

ANALYSIS

Speedboat (1976)



Renata Adler

(1938-)

“Renata Adler’s *Speedboat* has several possible meanings, connoted by a boat that speeds through, leaving only glimpses. This fits the idea of the narrator as a tabloid reporter whose life is made up of glimpses, as she, the reporter, speeds by. But ‘speedboat’ has other suggestive meanings: of speed, LSD, rushing into someone’s psyche and creating a montage of sensory experiences, sensations, unconnected to each other or even to the person experiencing them. These two ‘speedboats’ are the most reasonable. A third is the way we may call someone a speedboat, a flashy show-off.

Information is emitted into an indifferent world, and there is must be picked up by a consciousness that can or cannot interpret it. This example is a witty ‘sensation,’ embodying what we find throughout the narrative: short episodes like Kosinski’s ‘steps,’ only briefer, less ego-centered, less manipulative. Yet they are ego too—part of the ‘me’ demonstrating is ability to hold in balance that montage of disparate sensations and experiences. The narrator, Jen Fain, does take the pose of knowing all; she moves everywhere, sees everything, reports what she sees, enters into the lives of her friends.

There are six sections, all involving movement, defensive and otherwise; and yet all movement appears to be like the voice giving the Series [baseball] scores: lacking any hold upon the experiences unless one picks up the right signals. If one misses them, then experience remains incoherent. As in McElroy, information theory is chaotic; as in Pynchon, it is overcharged. Information pours out, and no one is prepared to receive it. Within the catchall of the reporter’s consciousness is a sorting mechanism called language, although language itself is part of the confusion and incoherence, often only voices. It is the vehicle for information and yet a part of the information theory which must be decoded.

Language both serves and disserves, a Wittgenstein conundrum. ‘While people tagged up on these public codes and incantations, baby talk took over private conversations—naughty and cranky in particular. Personal treachery and acts of violence were naughty. Citizens in the middle of small betrayals or murder trials described themselves as in a cranky mood. Murders, generally, were called brutal and senseless

slayings, to distinguish them from all other murders; nouns became glued to adjectives, in series, which gave an appearance of shoring them up. Everybody lies, words lose meaning. 'The jig was never up.... In every city, at the same time, therapists earned their living by saying, 'You're too hard on yourself.'

Language and knowing surface when Fain becomes an instructor in a branch of City University, and she must teach those who have neither precision nor awareness of words. Fain is very hard on these students, turning their errors into mockery, seeing her supervisors (chairmen and deans, the president himself) as part of a vast rip-off of city funds: making believe they are educating people when no one can handle language, the basic tool of knowledge. Here knowledge and information theory serve the narrator's social/political intolerance, where she fails to distinguish between those who cannot handle language and those who learn it minimally so as to improve their lives.

Her arrogance here is not isolated. The consciousness behind the tone assumes the world is a rational place filled with irrational people; and that if we can get behind the irrationality, we can structure sanity and stability. It is, in brief, a young person's sense of the world, where experience of order deceives her about the nature of disorder. Adler is excellent when she provides examples of disorder: for instance, course offerings, where groupings allow *The Brothers Karamazov* to be listed in the English department, Ibsen and Strindberg in the German department, where Swinburne, floating around, is also offered. Chekhov turns up in Classics, and Drama has added Film. The seizing and misplacement of courses are metaphors for the world outside, in which seizure force the temporary coherence of elements basically incoherent; and the university system, rather than disentangling, helps to abet the confusion.

Similarly, the male-female split is well taken. Adler mentions many of the 'contra-fifties' people, braggarts, among the men; whereas the women are suicides. The formulation is simplistic at one level, profound in another. 'All those unendearing braggarts and, on the distaff side, the suicides'."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 414-15

"Renata Adler...has written, in fact, two novels but no narratives. *Speedboat*, her first novel, and *Pitch Dark*, her second, are both composed for the most part of short, journal-like entries, which, in the modernist spirit, a reader has rather to assemble on his own. *Speedboat*, published in 1976, was much praised; it won the Ernest Hemingway Award for best first novel of the year in which it was published. Reading it today, one notices certain affinities with the work of Ann Beattie: a flatness of expression meant to convey a deep spiritual fatigue. On the formal level, the novel seems Barthelmystically influenced, though without Donald Barthelme's intellectual playfulness....

Miss Adler is not telling a story in *Speedboat*; instead she is trying to create a feeling through the thoughts, incidents, and odd happenings that occur to the presence at the center of her book, Jen Fain, who is a working journalist also teaching a film course at a school that resembles the City University of New York. The feeling she is trying to create is one of dislocation, disorientation, depression. 'There doesn't seem to be a spirit of the times,' Jen Fain remarks on the second page of the book. Miss Adler, though, will soon enough supply one. On the same page she has her character remark, 'I think sanity, however, is the most profound moral option of our time.' And at the bottom of the page, awaking at the apartment of one of her men friends, she is told, 'Just stay here. *Angst* is common.' We are, you might say, off and limping.... Renata Adler's account of New York life in the early 1970s....

The world she describes in *Speedboat* is a highly neurotic one. 'Sometimes it seems that this maybe a nervous breakdown—sleeping all day, tears, insomnia at midnight, and again at four A.M. Then it occurs to me that a lot of people have it.' In *Speedboat* disconnection is a way of life. Rats roam the halls; a Doberman pinscher attacks an old woman. Jen Fain reports: 'I knew a deliverer of flowers who, at Sixty-ninth and Lexington, was hit by a flying suicide. Situations simply do not yield to the most likely structures of the mind.' And: 'There are some days when everyone I see is a lunatic.' These passages pile up, and all are written, in the spiritual if not the grammatical sense, in the passive voice.

Having said all this, I must go on to say that I do not find *Speedboat* boring. It ought to be, but it isn't. Perhaps it isn't because, though the book offers none of the traditional pleasures of the novel, it does offer pleasures of a different kind. When it begins to hum, Miss Adler's is a lively mind, which throws off interesting insights. 'Lonely people,' she writes, 'see double entendres everywhere.' In a brilliant passage she talks about what she calls 'the Angry Bravo,' which is what goes on when, in her example, an audience cheers *No, No, Nanette* when in fact behind their cheers is rage at *Hair* or whatever is the going triumph of the day. She is also clever on the unseriousness of certain artists and intellectuals. In a scene in which no names are given, an Indian lady whom I take to be Mrs. Gandhi is told by a poet whom I take to be Allen Ginsberg, 'I think in this country we need to disburden ourselves of our, our burden of rationality.' To which Miss Adler offers the capping comment: 'He sat down. It did not seem exactly India's problem.'

The world depicted in *Speedboat* is that of unattached youngish people for whom money is not a serious problem but finding a purpose in life is. They I won't say bound but at least crawl into one another's beds, less it seems out of passion than out of the need for comfort and solace against a cold world. They are distanced from life. Boredom is among their deadliest enemies. They have endless time to spend thinking about themselves. ('Self-pity is just sadness, I think, in the pejorative,' says Miss Adler's Miss Fain.) Therapy is no help. 'In every city, at the same time, therapists earned their living by saying, 'You're too hard on yourself.' There is a slightly frenetic stylishness about their lives. 'Elaine's was jammed'; a man invents a drink called 'Last Mango in Paris (reminiscent, this, of a man in an Anthony Powell novel who invents a drink that he calls 'Death Comes for the Archbishop'). Nothing quite holds. Jen Fain avers: 'The radical intelligence in the moderate position is the only place where the center holds.' But of those who write or argue or say that the center will not hold, I always wonder how they know they are standing in the center—or anywhere near it.

It doesn't take long for *Speedboat* to run out of gas. The book provides no forward motion, nothing in the way of momentum. In a snippet of conversation reported in one of Miss Adler's paragraphs, a man says: 'Janine, you know I'm very tired of your *aperçus*.' So in time does one grow tired of Miss Adler's, which, in a book without any narrative force, could, any one of them, as easily appear on page 14 as on page 203. Cause and effect, narrative order, nothing seems to matter. 'It all ends in disaster anyway.' But then Miss Adler is forthright about not having a story to tell. Toward the close of *Speedboat*, she writes: 'There are only so many plots. There are insights, prose flights, rhythms, felicities. But only so many plots.' Friend, here's the bad news: you want to call yourself a novelist, you're going to have to find a plot."

Joseph Epstein
"The Sunshine Girls: Renata Adler and Joan Didion"
Commentary (1984)
reprinted in *Plausible Prejudices*
(Norton 1985) 240-43

Michael Hollister (2015)