastic—that characterized her previous work, toward more naturalistic settings and more recognizably “life like” characters. Although these later novels are by no means conventionally crafted “literary fiction,” they draw less noticeably on the structures and iconography of fairy tales and fables than the novels for which Ducornet initially became known, especially the “elements” tetralogy, *The Stain* (1984), *Entering Fire* (1986), *The Fountains of Neptune* (1989), and *The Jade Cabinet* (1993). The recognizable motifs introduced in the earlier books recur in these later ones, but they are now not tied directly to the more imaginatively colorful contexts in which they first appeared.

These three novels seem as well more directly autobiographical in choice of character and setting, as if only after invoking the “monstrous and the marvelous,” as the title of her 1999 collection of essays has it, through emphatically invented worlds could Ducornet then turn to the monstrous and the marvelous in the actual world of experience. The early novels were, of course, ultimately grounded in experience, both personal to the author—the settings were greatly influenced by Ducornet’s residence in a small French village, for example—and the very real human experience of wonder, cruelty, loss, and desire. In them, however, Ducornet chose to render human experience through undisguised fabulation, creating vivid characters who are nevertheless “flat” according to the prevailing assumptions of “depth” in characterization that inform most contemporary fiction. Ducornet’s fiction is intensely concerned with the effects of psychological impulses and states of mind, but these manifest themselves in the tropes,

images, and external action of her stories, which perform acts of imagination rather than laboriously simulate consciousness.

The characteristic exercise of imagination in Ducornet's fiction has perhaps most frequently been described as a form of surrealism, and indeed her pervasive invocation of dreams and dreamlike situations certainly associated Ducornet's work with surrealism in its original incarnation (not simply as the general purpose term for literary works that don't strictly adhere to the protocols of realism it has largely become). But Ducornet's surrealist narratives do more than incorporate hallucinatory imagery or uncanny events, although both are often featured. Instead they seamlessly integrate these elements within the formal conventions of folk and fairy tales, revealing not least the extent to which such stories themselves are inherently surreal in the way they draw on elemental fears and desires, and depict human experience in stark contrasts and distorted perspectives. Ducornet's fictions offer distinct oppositions (good/evil, innocence/experience) that allow for occasionally extravagant plot devices, and if novels like *The Stain* and *The Jade Cabinet* draw extensively on the allegorical resources of the fairy tale (as do the stories collected in *The Complete Butcher's Tales* [1980/1994] and *The Word "Desire"* [1997]), the aura of dream they induce also works to modify their allegorical content, suggesting a larger encompassing meaning but in its altered reality also partially concealing it.

The dreamlike element has been muted in *Gazelle*, *Netsuke*, and *Brightfellow*, although the reality depicted in each is far from ordinary, the characters engaged in extreme behaviors that are not so far removed from those depicted in the earlier novels. The stories take place in mid-20th century Cairo, a current-day psychiatrist's office and a college campus during the 1950s rather than "Dreamland" (as *Phosphor in Dreamland* [1995] explicitly identifies what in effect is the setting of all of Ducornet's previous fiction), but both the often destructive latent impulses and the potentially liberating possibilities made visible in dream worlds continue to be manifest in the characters, situations, and formal

assumptions of Ducornet's most recent novels. Characters persist in being confused about the nature of their own desires, acting on them in heedless and hurtful ways, seeking to control and exploit others as a means of coping with a flawed sense of themselves and their place in the...

BOOK REVIEWS

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Rikki Ducornet

Coffee House Press
www.coffeehousepress.org/shop/brightfellow
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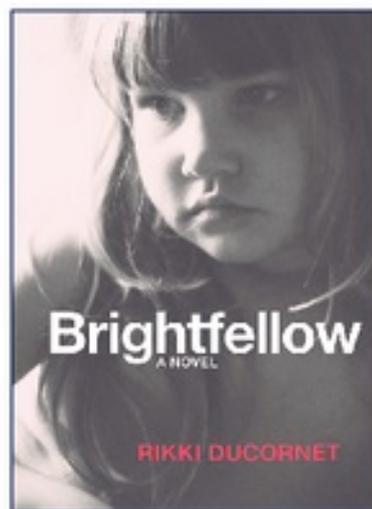
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Stub is one of Rikki Ducornet's most compelling characters, and the reason why Brightfellow leaves such a lingering impression.

novels. Characters persist in being confused about the nature of their own desires, acting on them in heedless and harmful ways, seeking to control and exploit others as a means of coping with a flawed sense of themselves and their place in the world. At the same time, wonder and beauty also exist, available to those willing to accept it, free of self-interest and the urge to possess.

Netzke was a further departure from Ducornet's usual practice in that its protagonist is an adult (a middle-aged verging on elderly adult at that), although the psychoanalyst whose account of his own sexual exploitation of his patients (and concurrent mistreatment of his wife) is the focus of the novel certainly well represents the Ducornet character type who, through an apparent inability to become properly attuned to the influences of desire behaves at best in a manner indifferent to the needs and well-being of others (and in the case of the psychoanalyst, that is ultimately self-destructive as well). More often the protagonist is young, if not a child (as in *Gazelle*) then a youth on the cusp of maturity. *Brightfellow* is more in keeping with Ducornet's characteristic depiction of a youthful perspective on the world the character inhabits, featuring a young man of 19 whose “world” is mostly restricted to a college campus, where he is a ghostlike presence after he leaves his troubled home and takes residence there, successfully occupying its nooks and crannies and avoiding discovery.

Given access to the college library, the young man, who is identified simply as “Stub,” begins to read the works of an obscure anthropologist (and former professor at the college), an endeavor that pays off handsomely when one day Stub encounters an elderly man he presumes to be a retired professor and to avoid exposure claims he is an Australian



student on a Fulbright scholarship to study the papers of this anthropologist, Verner Vanderdoon. The professor, who insists that Stub call him “Billy,” invites Stub to live with him for what Billy assumes will be the duration of his visit as an exchange student. Stub, adopting the pseudonym “Charter Chase,” accepts, and for a while he flourishes in his new environment, cultivating with Billy what is obviously the most substantive human relationship Stub has ever experienced. In the meantime, however, Charter also develops a fascination with a young girl named Asthma, a fascination that quickly enough moves from heartfelt to creepy.

As a character, Stub/Charter seems most reminiscent of Nicholas, protagonist of *The Fountains of Neptune*, even though in that novel Nicholas is portrayed first as a nine-year-old boy and then as a much older man who has awakened from the coma into which he fell after a near-drowning, a sleep lasting 50 years. Essentially each of these novels is a coming of age story (a favored narrative mode for Ducornet). Nicholas must cope with the emotional and psychological impulses of a pre-adolescent boy as he tries to catch up to his 60-year-old body; he has missed the maturation period that Stub is going through and must struggle to compensate. But where Nicholas finally succeeds in reconciling his mind/body split, Stub's passage to maturity is blocked by his own emotional impairment. Eventually Stub begins to fear his masquerade is about to be revealed, but even more devastating is his disillusionment with Asthma when he finds her engaging in activity inconsistent with his own romanticized vision of her. One day he sees her playing with her friend, Pea Pod:

He sees Asthma slap Pea Pod across the face with such force Pea Pod stumbles and falls, vanishing as if swallowed by the floor—only to rise and fly as Asthma and, like a wild thing released from its cage, bite her arm.

Charter turns away. Repulsed and despairing, he falls to his knees, his hands held to

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