

Chicago Tribune May 29, 1994

## **MY IDEA OF FUN: A cautionary tale**

By Will Self

Atlantic Monthly Press. 320 pp. \$22

The question that opens Englishman Will Self's dazzling debut novel sounds light enough: "So what's your idea of fun then, Ian?" Yet, by the time Ian Wharton completes his 300-plus page answer he has taken us on an unforgettably ghoulish tour of the modern soul.

Ian's idea of fun was forged in his childhood in the seaside resort town of Brighton. His father disappeared early from Ian's childhood, leaving him to the smothering nurture of a woman who viewed Ian as the emotional stand-in for his vanished father. Alternately clutching him to the ample breasts he'd not been weaned from until three years old, then withholding the physical affection Ian had come to crave, his mother's oscillating extremes left the boy remote and isolate.

So, he was ripe pickings for a corpulent Brighton visitor, Mr. Broadhurst. Broadhurst soon recognizes Ian's unusual, defining characteristic, his eidetic memory. Ian's astonishingly pictorial imagination creates its own reality. He notes, "I can summon up faces from my yesteryears and hold a technician's blowtorch to their cheeks." His Holy Trinity is "God the Father, God the Son and God the Cinematographer." Seeing this gift/curse in the boy and knowing an eidetiker's mind can be brought to serve his own purposes, Broadhurst becomes Ian's mentor and surrogate father.

At first, the relationship seems a perverse parody of David Copperfield's. Broadhurst even sounds like Wilkins Macawber. Asked where he spends his summers, he tells Ian, "That, my lad, I am afraid I am not at liberty to disclose. My perennial peregrinations are perforce secret.... You're wondering something, boy, cough it up, spit it out, expel it, vomit it forth. In short, tell me." Bearing a physical resemblance to Sidney Greenstreet, Broadhurst is "fat as if his mammoth aspect were the result of several, consecutively successful five-year eating plans." But, when Broadhurst tells Ian to call him The Fat Controller, we see the boy has entered "a Faustian pact" and it is a sinister wing Ian now nests under.

Broadhurst tutors Ian in dark and arcane arts and fosters in him the capacity for "retroscendence," the ability to gaze on an object and see its entire history unfold before the mind's eye. He also, by example, teaches Ian murder.

Only when Ian has gone off to college does he spy a way to free himself of Broadhurst's indoctrination. An instructor sends Ian to a Dr. Hieronymous Gyggel, a psychiatrist whose soft voice "was like a net of sound falling over my mind ready to trawl the truth." Soon, for the first time, Ian is able to enjoy human company.

Ian enters the working world of modern commerce. But Self's working world is a surreal caricature of '80s ulteriority and greed. Eventually a successful marketing executive in London, Ian lives where money doesn't talk, it hollers. The product he's instructed to clamor about is called Yum-Yum, an edible credit card whose disbursements come solely as foodstuffs futures. The avaricious industrialist behind this idea turns out to be, lest we had started to breathe easily, The Fat Controller, about to re-enter Ian's world and show him how all along Ian's idea of fun was nothing less than "the Holocaust writ small."

What elevates this grim outline into a probing exploration of the savagery latent in us all are Self's penetrating excursions into Ian's psyche and his lavishly maximalist prose.

Self bares Ian's mind to reveal the artificiality of the border separating subjective from objective truth. Broadhurst becomes less a distinct fiend acting "in *locus pater*" than a primal emblem of Ian's pleasure-seeking, amoral id. Dr. Gyggie, who tries to "cure" Ian with a drug-induced "deep sleep" launching Ian internally to an hallucinatory Land of Children's Jokes, seems at first the id's external reality corrective, the ego. These two guiding figures, therefore, prove not to be opposed but complementary, with the id far stronger. The young man whose mind provides their playground can be successful, then, only to the outer eye. Inside, his success will be perpetually shredded by his psychic demons. Beyond indicting the capitalist ethic, "My Idea of Fun" brings into horrifying focus what greed does to the soul.

And as striking as this novel's matter is its manner.

Self's prose is an exciting but rigorous adventure. Reading this novel will improve a high school student's SAT score by 50 points. Self's esoteric diction sent me—not appreciably dumber than most who opine in print about fiction—to the *Oxford English Dictionary* no fewer than 36 times, seven without finding Self's word. When no word exists to convey his meaning, like Shakespeare he coins one (e.g., "photoreal"). While I'm no doubt a better person for now being able to use "micturation," "sciamachy," "intercrural," "gallimaufry," "lycanthropic," and "priapic" in conversation, Self's formidable vocabulary can set communication speed bumps on the path to his point. And there's a pedantic neuron in me that sizzles when writers grow lax placing adverbial "only"s, particularly writers as devoted to baroque linguistic display as Self.

But it is the nature, and glory, of maximalists to take risks. Here, most of the risks work, some brilliantly. Self mixes comic and terrifying elements with authority, so that rather than weaken each other both grow larger in the mirror of the other. Throughout the first half of the novel, Ian gains our sympathy. He is, after all, forlorn and victimized. To balance this sympathy and prepare for the sordid revelations of the book's conclusion, then, Self distances us gradually from Ian by switching midway from first to third person narration.

There's a largeness to this book, room for echoes. Not only can we hear echoes of Dickens, but of Tolkien's Gollum, Blake's "Proverb's of Hell," Eliot's "Four Quartets," and even a faint kinship to the psychopathic voice narrating another recent and ingenious debut novel, Scott Bradfield's 1989 *The History of Luminous Motion*. And, like those writers he echoes, Self leaves little doubt we are in the presence of a gifted and courageous mind.