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## Inside Game

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American Book Review, Volume 42, Number 4, May/June 2021, pp. 7-8 (Review)

Published by American Book Review

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2021.0058>



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Márquez of *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), or Mathias Enard's *Zone* (2008), although *Aphasia* is more concentrated in its scope, less rhetorical than a Bernhardian "rant" and less dependent on narrative than García Márquez and Enard (even the nested, retrospective narrative of *Zone*). Discursive as they are, Cárdenas's long sentences in a sense seem more crafted, more deliberately composed to signify the presence of consciousness. If writers such as Marquez and Bernhard are among the writers who first challenged not just conventional narrative form or the protocols of realism but the structural and syntactical expectations of fictional discourse itself, Cárdenas is able to adapt their practice to a self-sufficient verbal strategy that uses this disrupted discourse as an available aesthetic resource.

What is most admirable about *Aphasia* is the way in which he does in fact execute this strategy not just for the purpose of depicting his protagonist's stream of consciousness but to realize what turns out to be a fully developed and conventionally recognizable crisis narrative in which the protagonist faces the various causes of his crisis and in the end manages, if not a solution to all of his problems, at least a reprieve. Along the way, much is revealed about Antonio and his past, contributing to the creation of a "well-rounded" character, as at the same time we are provided an account of his present actions (principally his interactions with his former wife and daughters, but also his "arrangements" with the women from the dating app) and his ultimate reunion with his sister, who is again being treated for her mental illness. In addition to these channels of Antonio's direct experience, the separate chapters focused on Antonio's reading of various works of fiction (presumably as a substitute for his own current inability to write much himself) are integrated into the novel's narrative structure,

incorporated into Antonio's ongoing reckoning with his circumstances.

Cárdenas's endeavor to create the appearance of stream of consciousness, then, is not simply carrying out the imperative to provide psychological depth (to "get inside" for its own sake) but is another means of accommodating the breadth of Antonio's experience, through something other than usual formal and stylistic conventions. In short, Cárdenas uses stream of consciousness as an aesthetic device, not as a revelation of the human mind at work. The former, I would argue, is what makes *Aphasia* most worth the reader's attention, what signals to us an author taking his medium seriously as literary art, not the novelist's putative authority to probe the human mind. Indeed, to the extent that the impression of Antonio's mind at work is largely created by the writer's loosely joined, onrushing sentences, *Aphasia* could be called an exercise in style, albeit one absent the standard sort of decorative lyricism that often passes for style in American fiction.

It is through style that we come to know Antonio, even though the novel is not a first-person narrative. Being a writer, not his routinized job as a data analyst, clearly seems an essential ingredient in his sense of identity, and it is more likely that the novel's prose is a reflection of Antonio's own writing than a facsimile of his thought process. Such a presumption is only reinforced by those parts of the book that are not in fact representations of thought but include Antonio's transcriptions of tapes of his mother speaking, his conversations with former girlfriends, and his reunion with his sister. These sections employ the same elongated sentences as those depicting Antonio's solitary deliberations, indicating that *Aphasia*'s focus on the protagonist's internal state provides a suitable

context for Cárdenas to effect the sort of prose style he favors, not the subject in service of which a prose style has been fashioned.

Rendering the internal perspective is not finally the most serious task that a work of fiction might undertake. At best it can fool us into believing we have access to a character's inner self (and by analogy to human inwardness in general). This is not an inconsequential feat, if not the form's *raison d'être*. Even if you think that pulling off such a feat is the preeminent achievement of fiction, however, *Aphasia* would surely be judged a success in satisfying this goal. But in this case it would hardly suffice in acknowledging either the novel's ambition or its value to say it is a successful work of psychological realism. Yes, we might say we are provided with a vivid portrayal of Antonio's state of mind, but that is not really the point. What Cárdenas has really done is in a sense to merge style and form so that style actually produces form, a move that is seriously impressive.

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## Tropic of Typewriters

Yonina Hoffman

### TYPEROTICA

Lee Siegel

Deuxmers

<https://www.deuxmers.com/authors/lee-siegel/typerotica>

222 Pages; Print, \$14.95

"There are a lot of funny movies," one of my students recently remarked in a conversation about genre, "but serious literature is not often very funny." The comment sat with me. Yes, there are *some* funny books among serious literature, but why do we associate seriousness with darkness and tragedy? And which authors right now resist that association?

Lee Siegel is one of them. Since his first novel *Love in a Dead Language* (1999) he has established himself as a serious novelist, crafting playful and complex stories that brim with ideas about textuality, meaning, history, technology, and media — all of which are driven by the undeniable, and undeniably absurd, force of love. In their self-conscious play with narrative structure, coupled with their embrace of the body, Siegel's novels inherit the tradition of Nabokov and John Barth, Philip Roth and James Joyce, exploring the

euphoria of love, its connection to language, and the deep physicality of both.

His latest, *Typerotica*, autobiographically examines the artist as a young man, but its idea of desire is starkly different from Stephen Dedalus's shameridden riot of the body. Instead, Siegel's novel is playfully silly about the ways our desire — and our language — are shaped. Structured as an introduction and two novellas, *Typerotica* layers three different moments in the life of Lee Siegel: a fifteen-year-old Siegel's infatuation with his typing teacher; a twenty-year-old Siegel's love affair with a married woman in Paris, during which he composed

### ***Typerotica's layering offers a complex advancement of Siegel's art.***

*QWERTYUIOP* (about the typing teacher); and a seventy-three-year-old Siegel's reflections on these experiences, during which he writes *AZERTYUIOP* (about Paris), annotates both novellas, and pens the introduction.

That introduction recounts *Typerotica*'s genesis: Siegel's mother, reading through a box of his juvenalia in the basement, found the manuscript of *QWERTYUIOP*: "Kind of dirty," she says, "but I like it anyway." Reading it, Siegel recalls the "delirious exhilaration" of writing's sexuality: "Typing on a typewriter was for me to writing fiction what sex was to love." Though his pretentious

and naïve youthful manuscript embarrasses him, it reminds him of his promise, to his Parisian girlfriend Seraphine, that he would write a love story about her. With *AZERTYUIOP* Siegel fulfills that promise.

Before we meet Seraphine, though, *QWERTYUIOP* plunges us into Siegel's coming-of-age with Miss Josephine Hammond, typing instructor at the Kitzler Academy of the Secretarial Arts and Sciences in Summer 1960. Learning to type allows Siegel to prepare manuscripts but also to connect with Miss Hammond, helping her train for a typing competition. In one of their meetings, a blindfolded Siegel "explored her body with the fingers she herself had trained to type by touch" and "applied all that I had learned ... about typing to lovemaking." Five years later in Paris, Siegel obtains the same model of typewriter (and a new girlfriend, Seraphine) while writing the story of Miss Hammond; along the way, he learns a lot about love, loss, and French literature from Seraphine, who is an avant-garde dancer married to "Le Grand Denys," the absurd genius director of her troupe. Fifty years later, rejuvenating his writing mojo, Siegel purchases the same typewriter — a Royal De Luxe.

The association between the physicality of the typewriter and of sex is one of the dominant ideas of the book. One's hands, which must develop the precision, rhythm, and strength to work the

—————Hoffman continued on next page