

TRANS-HUMAN GENETICS COMES TO TAMPA

M I C H A E L L . S H U M A N

O Brave New Eve: A Genetic Fantasy

By Donald L. Kaufmann

N.p.: Lulu, 2016

506 pp.

Trade paperback (ISBN 978-1-4834-3998-3): USD \$23.32

Cloth (ISBN 978-1-4834-3999-0): USD \$40.32

ePub edition (ISBN 978-1-4834-3997-6): USD \$0.99

Kindle edition: USD \$0.99

SHORT REVIEWS OF BOOKS AND OTHER MEDIA have a long and, perhaps, ignoble tradition. Charles Shaar Murray's *New Musical Express* review of the 1973 Lee Hazlewood album *Poet, Fool or Bum* answered that title's rhetorical question with one word: "Bum." A review of David Leavitt's 1998 novel, *The Page Turner*, upped the ante by doubling that word count: "It's not." Never mind that both reviewers found it necessary to twist the implications of the titles just a bit. Leavitt's narrative concerns a young man who assists a famous classical pianist by turning the pages of his score and not an invocation to compulsive reading; Hazlewood obviously intends "bum" as a noun to imply the artist's supposed wayward inclinations rather than an adjective describing unacceptable quality. A millisecond assessment, especially when dealing with questionable material, can deliver the goods in an effective way while protecting the consumer from wasting time on either the work or, more immediately, the review itself. All in all, a pretty good deal.

But there are times when a work comes along that is so complex, so imaginative, so very stratospheric in tone and content that a review of any length

would never communicate the originality of thought behind its creation. Donald L. Kaufmann's *O Brave New Eve: A Genetic Fantasy* presents just such a conundrum, and this review is accordingly brief in ineffable astonishment.

To appreciate this novel, written by a pioneering scholar of Norman Mailer's work and sharing that author's sensibilities if not approach, it is necessary not only to experience the thing itself but to go back a second and third time in both confusion and wonderment. Kaufmann's ideas and language resist immediate comprehension, with hipster lingo swirling through the narrative as if knitting the structure to keep characters and events from spinning out into the aether. A genetic fantasy this tome is, and science fiction that new-wave authors and critics such as Michael Moorcock would have celebrated in the sixties, and hip-guy eroticism such as the inimitable (and majestically-named) Orrie Hitt wrote, lightning fast, at the end of the fifties. There is little market for literature of this kind today, and the world is a poorer place for that.

Eve's world-beating plot concerns the Tampa-based efforts of one Doctor Victor (no, not the one you are thinking of, but he might as well be) to genetically engineer human birth through sperm-donation and womb-splicing, thus leaving the mother physically unaffected and mentally unaware of the process. As laboratory specimens in this process, Doctor Victor chooses Sophie, a street-reared orphan from the wayward side of the city whose natural air-headedness makes her an ideal candidate for the procedure, and Harry Lehr, the 60-year-old asexual descendent of a fabulously wealthy and appropriately haughty family. Doctor Victor's rival, and original inspiration, is Doctor Von Harvey at the Future Farm laboratory, who had "apparently shown how one could perform a miracle with the nonexistent. The neutrino, the mystery particle of the subatomic world, had been the genesis for a trans-human pig; and Victor now saw a nonexistent son as a genesis for a trans-human birth" (42). Library research follows, as Victor attempts to one-up his nemesis and win the Nobel Prize, even though Von Harvey's goal, if not his ego, is decidedly more modest: "Once there was the discovery of fire and the invention of the wheel," he tells transfixed television reporters, "and humankind will now be blessed with healthier and tastier pork" (152).

Victor's goal of upending the process of birth and consequently eliminating both the physical effects and the transcendence of motherhood is intentionally counter to human nature and inarguably socially destructive. Appropriately enough, then, Harry Lehr's aristocratic father, also named

Harry, somehow previously had destroyed the social distinction of his class and “accelerated the genesis of the demise of Society by altering it and laying it open to an influx of mass mindedness,” while Harry *films* “had been selected to accelerate the beginning of the end of human maternal instinct” (312). Sophie’s lack of identifiable lineage, combined with Harry’s nth degree pedigree, turns culture on its heels and threatens to radically convulse what it means to be human.

Sophie’s innate memory loss, a precursor to Victor’s procedure-induced amnesia of all future mothers, is symptomatic of the personal psychological aberration caused by an already-disintegrating culture. Just as Harry’s privileged ancestry is now devalued by society, a futuristic-seeming yet actually minutes-earlier version of our own, so does Victor’s bio-aberrational experiments threaten to disrupt the natural progress of generations, all in the name of preserving feminine beauty. “He was a humanist with a genuine heart,” Kaufmann writes of Victor, “and he could not forsake females in genuine distress. Victor imagined an overly pregnant woman seeing herself through his eyes, standing naked before her boudoir mirror, looking so ugly and feeling so sub-human. Victor and his DNA magic would make things right” (379). Victor, ever the researcher, obviously had no access to the works of psychologist Otto Rank or to the wide-range of other resources confirming childbirth as an empowering and even mystical process.

While people in Kaufmann’s world are mechanized by biological technology, automobiles curiously anthropomorphize into ur-human creatures saddled by buttocks and wrought with emotion. Sophie finds her Toyota at the most family-friendly dealer in Tampa, owned by Robert (not Bob) Hope, a self-proclaimed “Auto Completionist” who nurtures Rosetta (yes, the car’s name) through the loss of her one true love, Bruno (yes, a Firebird) with the benevolence of a physician. “But Sophie knew better. No one, not even an Auto Completionist, could fill the void left by Bruno. He had been Rosetta’s first, and no female ever forgot her first” (473). The romance of Rosetta and Bruno may be an artifact of Sophie’s dimmed-down memory, but ultimately Kauffmann’s comments on America’s love affair with the automobile and the disintegration of human relationships are at once humorous and insightful.

Should we look further at Sybil Munch, Victor’s dedicated gynecologist who reads paperback romances? Or Phineas Snyder, another zero-memory freak who, along with Memory Man, becomes midwife to the great birth ex-

periment? How about Bathroom Eddie, Sophie's one-time lover, or Kathryn Jayne, who lives with her centenarian mother and ends up with Sophie's gene-spliced progeny? I think not, and I think that from an abundance of concern that somehow, inevitably, the essence of Kaufmann's novel would be lost in the effort to dissect it.

Eve is a fitting companion to Kaufmann's massive *Bramble, Infant Martian* (2014) in terms of style, in tone, and in the infectious sense of otherworldliness curiously consistent with today's fractured society. Kaufmann, who somehow seemed immune from human frailty, unexpectedly passed away in October of 2015 at the age of 88, and lost with him is a whip-smart perspective on modern culture and a speculative imagination at once caustic and humorous. This book, a fitting tribute and remarkable last-bow, deserves a wider readership than Amazon reviews might suggest and that millennial readers might sustain. *Eve* somehow demonstrates the generational disconnect that it narratively describes, yet is as prescient, relevant, and quirky as anything by right-now authors such as David Foster Wallace, Amelia Gray, or Neal Stephenson. Ultimately, perhaps, *Eve* requires only a three-word review: Bum, it's not.