

BOOK REVIEW: LESS BY ANDREW SEAN GREER

By

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Who says you can't run away from your problems?

The blurb of the 2018 Pulitzer winning book *Less* begins with this rhetorical question. The protagonist – Arthur Less is on the cusp of turning fifty. He is an author whose works have earned him the reputation of being a “magniloquent spoony” (Greer 29). He has had a string of failed relationships – both serious and casual. His mid-life crisis reaches a crescendo when he receives an invitation for his ex-lover's wedding. Too heartbroken to go but too proud to refuse, he instead decides to accept seven invitations from around the world – a literary event in New York City, a conference in Mexico, a literary award ceremony in Italy, a short teaching opportunity in Germany, a small vacation with friends in Morocco, a literary retreat in India and a visit to Japan to research its cuisine for an article. Less's picaresque journey across the globe – meant to be an escape from his problems – rather brings him face-to-face with them and he emerges victorious.

Andrew Sean Greer says about writing *Less*, “It sounds strange, but what I was writing about was so sad to me that I thought the only way to write about this is to make it a funny story. And I found that by making fun of myself, I could actually get closer to real emotion — closer to what I wanted in my more serious books” (Charles). Indeed a comedic rumination of heartbreak and ageing as a gay man is an unconventional choice for the coveted Pulitzer. Literary honors are usually reserved for works of more serious tone and subject matter. Comedies in the contemporary literary scenario are considered to be a lesser genre – the poor cousin of serious works, only written by authors to make their oeuvre more varied. Traditionally, this has not been the case. We never learn to consider Shakespeare's comedies as secondary to his tragedies. In fact, even within his tragedies, jesters serve the function of truth-telling. They point out what is ignored by the main characters of the play. Isaac Asimov observes, “That, of course, is the great secret of the successful fool – that he is no fool at all.” (Shakespearean fool)

Why does the comedy genre then suffer such a poor fate in the modern world?

The Washington Post says, “Our critical resistance to comic novels attracts fewer writers to the form and leads to less interest from publishers. And that grim bias trudges out across the culture and gets disastrously reinforced in schools. We may all start off by reading the zany antics of Dr. Seuss, but by high school, the message is clear: ‘Abandon all mirth, ye who enter here.’ Ennui and despair are the province of the Great American Novel” (Charles). *Less* indicates a shift in our literary tastes. The human condition is as laughable as it is serious and Greer captures that spirit in *Less*; that is what makes it a Pulitzer winning book.

Greer is an American novelist and *Less* his fifth novel. While speaking to The Guardian about *Less* he says, “There’s a gap on my bookshelf for a story about two men in love that isn’t about trauma and despair and I wanted to write that book” (Beckerman). He credits Proust, Nabokov and WG Sebald as his inspiration and says, “...for *Less*, I read Philip Roth often... I hope by osmosis I’m picking up some of their language or sensibility or, hopefully, even stealing outright from them.” (Beckerman)

The book’s structure is based on Arthur Less’s itinerary, so the chapters are named—Less at first, Less Mexican, Less Italian and so on with the final chapter—Less at last. Another unique aspect of the book is its narrator whose identity is kept secret and is only revealed towards the end of the book.

The book begins with the sentence: “From where I sit, the story of Arthur Less is not so bad” (Greer 3). It is made clear that the story is from the perspective of an “I” whose identity we do not yet know. Less is first introduced to the readers as he waits in a hotel lobby, “...blue suit and white shirt, legs knee-crossed...the pose of a young man... once pink and gold with youth, (he has) faded like the sofa he sits on, tapping one finger on his knee and staring at the grandfather clock”(Greer 3). The central theme of the book – ageing is swiftly hinted upon as the first image we get of Less is him staring at Time. It is important to note that he is wearing a blue suit. The suit is a recurring motif in the book and is often described by the narrator as ‘Lessian’.

Less is a man experiencing mid-life crisis. He is approaching fifty and is still single. As an author too, he is not very well known. He is invited to literary events mainly because of his association with his ex-lover, the famous poet Robert Brownburn.

Robert Brownburn was Less’s first love. He was just twenty-one when he began a relationship with Brownburn. But more importantly, Brownburn was forty-six and married to a woman. Less for Brownburn was like an escape from life. Less describes the time when they went on a last minute trip to Mexico, “...he had known Robert for only a month; their encounters for drinks had turned into rented hotel rooms, and now...being whisked away to Mexico...he understood that Robert was on something, probably some amphetamine one of his artist friends had given him...they smoked and made love all weekend...he (Less) never asked the crucial question – *where is your wife?*” (Greer 52)

Brownburn was a Pulitzer winning poet. He was known for being a part of the Russian River School. This school of poets included many other famous artists just like Robert. They would camp near a Russian river, smoke drugs and read poetry. Less says he missed all the fun of the school because when he started dating Robert, the other artists were already in their middle-age and had settled down for a less adventurous life. Robert dating Less had caused

quite a scandal in this group and Less came to be known as the boy who made Robert leave his wife.

Less was not a part of the group as a writer but as Brownburn's lover. He was an observer of geniuses at work rather than a participant.

Brownburn always encouraged Less to write. Less was already in his thirties when he wrote his first novel *Kalipso* about a World War II soldier found washed ashore. He is saved by a local man who resuscitates him and they fall in love. The local man helps the soldier return to his home – back to his wife. His book is reviewed by a critic who calls him a “magniloquent spoony”(Greer 29). Brownburn simplifies the critique, “Arthur, he’s just calling you a faggot”(Greer 29). Despite the less-than-warm praise from critics, Less continued to write. His subsequent novels *The Counterglow* and *Dark Matter* were better received but he was never as successful as Robert. At one point in the novel, Less is asked by an acquaintance, “You and me, we’ve met geniuses. And we know we are not like them, don’t we? What is it like to go on, knowing you are not a genius, knowing you are a mediocrity? I think it’s the worst kind of hell” (Greer 56).

Less understands that his talent fades in comparison to Brownburn's and knows the literary community knows him better as Brownburn's partner than as an author himself. This too has a part to play in his mid-life crisis.

Less's relationship with Brownburn was not monogamous. Brownburn was aware of this and felt that he didn't want to come in the way of young Less living his life. Their relationship lasted for nine years and ended just as it had begun – suddenly.

Arthur Less's relationship with his second love Freddy Pelu is like a pathos-filled déjà vu.

Arthur Less first met Freddy Pelu at a party which they both wanted to escape. At the time Less was still in a relationship with Brownburn and Freddy was a teenager. Freddy and Less quickly bonded over their mutual love for poetry and stayed friends. Freddy is Less's nemesis Carlos Pelu's nephew. Carlos adopted him after he was orphaned.

Freddy grew up to be a high-school English teacher. Finding Carlos's house unbearable, he would show up drunk at Less's place reciting poetry. They would spend the weekend together and then part when the week began. Just like Less's relationship with Robert, his relationship with Freddy too was not monogamous. Both Less and Pelu dated other men while continuing their liaison with each other. Young Freddy wasn't looking for love and Less didn't expect it anyway. The narrator says, “Arthur Less had always fallen for older men; they were the real danger. Some kid who couldn't even name the Beatles? A

diversion; a pastime; a hobby” (Greer 14). For Less, Freddy was his escape from his world. He considered their relationship to be harmless fun.

Less describes the time he and Freddy went on a trip to Paris: “Lewis had told him of an exclusive men’s boutique...Freddy in a black jacket, seeing himself in the mirror, transformed from studious to glorious...the hopeful look on Freddy’s face; Less had to buy it for him, though it cost as much as the trip. Confessing to Lewis later of his recklessness, and getting the reply: “Is that what you want on your grave? *He went to Paris and didn’t do one extravagant thing?*” Later, he wondered if the extravagant thing was the jacket or Freddy.” (Greer 136)

Their relationship went on for almost a decade and ended when Pelu announced that he’s seeing someone who wants to be monogamous. This is when Less’s façade is exposed – he is deeply hurt but lets Freddy go. He feels it’s the right thing to do as Freddy is still young and deserves a partner who will be with him till the end. Less is afraid that he would again be the topic of gossip among his friends. “Sad young Arthur Less had become sad old Arthur Less,” the narrator says. (Greer 17)

Even after several years apart from Pelu, Less finds himself still heartbroken and alone. He is terrified of spending the second half of his life without a partner. He is shattered when he receives Freddy’s wedding invitation in the mail. He cannot go but he cannot stay at home. As a diversion, he accepts seven invitations from around the world. He promises himself that he will not think of Freddy Pelu in his travels. But at every step of his journey, Less breaks his promise.

Being a middle-aged gay man is confusing for Less. He feels, “...(he) is the first homosexual to ever grow old...he has never seen another gay man age past fifty...they died of AIDS, that generation. Less’s generation often feels like the first to explore the land beyond fifty” (Greer 34).

Robert is the only older gay man he knows and he is holed up in a medical facility, his estranged wife right beside him. They communicate via video-calling every other week and it is sad for Less to see him attached to oxygen tubes, a shadow of the man he used to be. Less is afraid of ageing, of death – the eternal human fears. But he is most fearful of ageing alone.

Less fondly remembers the times he went on camping trips with his father and cooking potatoes on the bonfire and telling ghost stories. Many years later, he found a book in his father’s library called *Growing Up Straight* which offered advice on how to raise a ‘sissy’ son. In this book, activities like camping and telling ghost stories had been underlined with a blue pen. Less was disappointed but it didn’t take away the nostalgia of those memories.

Less is comfortable with his gay identity and his novels prominently feature gay characters. Throughout the book, we see him pitying himself for not being a good enough writer when a conversation with a friend comes as a rude awakening for him. His friend asks if Less has ever wondered why he has never won any awards? Why the gay press doesn't review his books? Why he is not considered to be a part of the gay cannon taught at universities? Less thinks it is because he is an average writer but his friend explains that he is not a bad writer but a bad gay! He says, "It is our duty to show something beautiful from our world. The gay world. But in your books, you make the characters suffer without reward... *Kalipso* was beautiful. So full of sorrow. But so incredibly self-hating. A man washes ashore on an island and has a gay affair for years. But then he leaves to go find his wife! You have to do better. For us. Inspire us, Arthur. Aim higher. I'm so sorry to talk this way, but it has to be said"(Greer 144).

This understandably elevates Less's anxieties. He thinks, "...he was merely a bad writer. A bad lover, a bad friend, a bad son. Apparently the condition is worse; he is bad at being himself" (Greer 145).

Before this event, Less was very excited for his next novel *Swift* about "A man on a walking tour of San Francisco... returning home after a series of disappointments." (Greer 30) This led Freddy to remark "All you do is write gay *Ulysses*". (Greer 30)

But at the very beginning of his tour, he is ditched by his agent as he feels Less's novels are repetitive and not worth his investment. Wallowing in self-pity, he wonders about *Swift*: "What is it isn't a poignant, wistful novel at all? What is it isn't the story of a sad middle-aged man on a tour of his hometown, remembering the past and fearing the future; a peripatetic's of humiliation and regret; the erosion of a single male soul?" (Greer 195)

Less thinks that he will never be acknowledged as a writer because he is too old to be discovered and too young to be rediscovered. He is frustrated with his life when his friend Zohra, a fellow fifty-year old, puts things in perspective for him: "A white middle aged-American man walking around with his white middle-aged American sorrows?...Arthur, sorry to tell you this. It's a little hard to feel sorry for a guy like that."

"Even gay?" says Less

"Even gay!" she responds. (Greer 170)

Less acknowledges that his problems are first-world problems at best but he is so deeply psychologically tormented by them that even physical distance doesn't help him heal.

He chooses temporary diversions as an escape from his mind – where thoughts of his mediocrity, his heartbreak and his age are eating away at him. He indulges in a temporary

affair with a young man in Germany who suggests that Less should grow a beard and he does. For him, growing a beard is a soothing activity as it is something he still has control over. One of the funniest scenes in the book is when he gets locked out from his room after a night away at his German lover's place; So, Forty-nine year old Less jumps into his room from the open window. A woman notices him and "she knows he is not a thief; he is clearly just an American." (Greer 108)

The blue suit that he wears often in the book is an extension of him. He often says that there is no Arthur Less without the suit. He ordered it in a drunken stupor and chose the most extravagant colour he could find – a testament to his youth. The suit comes to a gnarly end when in the India leg of his trip, a dog tears his suit to pieces. He goes to buy another suit but this time the tailor suggests he should get a grey one – more suitable for his age.

Towards the end of the book, Less gets a call from Robert Brownburn's wife. She informs him that Robert had suffered a stroke and is recovering. Less arranges for a video call with Robert and he sees half of Robert's face was drooping because of the stroke. Robert was given silly-putty by the hospital staff to keep his mind active. It is a pathetic image – seeing a remarkable poet's mind be reduced to being kept stimulated by silly-putty. Despite the position he is in, Robert asks if he is sad at Freddy's wedding to someone else. Less confesses he is heartbroken and Robert tells him he is not too old to meet someone new or to live his life the way he wants to. Brownburn says he was worried to be fifty but lying in a hospital bed after a stroke he wonders why he ever thought a healthy life at fifty was worth worrying about. He implores Less to choose to be happy. Less tries to heed his advice, as always, Brownburn had been a sage and valuable presence in his life.

The mysterious narrator of the book is finally revealed to be none other than Freddy Pelu. Less has been described so intimately in the book – his thoughts, his anxieties, his fears, his awkwardness are all explored so intensely that as a reader, it comes as no surprise that the narrator is Freddy Pelu. Less spends the majority of his thoughts pining for Pelu and chiding himself for not confessing his love for him sooner, for not being brave enough to realize his relationship with Pelu wasn't harmless flirtation but Love and for letting his fear of ageing end their relationship. So far into the book, we are not told if Pelu feels the same, if he too is still in love with Less.

The narrator shares that he is on his honeymoon with his husband and he looks at Pelu and says, "I really wish you weren't crying right now" (Greer 257). Pelu's marriage lasted all of twenty-four hours as he realizes his heart belongs to Less.

The story ends on an optimistic note as we see Pelu walking up the stairs to Less's house calling out to Arthur Less.

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