



# Steve Katz and the Experimental Fictionalist Identity

Steven Wingate

Books Reviewed in this Essay:

*Antonello's Lion* (Green Integer, 2005)

*Kissssss* (FC2, 2007)

*43 Views of Steve Katz*, by W.C. Bamberger (Borgo Press, 2007)

Steve Katz, a co-founder of Fiction Collective and longtime stalwart on the scene we call experimental fiction, took a decade-long hiatus from publishing after his award-winning novel *Swanny's Ways* (1995). Recently he has put out the novel *Antonello's Lion* (Green Integer, 2005) and the story collection *Kissssss* (FC2, 2007), and he is now the subject of a book of criticism: W.C. Bamberger's *43 Views of Steve Katz* (Borgo Press, 2007). This "Katz revival" offers an opportunity to consider Katz as an author, since, at this stage of his career, he brings up some important questions about what that term "experimental fiction" means and how it is applied.

Katz's shape-shifting, tradition-bending, and seminal first novel *The Exaggerations of Peter Prince* (1968) helped spawn the metafiction movement; forty years later, grad students read its anthologized excerpts. In that respect Katz now *is* the tradition, even though—as Bamberger articulately points out—he has veered away from metafiction. His latest work is far more classical in orientation than his earliest, and is more concerned with character than self-conscious formal innovation. Even though his prodigious authorial box of tricks is never out of reach, Katz picks his spots to use it in the service of a character-driven agenda, rather than emptying that box for all to see as he does in *The Exaggerations* and elsewhere.

Yet we primarily think of Katz as an experimental writer—the label a culture bestows on authors it does not know how to place. Does that label still hold by default when that author’s innovations have blended in with the deeper traditions of his art, and become signposts that other writers use to find their way through the wilderness? A worthwhile discussion, I hope. But first, the books.

Big novels have always frightened me, and the 582 pages of *Antonello’s Lion* seemed daunting; but due to its brick-like trim size, those pages turned quickly. The book follows Solomon Briggs, an Italophile New Yorker who impregnates his artist girlfriend in 1964 and immediately disappears in southern Italy to search for a painting by the 15th century Sicilian master Antonello de Messina—one which he expects to point him toward the “secular spirituality” he desperately craves. In 2001, his financial adviser son Nathan ditches his fiancée to pursue traces of the father he has never met, as well as a personal identity that he has never been able to achieve.

Like much of Katz’s work, the double-picaresque *Lion* contains a great deal of ribald, absurd humor: a German who lays eggs, a farmer who crosses goats with bats, etc. Bamberger points out that “Katz doesn’t think of himself as a Magical Realist, though his fictions comprise North America’s most accomplished equivalent,” (11) and *Lion* bears this out. Many of the book’s most magical passages (I’ll avoid the word “realist” for fear of hackneying the phrase any further) come to us through the eyes of Nathan; for although the father searches so obsessively for the mystical, Nathan is the one who finds it. He simply doesn’t know what to do with it, and in that juxtaposition between the two men lies the meat and bones of the novel.

Due to Katz’s alternating third person chapters, it took a while to settle into the book. But once I got into its groove I stayed there; *Lion* is best read in long draughts that allow the reader to soak in both Solomon’s and Nathan’s stories in one sitting, conflating their lives. It adds inventively to the tradition of father/son novels—Larry Brown’s *Father and Son* and Russell Banks’ *Affliction* being two contemporary examples—by revealing the father to the audience while making him a shadow to his offspring. Viewing the book in the context of that tradition, rather than in the context of Katz’s experimental label, accents its richly textured, character-driven nature.

*Lion* might also give us a few clues about Katz’s aesthetic—though I realize that I’m wandering into murky territory. But here is Solomon Briggs imagining Antonello’s lecture to a muse and lover:

All the contradictions interest us. We have to be able to lock these oppositions into a harmony that becomes stronger and more revealing and more provocative through its delicious dissonance. We can never resolve, and don't want to resolve that dissonance, but maintain it as the core of beauty. (483)

As a Katzian aesthetic, this passage fits like a glove. Katz has always found dissonance at the core of beauty (and vice versa); as his work has changed with time, he finds it not only in the superficial bustle of human life and language, but in stillness itself.

This is not to suggest that Katz is no longer interested in bustle; his collection *Kissssss* plunges itself repeatedly and joyfully into the sea of human contradiction. Working in the shorter form allows him to use a broader selection of authorial tools than he does in *Lion*, including prodigious and unfettered wordplay, but these are by no means as foregrounded as they were in his earliest work. They are predominantly hitched, as in *Lion*, to a series of misadventurous and always entertaining characters whose confusion reflects and mimics their *Zeitgeist*.

The collection has more thematic coherence than its subtitle (*A Miscellany*) suggests, as several stories resonate and rhyme. "Current Events" and "Wing Night" both explore the private lives of people in groups, the former tangentially connected through a stolen car and the latter relaxing in a Nova Scotia bar as apparitions haunt the nighttime sky. Cannibalism shows up in "Date Biting" and "Three Conflations Extemporized," but takes center stage in "Hollywood Novelette"—the tale of a showbiz enclave where parents are biologically compelled to eat their firstborn son in his teens. Language play suffuses this story; its setting (Monisantaca=Santa Monica) and characters (Dojie Resoft=Jodie Foster, Eukan Severe=Keanu Reeves) are scrambled showbiz names, which makes the story read like a myth from another culture. Exuding a similar sense of mythos is the closing story "Nowadays and Hereafter: The True Animated Fable"—originally published in *Marginalia*. Its protagonist, a net-weaver trying to rebuild his life after a tidal wave destroys his home, wanders into an enclave of the dead and falls in love with a ghost.

Such storylines give considerable variety to *Kissssss*, which includes a poem and a "Manifesto Dysfic" that exhorts us to "flee the workshops! make sense not!" One reason that the subtitle *A Miscellany* fits is the side-by-side

presence of Katz the full-throated experimentalist and Katz the raconteur of human dissonance. In the best stories—such as “The Information Highway,” in which a power-hungry businesswoman pulls off her boyfriend’s head while he performs cunnilingus, and then forgets the letters of the alphabet—both Katzes work together, using form and language to show us how deeply his characters have thrown themselves into the intractable center of their lives.

With *43 Views*, W.C. Bamberger—who published Katz’s *The Lestriad* and *Journalism* in the late 80s—provides the first book-length study of Katz’s work. Its title derives from Katz’s use of “43,” which appears as a frequent object of rumination (e.g., *Moving Parts*). Future critics may need to give themselves more views of Katz, as 137—the Fine Structure Constant, which figures in any transaction between light and matter—is his current number of obsession.

Bamberger largely succeeds at taking a playful, Katzian approach to the Katzian oeuvre. This makes for lighter and more enjoyable reading than most critical work, as do its 43 short chapters. Bamberger is not bound by chronology, which can occasionally confuse. But it also produces some wonderful moments in which he easily synthesizes Katz’s themes and trends across the decades, presenting an overview of the author—his range of storylines, as well as his recurring “ur-Katz” characters—in a way that more traditional critical studies would find difficult.

Bamberger’s chapter on the early, unpublished work is especially strong, and the one on Katz and the oral tradition sparkles. And though he sometimes gets a tad hagiographical, Bamberger does Katz and his readers a service by refusing to compartmentalize him as simply an experimentalist. In examining the early unpublished novel *The Childhood of Marcus Morocco*, Bamberger writes that Katz’s “emotional investment in his fiction is sincere, no matter how smart-ass the surface of the stories he tells. This emotional investment is hard to see here... but will become more apparent as Katz continues his writing over the years to come” (16). He later states that “Katz will gradually increase this emotional weight... His frame-breaking impulse will never entirely disappear, but it will grow more and more modest, out of respect for the struggles of the characters inside the frame” (57).

That *Antonello’s Lion* and *Kissssss* support this assessment makes *43 Views* especially notable. Bamberger knows that Katz can now render the spirit of his work—which he did with self-conscious bravado forty years ago—with a touch here, a gesture there. Yet despite his progressive non-reliance on

formal agendas over the years, almost any consideration of Katz contains the experimentalist label that he earned at the beginning of his career. In the case of *Antonello's Lion*, as well as many of the stories in *Kissssss*, that label can actually get in the way—in the search for surface innovations and experiments, one may completely miss deeper, more compelling emotional resonances.

Such ghettoizing can hinder our understanding of an author's oeuvre and prevent us from understanding each individual work for what it is. While it is crucial to literary culture for writers and readers to keep their eyes peeled for works of innovative fiction—recognizing them for what they attempt and for what new trails they may lead us down—there is far less value in pigeonholing authors in the same way. If we do, we risk blinding ourselves to what is on the page, seeing only familiar labels while the works themselves offer us the best clues on how to read them. And, on a grander scale, we must ensure that we do not misapprehend an entire body of work by limiting the perspective through which we view its components and ossifying that author's identity.

Instead, we must acknowledge that a writer's place in literary culture changes over time and allow for our own perspectives to shift—a process that is perhaps easier with authors who have died than with those who have not. Does Donald Barthelme come across as such an experimentalist now that virtually any literary magazine contains some piece of fragmentary flash fiction in his vein? Is Borges quite so tricky and mysterious now that his name has morphed into an adjective? The fresh territory claimed for the craft by those at the forefront of innovation inevitably appears on future roadmaps, and their trails become the starting point for the explorations of those who follow them. Experiments that appeared to sprout from nowhere are revealed, over time, as growing directly from the deepest roots of the fiction tradition.

I wish there were a simple English verb to describe this process, because it would perfectly sum up my perspective on this phase of Steve Katz's work and how I would like my generation of writers to view him. Katz is now in his early 70s; many authors who came up alongside him as innovators in the late 60s are the same age, and it's time to figure out where they fit in the American literary puzzle. And I don't mean merely the *experimental* puzzle—such too-easy classification is unfair to writers we praise for work that eschews classification. Katz's two new books give us the opportunity to

start that figuring, and W.C. Bamberger has gotten the ball rolling with *43 Views*. I hope it will continue, for Katz and for others, and that when it does we will recognize the historical process that such authors are undergoing.