

CHILD'S PLAY

Nicholson Baker enters a kid's head

BY DANIEL AKST

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Tour de force was the phrase that kept popping up in my head as I wandered wide-eyed through *The Everlasting Story of Nory*, an extraordinary new novel in which Nicholson Baker blithely immerses us in the consciousness of the world's most charming 9-year-old. Tour de force, I kept thinking, turning once again to the last page to see when the thing would be over.

Oh, I'm a Philistine, all right, but I can't believe I'm the only one who suffers this childish "are we there yet?" squirming in the face of such virtuosity. Can I really be the only reader bored to tears by Mason & Dixon? The only one who finds Proust a forced march? The sole dissident in the face of *Finnegans Wake*? A tour de force is a strenuous book by definition, one in whose readers the forces of admiration and restlessness uneasily vie. It's a feat of dazzling virtuosity, like John Lanchester's recent *The Debt to Pleasure*, yet undertaken, it often seems, for its own sake, which means it's like that novel written entirely without using the letter E. When the virtuoso is so in love with his own voice as to produce the classic tour de force, glittering smugly in its overweening self-regard, the virtuoso can get a little tiresome. All writers are in love with the sound of their own voices, but the talented literary narcissists who commit the tour de force can't subordinate their self-love to the reader's homely need for plot and pacing, action and development. Thus, the tour de force is often boring, a terrible sin in writing, and in my darkest moments, when I get tired of blaming television, I decide that this is how literature got backed into the sorry cul-de-sac in which it now finds itself.

The Everlasting Story of Nory, it should be said, is one of the least tiresome, or at least most rewardingly tiresome, feats you're likely to come across, and belongs perhaps in the category of Edwin Mullhouse, Steven Millhauser's astounding (and at times equally wearying) fictional "biography" of an 11-year-old literary genius whose Boswell happens to live next door. Baker's *Nory* is Eleanor Winslow, an American whose family has moved to England with her parents, and the novel is an imaginative chronicle of her first semester at a provincial day school. But it's really a remarkable account of the inner life of an irresistible little girl, as well as of the many burning questions and crises that beset even a sensible 9-year-old. As with most 9-year-olds, these mostly come to very little, and as the novel floats on with nary a plot in sight, its pages come to seem awfully heavy.

This is a shame, because there is much in this book to like and admire. Baker's adorable heroine, for example, is brave, modest and kind, frank and articulate, quick-witted and self-aware. Baker does an amazing job of conjuring the mental processes of his youthful heroine, who leaps from topic to topic and compulsively gilds every possible lily in a way that vividly illuminates her intense curiosity. And *Nory* really is a heroine. Betrayed by a friend who tells her entire class, "Nory fancies Jacob Lewes!," she shows uncanny poise in weighing her response. Public denial might be hurtful to Jacob, by now red-faced, "even though he would also act very relieved to hear it," and besides, then she would have "the pain of feeling the

guilt of lying and the pain of admitting that you do fancy him."

So Nory said, "Well, I do think he's nice."

Julia Sollen said, "You're blushing!"

"Yes, I know that," said Nory. "Any further questions?" It was all quite terrible and there was a sliver of a moment when Nory thought, "This is so bad that I have a slight feeling in my lips of wanting to cry, should I cry?"

Baker is great at capturing transatlantic English, too, even if he sometimes has Nory saying things that sound more Jane Austen than Cool Britannia. When a bird takes a crap on her, to cite one example, Nory cries out to her friend: "Kira! A disgusting bird took its leisure on me!" But the comment may not be so far-fetched. Nory is a terribly literary child, after all, and her greatest love, aside from her parents, a few cherished dolls and her best friend back in the States, is storytelling. The tales she tells reveal a powerful moral imagination, as does her own special brand of hermeneutics:

"The other small problem with the story - not that there are any real problems with the story, it's a good story by a man who lived in Africa for many years, not an African American man but just a man who lived there, or somewhere like Africa - but it's sad to think of such a likable mongoose eating holes in the baby cobra eggs. The baby cobras hadn't killed anything or frightened anyone. They would when they hatched out, because that's what cobra snakes are designed to do naturally. But a story should not have a small, tiny, curled-up barely alive animal be killed unless it has done a terrible thing, which it can't have done because it hasn't even uncurled itself from the egg. And the story isn't about what cobras do naturally, anyway, since it has the cobras speaking. In real life they don't speak, at least in English."

Baker's novel is something of a departure for a man who is surely America's most anal man of letters, having explored the minutiae of quotidian life in his essay collection (*The Size of Thoughts*) as well as the minutiae of his knowledge of John Updike in the odd and delightful *U and I*. His previous novels include *Room Temperature*, a reverie of feeding time with baby; and two controversial novels - *Vox*, which concerned phone sex, and *The Fermata*, about a masher with the power to stop time, the better to take advantage of the nearest woman. Yet all Baker's work is marked by obsessively precise observation, and this compulsive sensibility suits him ideally to the task of assuming the consciousness of a morally intelligent 9-year-old.

It is Nory's moral consciousness, in fact, that provides the only real wisp of plot to be found in *The Everlasting Story of Nory*. It involves Pamela, one of those unlucky children who for no apparent reason are singled out for merciless peer hounding. Her life a living hell, Pamela keeps her torments a secret despite the urgings of Nory, who bravely befriends her. But this plot comes late in the game, and meanwhile there are too many occasions (the interminable tales Nory tells her dolls, for example) when the urge to skip ahead is almost overwhelming. It's like the feeling of exhaustion you get sometimes in museums, where an irresistible impulse to escape the suffocating art on all sides makes you glide blindly past centuries of exquisite painting and sculpture in search of the cafeteria, the bathroom, even the gift shop. There are gifts everywhere in this museum, and Baker's talents are on display most wonderfully at the end of this book, so that one is finally sad to go home, just as his unforgettable heroine must be. Yet there's relief as well. I left loving Nory, but I was glad to be going nonetheless.

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