

San Francisco Chronicle 1996

## THE INSULT

By Rupert Thomson

Alfred A. Knopf; 406 pp.

Since the first caveparents heard their teenager say he came home late because a sabre-tooth chased him up a tree, we've wondered: What do we make of a tale whose narrator we're not sure we can trust?

Sometimes—if he's a child, like Huck; mentally deficient, like Benjy Compson; a monster, like Grendel—it proves stimulating.

Critics have long noted that a narrator's unreliability can actually deepen the reader's immersion into the book, forcing a more active quest for the truth.

In part, that's what Rupert Thomson counts on in his brilliantly written but rambling third novel.

The clever young British author hooks us right away: Martin Blom wakes in a hospital to learn that while walking in a supermarket parking lot he was shot in the back of the head. His eyes are fine, but his occipital brain tissue is destroyed. He is totally, permanently blind.

However, one night as he strolls the hospital grounds he notes the grey-black before him turn to green. He sees trees. He approaches one, reaches out and feels bark. He can see. But upon awakening the next morning, all again is black.

At nightfall, he can see again, at one point even watching a young nurse perform a striptease at the foot of his bed. But, like John Milton, each day brings back his night.

One night, Blom spies his doctor sifting through x-rays, all of people who, like he, have titanium plates in their heads, perhaps a means by which Dr. Visser can control their thoughts.

Convalescing at his parents' home affords little sanctuary, as Blom feels oppressed by their torpid lives ("Life was something [my father] entered into reluctantly and withdrew from whenever possible"). Blom decides, "I had to move away from everyone I'd ever met.... I simply wanted to start again, with no awkwardness and no comparisons—no past." He moves to a hotel.

That's when the fragile, cryptic stranger Nina approaches him in the pub and asks, "Can I kiss you?" She felt drawn to his blindness, as she didn't like the way most men looked at nubile women. Soon, they are in bed and Blom falls in love. Then, Nina disappears.

And that's when the author loses his way. Suddenly, *The Insult* becomes a surreal detective story rather than what it had been: a beautifully observed study of alternative ways to observe our world. Liberated by the shooting from commonplace ways of seeing, Blom had begun to explore the Blakean visual realm of the imagination, learning to use his inner eye. He wasn't particularly likable (his first act in the hospital is a callous breakup with his devoted fiancée), but he was interesting.

With Nina's disappearance, he grows less interesting than aberrant. He'd already been "seeing" trick bicycle riders and group sex in his hotel. Now, he starts seeing television inside his head and Dr. Visser everywhere else. He's convinced Visser is manipulating his mind.

But when life becomes a tale told by a paranoid, what can it signify? So Thomson backs away from all his novel's exciting possibilities and heads toward finding Nina's whereabouts.

The plot wanders, but the journey itself abounds in dazzling moments. Thomson has a fresh eye for objects ("The Hotel Kosminsky...All flaky-grey, it had the look of cold roast pork"), people ("His bald head had the high shine of a dance-floor. What was left of his hair floated above it like dry ice"), demeanor ("The doctor was a small bald man with a fragile manner. He always looked to me as if he'd just broken something valuable and was expecting punishment") and especially for bewilderment: "It was as though, behind Bruno Visser, fifteen or twenty people were standing one behind the other. If I took a step sideways, I would see them right away. But I didn't know how to take that step."

Wed his descriptive gifts, dark vision and keen mind to a well structured plot and Rupert Thomson becomes a novelist of the first rank.