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PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION

By D. M. Thomas

Charles Scribner's Sons. 272 pp. \$21

Because conventional novels depict events and people moving through time, we consider the novel, like music, primarily a temporal art. Experimenters like D.M. Thomas unsettle us. His novels are vast and deep, more cognitive than visceral, admirable rather than lovable.

Like the painter or lyric poet, Thomas draws events, people and images in space, then shapes them into a ball to roll toward some overwhelming question: Can art survive in a totalitarian society (*The Flute-Player*)? How inextricably are our erotic instinct and our death wish bound (*The White Hotel*)? Or in this, his tenth novel, can we attribute guilt to individuals when they are deluged under a flood of universal horror and evil? Put another way, must we become diseased to find our niche in a sick society?

As in *The White Hotel*, Thomas yokes psychoanalysis to the holocaust, an interweaving of the realities of the unconscious and history set at the intersection of fact and poetic truth. On both sides of death camp infernos, people insist they are virtuous. Rabbis, for the glory of their souls, take the place of fellow Jews trudging to gas chambers. Nazi doctors trust they are doing God's will: preserving His crowning achievement, the Aryan race.

In the first of the book's nine patchwork sections, set in Auschwitz, Nazi doctor Bertold Lorenz suffers agonizing headaches, hysterical symptoms and troubling dreams. He asks Jewish inmate Chiam Galewski, a Czech physician with Freudian training, to analyze his dreams. This immediate plunge into the unconscious stretches Thomas's canvas from the factual to the phantasmal, making it large enough for the reader to get lost in a labyrinthine plot rich with blind alleys.

Galewski's narrative voice at first seems marked by modest Continental dignity. Soon, however, we suspect that calm to be a dissociation of feeling as we learn how he dragged from the gas chamber the corpse of his mother, his wife and finally his still-breathing daughter, Elli. Galewski saves the infant's life by giving her for adoption to a Nazi doctor conspicuous even among Nazis for the sadism of his psychosexual experiments on inmates, all victimizing a young Jewish prisoner named Judith.

Lorenz, Galewski, Elli, Stolb and Judith seem to suddenly disappear in the second section, "Jealousy," set in 1990, a jigsaw of monologues and letters introducing the remaining cast, all clustered about venerable analyst Oscar Jacobson. There are Chris James and Rachel Brandt, both in training with Jacobson, both of questionable stability. There's bitter Lilian Rhodes, an old friend of Jacobson, now in therapy with James. And there's Jacobson's wife, Maya, an Auschwitz survivor.

Before the ties among these characters, much less between them and Auschwitz, grow clear, Thomas presents his third, most risky section, "Six Studies for Compassion." Thomas reproduces verbatim six documents from "Those Were the Days" by Ernst Klee et. al., describing the 1941 imprisoning and slaughter of 90 Jewish children by Ukrainian soldiers on Nazi orders. Borrowing from other works isn't new for Thomas. When he took passages of Kuznetov's "Babi Yar" and wove them into *The White Hotel*, charges of plagiarism were leveled against him.

Back in 1990, Jacobson invites the characters, including the German analyst under whom he studied, a Dr. Anton Becker who practices in Syria, to view paintings by the morbid expressionist Munch. Dark secrets bubble toward the surface, elucidated further in the Munch-titled section, "Scream," more letters and monologues drawing toward apparent horrors. In a mass Christmas Eve murder at Jacobson's house, several people are gunned down by Jacobson's souvenir Lueger, and the Jacobsons appear to commit suicide by arson.

By now, however, we know to suspend judgment. All our narrators, even Thomas, have proven unreliable. The genial and supposedly British Jacobson has a troubling sadistic streak he exercises under the guise of "helpful" violations of patient confidentiality. He collects sadomasochistic magazines and owns photos of what appear to be death camp inmates. We see bridges forming to the novel's Auschwitz sections, connections between Jacobson and Lorenz, Maya and Judith, Becker and Galewski, even Rachel and the Ukrainian massacre. Yet there is much in each of their histories to contradict these suspected ties.

The "facts" about these characters may grow clearest in the least likely place. Unsited to becoming a therapist, Chris James switches to novelist. "Patterns of an Observed Disturbance," the seventh section, is a two-page publicity blurb for his first thriller. James's book sounds as if it may be Thomas's book with the identities made clear, all but the miracle infant Auschwitz survivor, Elli, whom James ignores but Thomas does not.

Elli may even reappear to receive a belated kiss from her father. But we cannot be sure. By the end, the plot has become a swirl of anguish, guilt and loss where what appears true is often not. Thomas's people have memories too painful to face but too searing to forget. An aged bishop, who wrote to protest the manner but not the morality of the Ukrainian children's incarceration, lives to claim he did all he could to save them. "Memory believes," said Faulkner, "before knowing remembers." All death camp survivors may be victims with memories indelible yet selective.

Thomas shows, too, that holocaust morality survives into our time. Contemporary fetal experiments evoke images of Nazi experiments on living Jews. Serbian death camps recall Auschwitz butchery.

The eerie fascination of this book lies in its hallucinatory interconnections. It brings us close to crying out with Lear, "None does offend, none," as the horror and global carnage swell so vast that individual guilt and innocence become engulfed, almost invisible within the magnitude of its international nightmare. None does offend, because we are all almost equally guilty.

As with *The White Hotel*, reading some passages of *Pictures at an Exhibition* requires a strong stomach. The novelist explains why. In a moment that also reveals why Thomas feels drawn to psychoanalysis, Rachel Brandt echoes the words of Roman dramatist Terence: "Analysts had to consider the whole of human nature; nothing human could be alien to them." That includes our compulsion to destroy each other.