

Leslie Vryenhoek. We All Will Be Received

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Leslie Vryenhoek. *We All Will Be Received*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2019. ISBN 978-1-550-81804-8

Walker Percy, American novelist and critic, had a fondness for amnesia plots in cinematic thrillers; his particular favourite was the one played by Gregory Peck in Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound*. Peck, Percy noted, offered filmgoers the usual existential pleasures of rediscovering the self and, in the process, seeing the world anew as the character ostensibly recovered from a traumatic incident in the past. Forgetting who you are lets the id out to play, and the id might be a wild dinner guest, but at least she's not boring: Hitchcock famously talked Salvador Dali into designing the dream sequence. Percy, in his novels, finds ways of erasing his characters' pasts so that readers can rediscover themselves in rediscovering, and Hitchcock never stopped spicing his movies with a heavy dose of Freudian subtext and heaping side of existential dread.

Leslie Vryenhoek's *We All Will Be Received* ends and begins in hotels, the kinds of empty, budget hotels where bad things happen to people running from something awful in the rear view. Hotels are the perfect space for existential dread: their anonymity invites forgetfulness and promotes the illusion of reinvention. And Vryenhoek captures both the banality of these spaces as well as their *film noir* potential. Two of the novel's three hotels are located on the west coast of Newfoundland, and Newfoundland's stark stones, deformed trees, and greyscale sky—a kind of natural blank slate—put the characters loneliness, alienation, and existential urgency into stark relief. Those natural views—Newfoundland is the only place I know where the sky feels consistently uncanny—are framed by nondescript hotel windows where characters try to erase themselves, reinvent themselves, forget themselves, and find themselves.

Rosie, our central protagonist, is on the run from a bad boyfriend. In the opening she exits a cheap hotel hoping she won't wake him up from his epic bender. Hitchhiking out of the situation, she comes up against the blank spaces of truck stops and truckers and negotiates the

generic, yet dangerous, masculinity that greets her on the road. She meets a hero, of sorts, a trucker heading towards Newfoundland, and she begins to fade into the eastern sunrise, renaming herself Dawn. In Corner Brook she finds herself in another hotel, one where she eventually finds something resembling community and family. She steals someone else's identity. She gradually begins to remake herself.

Another plot line includes a young man trying to shake the legacy of being kidnapped and abused: Ethan doesn't quite know how to find himself outside of the narrative of his own childhood abduction and the stories his small-time actress mother needs to continue performing about the incident. Ethan is in a prison to the narrative others tell about him, narratives found all too easily on the living, pulsing memory of the Internet.

As the novel progresses, we are also introduced to Cheryl, a film director who has said the wrong thing at the wrong time and whose sin is now continuously documented and replayed every time someone Googles her name. She's fighting it out with her adolescent daughter, Jenna, a girl whose sexual indiscretion at a party was also captured, uploaded, and then instantly shared with the masses through the malignant magic of social media. Mother and daughter want, in other words, to be able to forget, yet at the same time Jenna cannot release herself from the desperate grip that social media exercises over so many of us.

As the novel descends through the decades, we also get to know Rosie/Dawn's bad boyfriend, Spencer, an ex-con made good. He has successfully rehabilitated himself after serving nine years in prison for a murder that he didn't actually commit. He still finds himself trapped in narratives that others wrote for him, narratives he unwillingly acquiesced to, unable to quite find out who he is apart from the role that has been assigned to him. He is recently separated from his wife and his son, and he wants them back. Searching the Internet for a decent hotel for the corporate conference he is organizing in Newfoundland, he comes across a familiar face. The Internet never forgives or forgets. Neither does he.

All of these plot lines begin to descend on a new hotel—actually an old hotel refurbished with discarded furniture—in St. Anthony. A

much older Rosie/Dawn owns this hotel, and—under the influence of her Elvis-loving truck-driving hero—she has named it Graceland. Our cast, in their various ways and for various reasons, make their way towards the Graceland of St. Anthony's, where Wi-Fi and cell service is spotty, and the Internet still functions like it did in 1998 for the rest of the continent. The knowing cloud of all our sins, in other words, has been severed, and our characters have been left with themselves and their pasts. Once the cast is assembled, the Northern Peninsula all too believably provides a blizzard to knock out power and thrust our characters into an even more uncomfortable intimacy. The result is a kind of inverted set piece: murder mysteries usually start with anonymity and end with revelation. Jenna, in a moment of boredom, proposes playing a game of Clue. Her mother appears to wink at the reader as she suggests that perhaps the game is a little too “on the nose.” This final existential hotel on the Northern Peninsula can't quite give everyone exactly what they need—a new start—despite its promises of grace.

Vryenhoek puts all the Clue pieces on the board in interesting ways—I read through the dénouement with anticipation—but I'm not sure these characters have the depth to make the plot as urgent as I'd like. For once I wanted a novel to be longer, not shorter: Ethan, in particular, feels underdeveloped. I liked Jenna the petulant teenager: I could have used more of her and her refreshing ability to shake the adult characters out of their predictably melancholic patterns of thought, and I wanted more of her social media mishap backstory. Mystery novels and thrillers invariably have to find ingenious ways to keep their narrative secrets up the magician's sleeve until the right moment; the novel succeeds in doing that, but the effort to misdirect a reader's view from certain plot elements occasionally felt strained.

These minor grumbles should not be taken too seriously. My allusions to favourites like Hitchcock and Percy should be taken for the deep compliments that they are. The novel reads quickly and tightly; the characters are interesting, and their existential dilemmas are firmly rooted in the twenty-first-century age of social media, the Internet, and global finance, for all of the novel's rural setting. A light yet tart

critique of the island's attempts to market itself as a tourist destination provides comic relief as well as a political comment on the deep digital weirdness of our current age. *We All Will Be Received* allows us to live in an existential hotel for its 300 pages, reimagining what we are, wondering where we came from, dreading where we are likely headed.

Nathan R. Elliott