

This short book review outlines clearly the main themes developed by Paul Auster in his latest novel.

1. Read it and write down what, in your opinion, August Brill looks like. You will have to use the dictionary, since I would like you to give me a detailed portrait of the main character. Imagine you can see him, but I can't. Describe him to me in a way that I could recognize him should I meet him somewhere. Hunt for as many adjectives as possible: they are the ones that make people "see" things in books. What is he wearing? What is his face like? Hair, nose, ears, cheeks, etc. What about his tone of voice? And his posture? And gait? Is there anything peculiar about him that struck you? Has he got a twitch? Has he got a whim, little mania?
2. August Brill tells himself real and imagined stories at night. You are August Brill (reread your description of him and try to wear his shoes), you can't sleep, what is the story you are telling yourself tonight? It can be real or imagined. Remember that in a story you should make the reader see, hear, feel, perceive things as real. So, once again, try to use adjectives that appeal to all the senses. It's your turn to be a fantastic writer. Looking forward to reading your story!!! Send it to me via e-mail so that I will be able to post it if you want me to. (chiccaipsia@libero.it)

Book review - Man in the Dark, Paul Auster <http://www.independentweekly.com.au>

GEORGIA GOWING

August Brill is a damaged man lying awake in the dark in a house full of grief. Upstairs, his daughter, broken-hearted over her broken marriage, and his granddaughter, grieving for her murdered boyfriend, also lie awake and alone. Brill is doing his best to plug with stories all the chinks in his mind that could let the memories in. By day, he whiles away the hours watching movies with his granddaughter. By night, he tells himself tales, both real and imagined, as he waits for the darkness to dissolve.

The premise for New Yorker Paul Auster's latest book is simple and it works well. His deft prose is also simple: spare and pared back, yet infused with horror and with moments of aching beauty. Part of the book is taken up with the story Brill is telling himself to pass the nights, the tale of solid Owen Brick. Set in a parallel America where the terror attacks on New York never happened, but where a civil war is killing thousands, it is reminiscent of the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges. Brick, an imaginary character in an imaginary world, must kill the man who dreamed both him and the war into being.

The story is, of course, just a sideline to keep Brill from thinking about the real stories, the ones that truly worry him: his bittersweet marriage, his wife's death and the horrific murder in Iraq of his granddaughter's boyfriend, Titus.

Many other writers have tried to write about September 11 with varying levels of success. Auster comes at the subject in a glancing way that does not attempt to talk about crashing planes or falling buildings and therefore does not feel so heavy-handed. If Brick's story does clunk to a rather abrupt close, Auster convinces us that it is because Brill as creator-character can simply see no way out of the fable. *Man in the Dark* is that rarest of beasts: a multi-layered literary novel with well-made characters that also manages to be a page-turner.

Read the book review below and make notes as to the most important points the journalist is trying to make.

The book reviewer draws a comparison between Paul Auster and Luigi Pirandello. What are the similarities and differences?

What are the main themes present in the novel you can envisage from reading this book review?

What is the book reviewer's response to the latest book by Auster?

Man in the Dark By *Paul Auster*

International Herald Tribune <http://www.iht.com>

Reviewed by Janet Maslin Published: August 27, 2008

Civil war rages between America's 16 seceding blue states - incensed by the rule of George W. Bush - and the red-state-backed federal government. Twelve million have been killed so far. Brick, a children's magician from New York City, is conscripted by the blue leadership to put an end to the war by assassinating the man who invented it and keeps it going.

That man is not President Bush. He is a 72-year-old book critic named August Brill who, afflicted by all manner of troubles, spends an insomniac night making up stories. The main story, which takes up the first half of "Man in the Dark," invents both the war and the travails of Brick as he tries alternately to carry out his kill-Brill mission and desperately to evade it.

And so, the latest product of Paul Auster's more than 20-year career as the most meta of American metafictional writers. It is a career that has won him considerable esteem in European literary circles, where the project holds pride of place over the product; and more restricted esteem here, where it is the other way around.

The puzzle of "a man who must kill the person who created him" is the latest of many versions of what the Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello devised close to a century ago. His characters (in "Six Characters in Search of an Author") take over his play and proceed to denounce him.

Pirandello's figures, though, had a touchingly rounded humanity to them. Brill's are gray and flat in their roles. They could be human chess pieces enlisted by some powerful and capricious potentate to play out the game on his palace lawn. Even Brick, whom Brill switches back and forth between the devastated war world and the parallel regular world (where he needs to be if he is going to assassinate Brill), is little more than a pawn.

Before the characters-versus-author game reaches its logically impossible conclusion, Brill shuts it down to tell the more conventional story he has hinted at between meta-hops. Through the long night, in a wheelchair in his Vermont cottage, he has been contemplating ruins.

His own, first of all. His writing talent has been squandered, he tells us, on thousands of 700-word and 1,500-word reviews. He is a sprinter, not a long-distance writer; indifference has brought him to a halt partway through an attempted book-length memoir. His leg is shattered after a near-fatal car crash.

Sonia, his wife, left him years before, because of his liaison with a younger woman; later they came back together, but now she is dead and guiltily mourned.

Living with him is his daughter, Miriam, deeply depressed after her husband divorced her and, like her father, went off with a younger woman.

No cheerier is Katya, his granddaughter, paralyzed with guilt because a lover she'd rejected went off to Iraq and was kidnapped and filmed as his head, like Daniel Pearl's, was cut off. She spends much of the time snuggling beside Brill as they watch three classic films each day.

Perky amid this depressive recital, where even the adulteries - oh, for a Cheever, an Updike, a Roth - are no fun, is Katya's film theory.

The emotional key to the great classics, she proposes, is things.

Dirty dishes in "Grand Illusion," a ceiling-high shelf of pawned clothes in "The Bicycle Thief." Auster, who has written screenplays, knows a lot about films, and Katya's examples are suggestive.

Auster is a longtime disbeliever in narrative connection. The long Brick section is detached in style, content and emotion from Brill's subsequent painful recitation. The painfulness itself is suddenly disconnected at the end, with hope breaking out just as the sun rises.

The intent is not camp, nor is it parody. It is an act of disbelief in traditional fictional values. The trouble is that the disbelief is getting to be as old as the values. With "Man in the Dark," Auster's literary collider has lost its subatomic energies; the result is wan as well as scattered.

[Read the following book review and say what useful information you can find in it you couldn't in the book reviews you read before.](#)
[Out of the two long book reviews you read, which one did you like better? Why?](#)

Sleepless in Vermont

By TOM LeCLAIR
Published: September 19, 2008

A few years ago, Paul Auster told an interviewer that "I get the best reviews and the worst reviews of any writer I know." His previous novel, "Travels in the Scriptorium," rewarded his best reviewers and other admirers with a reunion of previous Auster characters in a familiar plot of confused identity. With this new one, "Man in the Dark," Auster takes revenge on his worst reviewers by making his protagonist/narrator a 72-year-old literary critic with multiple miseries. His sister may have committed suicide, his wife has recently died, and his daughter and granddaughter are deeply unhappy. He suffers from insomnia and walks with a crutch because his leg has been mangled in one of those accidents Auster likes to inflict on his characters.

As the longtime book editor of *The Boston Globe*, August Brill wrote more than 1,500 essays, but he now believes all this work to be “ephemera.” The only book project he ever began, a memoir about and for his family, was abandoned. Although he no longer writes, he tells himself stories in the dark to avoid thinking about the women with whom he lives: a daughter grieving over a broken marriage, and a granddaughter mourning a former boyfriend killed in Iraq. The novel is the narrative of one such sleepless night, a “Long Night’s Journey Into Day,” in which Brill invents a character named Owen Brick, a happily married 29-year-old man who wakes up in a parallel contemporary world where the United States is fighting a civil war. This Rip van Brick must cope with separation from his wife, altered conditions — random bombardments, very high inflation, no TV, few cars — and quantum quirks, like running into his teenage “heartthrob.” With this woman’s aid, secessionists from the federal government dictate a mission implausible: Brick must return to the “real” world of 2007 and kill Brill, who has caused the civil war by imagining it.

Brick’s story is interrupted by Brill’s memories, by his awareness of physical discomforts and, near dawn, by his granddaughter, who also can’t sleep. She lies down next to him and slowly, persistently, forces him to reveal the most painful part of his past, his betrayals of her beloved grandmother. By morning Brill has, through this nocturnal transmission, finished his memoir.

Invigorated, Brill wants “a farmer’s breakfast.” He doesn’t realize the full extent of the punishment Auster has in store for him. Although a lifelong reader, Brill is in the dark as a storyteller: his alternative-world plot is hackneyed in concept and rickety in execution. But if his account of a war between American liberals and conservatives is sketchily imagined, Brill does no better with his personal materials, confabulated anecdotes rendered in a flat, chronicling style. One of his favorite phrases, which closes the book, is taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s daughter Rose: “the weird world rolls on.” The sentence summarizes Brill’s banality and lack of originality, which discourage emotional engagement from anyone not a blood relative.

“Man in the Dark” might be mistaken for a clever mockery of literary critics if the slackness of Brill’s narration didn’t also mar Auster’s other recent fiction. Auster is 61, but the focal characters of his last three novels are figurative or literal old men. The narrator of “Oracle Night” walks like a “shuffling geezer” after a near-fatal illness; the narrator of “Brooklyn Follies” has moved to Park Slope to die; and Mr. Blank of “Travels in the Scriptorium” is a geriatric case. Like Brill, these characters ultimately manage a modest revival, but for long stretches their sensibilities are dull, their perceptions dim, their language fatigued. Feeble figures, they provide a low-energy, high-fiber perpetuation of the Auster brand.

“Man in the Dark” is a slightly new and improved “Travels in the Scriptorium,” which it partially rewrites in a semi-realistic vein. Both B-men occupy a context of imaginary political unrest, and both reveal themselves through their fictionalizing. But the buried associations between Brill’s civil war and the family battles of his past keep “Man in the Dark” within a marginally interesting

psychological realm, while “Scriptorium” is a self-regarding and airless authorial game. Yet the superiority of the new novel to “Scriptorium” becomes trivial when “Man in the Dark” is compared with a similar short novel by Max Frisch, “Man in the Holocene,” which is also about an elderly, desperate man who spends a night awake. The scientific and cultural expansiveness of Frisch’s novel make “Man in the Dark” seem narrow and perfunctory.

After, say, 10 books, maybe novelists should be retested, like accident-prone senior citizens renewing their driver’s licenses. Veterans of literary wars would anonymously submit a new manuscript to agents. Of “Man in the Dark,” I think they’d say, “third-rate imitation of Paul Auster.” Then the author might decide to rev up a first-rate imitation of his first-rate early work. Or he might write a fourth-rate attack on literary agents.

<http://www.nytimes.com>