

Conformityville: Rebellionaire Cheats Groupthink

Billy McCoy

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In the philosophical novel Conformityville, a young man with a striving mind has to choose between fitting in and forging his own path.

Often satirical and sometimes surreal, Billy McCoy's musing novel *Conformityville* follows a burgeoning intellectual's coming of age among his working-class family.

Toussaint is a "hyper-driven," high-minded man with a monomaniacal obsession with learning. He expresses empathy for his illiterate mother, who was hampered by a lack of a formal education. Still, his autodidactic interests and neuroses make him an outsider in his family, and he feels alienated among his peers, too. His childhood is a solitary one during which he's fed by a steady diet of authors and thinkers, including "Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Tennyson, Alaine Locke, Hughes, Kant, Nietzsche, Fichte, Ralph Ellison, Marx, Richard Wright and Kepler." His narration overflows with ideas, theories, and digressions in an ebullient and stimulating fashion.

Toussaint's narration reflects the fact that he is enamored by whatever he happens to be reading. Though his language is elevated and formidable, even at a young age, this is true to his characterization. Still, his grandiloquence leads to clunkiness throughout. And the same habits that make his speech distinctive are less convincing when they bleed into the words of other characters, who often sound too much like Toussaint. Toussaint's proclivity to caricature others, including his grandfather, grandmother, and mother, is additionally limiting: his assessments of people are harsh at times. But he also preserves snippets of conversations with verve, blending their high and low moments well, with proclamations like

Boy, the last words of Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus are prophetic: "Whereof one cannot speak, therefore one must be silent!" In his own highly idiosyncratic way Wittgenstein meant: close your pie hole!

Indeed, the novel is at its most immersive when it centers on its hero, whose own idiosyncratic speech patterns are appealing: he refers to his tobacco-chewing, moonshine-swilling grandfather as Homo Erectus and to his grandmother as Frau Verstopft. His flourishes are quirky and comedic. But he's also so caught up in his own head that he forms few connections with others; he is more concerned with establishing his own identity. He chafes against the prospect of becoming a wage slave or a "conformist hack" who succumbs to the "boredom of routine, thwarted hopes and blasted ambitions." And he pontificates for long stretches on the generic masses, the unintelligent legal system, mindless football fans, and other social ills.

Though the novel is more centered on Toussaint's stream of consciousness than it is on its plot, it still builds to a critical event: his mother goes on trial for stealing a half pound of bacon, a degradation that debases her given her religious piety. In the aftermath, Toussaint has an epiphany and sees her in a more sympathetic, holistic light. He becomes less dismissive of others, and his growth is earned and satisfying.

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JOSEPH S. PETE (November 11, 2022)

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