

Literary Hijinks: Lorrie Moore's *Bark*

A Review of *Bark: Stories* by Lorrie Moore (Knopf, 2014), 192 pages.

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FROM ALL AVAILABLE evidence, Lorrie Moore's readers divide pretty neatly into two camps: those who see her seemingly endless supply of witticisms, quips, and "ba-dum tish" one-liners as gratuitous and pointless, and those who view them as purely mimetic. For the latter camp, Moore's idiosyncratic comic sensibility both reproduces and illumines their experience of life; for the former, her reliance on humor is at best an irritating indulgence, at worst a pointless tic. In the long-awaited new collection, *Bark*, Moore shows no sign of easing up on this most polarizing element of her work—in fact if anything, the collection has an even higher density of jokes-per-page than her previous collections, *Self-Help* (1985), *Like Life* (1990), and *Birds of America* (1998).

Since Moore's most recent short story collection was published more than sixteen years ago, it's worth taking a quick tour through Moore's bag of comedic tricks. The stories comprising *Bark* contain straightforward puns ("One of his Concertos in Be Minor"), surreal conjunctions ("In the chrome of the refrigerator she caught the reflection of her own face, part brunette Shelley Winters, part potato"),

and glibly tossed-off one-liners (one character describes Kentucky as being just “like Ireland but with more horses and guns”). There are also witty epigrams (“You could lose someone a little but they would still roam the earth. The end of love was like one big zombie movie”), vaudevillian slapstick (“The Juniper Tree” has a literal pie-in-face finale), and good old-fashioned wordplay (“a bazillion Brazilians”). For those who prefer their comedy in a darker hue, there are grimly comical asides on death, risqué child-abuse cracks (“A self-described ‘ethnic Catholic,’ he once complained dejectedly about not having been cute enough to have been molested by a priest”), as well as several gags for which the term “gallows humor” doesn’t quite go far enough: as in “Wings,” when Milton quips, “Of course she has on her gravestone ALONE AT LAST. So, I’m putting on mine NOT SO FAST.” In fact, in Moore’s universe, life itself has impeccable comic timing. The closing scene of “Paper Losses,” for instance—in which tourists holidaying in the Caribbean witness freshly hatched baby sea turtles making their way back to the ocean—starts out as an ecstatic vision, lovingly rendered in self-consciously lyrical prose: “The squirming babies were beginning to heat up in the warming sun; the goldening Venetian vellum of their wee webbed feet was already edged in desiccating brown.” But just as this idyllic scene is beginning to come into imaginative focus, Moore provides an unexpectedly macabre punch line: “one by one a frigate bird swooped in, plucked them from the silver waves, and ate them for breakfast.”

In the same vein, the story “Foes” exploits a culinary “witticism” (“Tomatoes stuffed with avocados and avocados with tomatoes”), while many characters discover puns hidden within everyday speech: “... he was really into English country dancing. Where eventually he met a lass. Alas.” Of course, another big specialty of Moore’s is her effortlessly witty banter. In fact, I’m convinced that rigorous statistical analysis would bear out my inkling that her characters trade more *bon mots* than anyone else in literary fiction:

"Nature can be cruel," said Pete.

"Nature can be one big horror movie!"

Moore is also a master of showing how relationships are so often built on a mutual comic sensibility, revealing the way that couples co-create their own little private languages, full of obscure jokes and arcane references understood by precisely two people. In "Wings," for instance, KC and Dench's relationship is full of insider exchanges, and the relationship begins to crumble when their private language itself breaks down. In such stories, Moore also dramatises the constant tension between humor and awkwardness: in a recent interview, she points out that her stories explore "the makeshift theatre that springs up between people at really awkward times—times of collision, emergency, surrealism, aftermath, disorientation."

Of course, none of these examples is likely to convince someone already predisposed to see Moore's comedy as a tic to pick up this collection. And if you're a long-time Lorrie Moore fan, you will most likely have already read all of these stories in the magazines in which they initially appeared (*The New Yorker* mostly, but also *Harper's* and *The Paris Review*). But it's probably worth reflecting a little on just what Moore is up to with her relentless jaspery, which defines her work in a way that seems unparalleled within contemporary American fiction. As hinted at earlier, I think that the best defense of her method has to do with mimesis—with seeing Moore's fiction as motivated by a genuinely realist impulse. Seen in this light, the stories in *Bark* make us aware of the ways in which we all leaven everyday conversations with both deliberate jokes—"I keep thinking of the hereafter: I walk into a room and say, What am I here after?"—and discovered half-jokes: "Here, have some gin. Goes in clean and straight—like German philosophy!" And since so many of the witticisms either conceal an unspeakable sadness or gloss over what is inexpressible, they gesture toward the countless ways in which we use comedy as a kind of semantic red herring, a way of tiptoeing around an underlying unpleasantness. Tonally, it

helps no end to read these stories with Moore's own sleepily gauzy reading voice in mind, which conveys just the right mixture of humor, sadness, and world-weary irony. (Is it just me, or does Lorrie Moore always look and sound as though she just rolled out of bed?) Footage of her readings is readily available on YouTube, so if you're a skeptic and have never heard her voice, knock yourself out: you'll never read her stories the same way again.

Ultimately, complaining about either the quantity or the quality of Moore's comedy seems sort of beside the point. If Moore's chief aim is mimesis, then you either agree or disagree with her take on what constitutes reality. Virginia Woolf thought that the writer's duty was to "inflict his own perspective upon us so severely that as often as not we suffer agonies," a thesis that seems particularly relevant here: if you find it impossible to acquiesce to Moore's "makeshift theatre" view of the world, at least for the duration of a short story, then you'll have a hard time enjoying this collection. A strong reaction against these short stories may in fact reveal more about your own worldview than Lorrie Moore's.

Another way of looking at *Bark's* particular sensibility is to see Moore's witticisms as attempts to coax the reader into paying attention to the collection's broader themes. At their best, her stories ripple out to encompass questions of gender ("Debarking"), environmentalism ("Paper Losses"), psychology ("Referential") or, as is more often the case in this particular collection, politics ("Debarking," "Foes," etc.). Indeed, *Bark's* stories frequently explore explicitly political content: Moore's characters have "John Kerry sticker[s]" on their suitcases, others discuss the racial politics at play in Barack Obama's election (who is playfully recast as either "Brocko" or "Barama," depending on one's political persuasion), while the particularities of character and event often take place against the backdrop of international warfare. The story "Foes" is Moore's most explicitly political piece—about an ideological opponent whose conservative beliefs, it ultimately emerges, stem from her experience of being

inside The Pentagon on 9/11—but almost all of these stories contain characters whose personal lives mirror broader political realities. Through such narratives, *Bark* investigates the precise degree to which the personal really is the political; Moore is incredibly deft at revealing both the ways in which everyday expressions and figures of speech can conceal or distort the truth, and how political rhetoric and international warfare infiltrate the lives of private citizens.

But in spite of *Bark's* highly sophisticated comic sensibility and the broader investigations that such a sensibility facilitates, the collection does have its faults. In fact, despite having one or two superlative stories (“Paper Losses” and “Thank You For Having Me”), *Bark* falls short of the precedent set by Moore’s previous collection, *Birds of America*, surely one of the high water marks for the American short story. Part of this collection’s disappointment arises through its tireless insistence on finding as many variations as possible on the word bark. To name just a few, there is the “Debarking” of the opening story, a dog’s bark (though the dog is, of course, named “Cat”), the “outer bark of the brain,” and a further permutation, in a wife’s accusation to her husband, “You *bark* at [people].” (Though one wonders how Moore missed the obvious phonetic pun *debacle*, which would have worked in “Debarking” or elsewhere.) Beyond such insistence, Moore hammers the point home in the three epigraphs hovering over the book, referring variously to a dog’s bark, the “pre-verbal” Neanderthal grunts that may as well have been barks, and to tree bark growing “around the wire fence like a grin.” There’s also the occasional vagueness and imaginative impenetrability of her prose: although *Bark's* stories are memorable, what’s memorable about them are their character sketches, tonal colors, jokes, and moods, rather than particularly vivid or striking images. Occasionally, as in the aforementioned turtle-massacre or in the honk-for-peace scene in “Debarking,” rendered as a gorgeous, “wild chorus of futility,” Moore’s scenes jump sharply into focus and clarity, but for the most part the reader’s visual detachment mirrors her characters’ ironised

distance from their own lives. (Can I be the only person who wishes that Lorrie Moore would give the reader more concrete images with which to anchor the stories in the imagination?)

Finally, there's the alarming number of typographical errors scattered throughout the text—an extra *t* in “little”; a backwards quotation mark; a bonus parenthesis slipped into “(dead and wed!),” among others—all of which would be unbelievably petty to mention if such editorial sloppiness didn't contrast so strongly with the meticulous precision of her prose.

Another slightly irritating aspect of *Bark* is its continual literary name-dropping: characters routinely mention novelists like David Foster Wallace, Edith Wharton, Don DeLillo, and Martin Amis, along with a veiled reference to Moore's own 1987 children's book *The Forgotten Helper*. Moreover, a “wiry old American pothead” with “the Dickensian name of Daniel Handler” turns up in “Paper Losses,” whose real-world namesake apparently won an online charity bid for the privilege of having a Lorrie Moore character named after him. Although such inclusions might seem fairly innocuous, they suggest that Moore's fiction might be growing both increasingly cloistered and more self-consciously literary. And though the imaginative reworkings of Henry James's *The Wings of The Dove* (“Wings”) and Nabokov's “Signs and Symbols” (“Referent”) are potent appropriations if one is familiar with their original source texts, they also confirm the sense that *Bark* is far more insular and cliquish than her two previous collections.

But aside from these few complaints, *Bark* is a compelling and endlessly entertaining collection. Essentially, these stories are like Lorrie Moore's earlier work, only more so. In many ways, she seems to be pickling (as it were) in her own juices: becoming a more concentrated version of her former self. Here's hoping that the next collection has an even deeper exploration of personal/political intersections, and that it extends the sophisticated interrogation of comedy that is Moore's most powerful literary weapon.