

Two novellas on the #MeToo issue: Mary Gaitskill's *This is Pleasure* and James Lasdun's *Afternoon of a Faun*

By Sandy English
9 September 2020

Mary Gaitskill, *This is Pleasure*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2019, 83 pp.

James Lasdun, "Afternoon of a Faun" in: *Victory: Two Novellas*, London: Vintage, 2019, pp. 103–263.

The #MeToo campaign has seized hold of and shaken film, artistic and literary circles in the US and beyond over the last three years.

What it has not done, however, is inspire any great or even serious work of art. Moreover, relatively little fiction has even been written about the complexities and ambiguities of both unsubstantiated accusations and the behavior that may, or may not, bring them on.

No major American or British fiction writer has excoriated the practice of "disappearing" or "canceling" important artists and their work overnight. The strain of this campaign on artistic thought and life has no doubt been considerable, but contemporary writers seem largely unequipped to understand the broader ramifications of the #MeToo operation.

However, the silence on the issue has not been absolute. Authors James Lasdun and Mary Gaitskill have each written a novella (short novel) that tries, with some success, to give a nuanced and sympathetic view of people's feelings and reactions under the weight of attempts to destroy them through allegations of sexual misconduct. Ultimately, both books fall short.

Lasdun's *Afternoon of a Faun* opens with a comment by a lecturer about the 2016 Republican Party presidential candidate at a "lunchtime talk" whose subject is rape.

In the audience are Marco Rosedale, a documentary film journalist whose career has been flagging for several years and the unnamed narrator, a writer and Marco's boyhood friend. Both are British expatriates (like Lasdun himself) living in New York.

Marco has learned that a woman, Julia Gault, also a childhood acquaintance of the narrator, is publishing a book in which she alleges that Marco raped her in a Belfast hotel room in 1975 while they were working together. The novella depicts Marco's fear and anxiety about the accusation. The narrator becomes involved and visits Julia. A tragedy occurs, and the story ends on a note of ambiguity.

In many respects, the self-centered and deceitful attitude and habits of the milieu that Lasdun writes about—the world of well-paid journalists, editors, lawyers—seem to be at the center of the tale's concerns.

It is more than a little dirty, for example, when a magazine editor who wants to publish an excerpt from Julia's memoir tries to gauge Marco's reaction and solicit a reply from him. "Memories can be slippery, can't they?" he says. "Perhaps you might want to remind

people that all kinds of behaviors we condemn now were considered perfectly acceptable in those days."

Marco's father, a prominent lawyer, subsequently blackmails the publisher of Julia's book by telling her, the wife of a Holocaust survivor, that Julia has also written a proposal for a book about a female Nazi aviator. The narrator remarks to Marco that Julia admires "the woman's stubbornness, not her actual beliefs." Marco replies, "'Maybe, maybe not. Either way, it did the trick.'"

Marco then becomes more relaxed and stops offering categorical denials that he forced himself on Julia in 1975. The narrator is dismayed and irritated. He had thought his defense of Marco to his family and friends was morally upright.

His emotional discomfort increases when he visits Julia and finds himself grilling her and is somewhat ashamed about this. And Julia herself adds in that conversation what she later admits is a lie about Marco sleeping with an underage girl, though she stands by her original accusation.

Lasdun's 2002 novel, *The Horned Man*, also deals with accusations of sexual harassment. The circumstances behind his own memoir, *Give Me Everything You Have: On Being Stalked* (2013), about a systematic campaign of harassment and public accusations of plagiarism and rape by a former student, have undoubtedly attuned him to the feelings of both genuine victims of abuse and victims of false accusations.

But at the same time, the novella cannot escape its allegiance to subjective skepticism and muddiness. The social and political context in which the sexual witch-hunt is taking place, the immense social and political crisis in the US and the disorientation of and shift to the right by substantial layers of the affluent middle class, simply never comes in for consideration, as though it didn't exist.

Early in the story, for example, Marco asks the narrator what he finds fascinating about the unproven accusations against people like the French politician Dominique Straus Kahn, who was accused of sexual assault by a New York hotel maid in 2011 (charges were later dropped), and the journalist and publisher Julian Assange, falsely charged by the Swedish government with rape in 2010.

The narrator replies that "in these kinds of situations there's no solid basis for judgment other than your own assumptions and prejudices. So you're forced up against yourself, your own mysteries."

The fact that these remarks can be made without a hint of irony about two such politically motivated "scandals" is telling. Strauss-Kahn was about to run for the French presidency as the

candidate of the Socialist Party, and Assange was the object of a CIA smear campaign for exposing American war crimes. But for Marco and the narrator, it remains a matter of perception. And the author seems to share this view. The whole discussion between Marco and the narrator leaves an unpleasant taste.

Lasdun's narrator, it is true, is aware that there may be larger processes behind the #MeToo campaign. After Marco tells him about his antics with a female professor at university as a student, in which she referred to the poem "Afternoon of a Faun" (1867) by French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, the narrator imagines himself in front of a "campus star chamber" where he responds to accusers:

"They were reactionaries in the guise of progressives, I informed them, puritans whose obsession with female victimhood masked impulses as controlling and infantilizing of actual women as the code of gentlemanly 'chivalry' ... I accused them of trying to bring back shame as an instrument of social control, of wanting to re-create a world in which a word, a rumor, an anonymous posting, could once again destroy an entire life. They'd trapped themselves, I declared, in the escalating logic of hysteria that ends, unflinching, in the witch hunt."

The soliloquy is valuable, but not acted upon and tends to get lost in the eddying moods. The character who has these thoughts but does nothing resembles many professionals and academics at present. They stand on the sidelines, often looking on in dismay at the #MeToo witch-hunt, rampaging racial politics or postmodern fakery, and keep their mouths shut.

The exceptional person, the morally vigorous character who has not been whipped into conformity has not made an appearance for a long time in American literature. Lasdun, one feels, has the artistic strength to bring him or her out, but he has chosen not to do so here.

Mary Gaitskill's *This is Pleasure* concerns figures in New York's publishing industry, a social layer not dissimilar to the one Lasdun describes. The work is alternately narrated by a female publisher, Margot, and her friend, Quin, a male publisher, who has been accused in a lawsuit by several present and former subordinates of various sexually inappropriate behavior such as spanking them, sending them suggestive photos and using lewd language.

Quin, a British expatriate (again), is an elegantly dressed man, flirtatious and creative. He comes from a wealthy background. He easily makes friends with the women who work with him, promotes their careers, gives them advice on clothes. He is a certain type of cultured petty bourgeois found in New York City: flippant, unconventional and generally harmless, if somewhat trite and irritating.

Some of his behavior is certainly out of bounds: one of the first times Margot meets him, he attempts to put his hand between her legs (an oblique reference to recorded remarks by Trump released during the election of 2016). "'NO!' I said, and shoved my hand in his face, palm out, like a traffic cop. I knew it would stop him." She proceeds to have a close friendship with him for the next two decades.

Gaitskill has demonstrated that she can accept and treat people as they are—for example, the prostitutes and drug addicts in the stories in *Bad Behavior* (1988), cultists in *Two Girls Fat and Thin* (1991), victims of the AIDS pandemic in *Veronica* (2005) and working class girls in *The Mare* (2015). She can also subject a social milieu to cutting criticism, as she did with the fashion industry in *Veronica*.

In this work, though, there is a good deal of empathy—sorely needed in the period of the #MeToo witch-hunt—but too little serious analysis of the circles and moods that spawned it. This comes out when

Gaitskill assesses Quin's accusers. One of them, Caitlin, who has participated in the suit against him, was his friend for 11 years.

"Why do you think she is so angry?," Margo asks Quin. "He shrugged. 'She asked what she had to do to get invited to my parties and I told her she had to flirt with me more. I think that really offended her.'" Such things can happen, but the resentment and sense of being demeaned referred to provide only a glimpse. Caitlin's motivations, the motivations of a whole set of people, are not explored by the author or morally weighed by the characters.

The bitterness and envy that seem to preoccupy the Manhattan publishing industry briefly appear again, when, after the papers reveal that Quin has sent Caitlin a suggestive video, he thinks it is absurd that "Caitlin holds a position that I helped her get and, from that position, accuses me of things that she was party to. Even more absurd, she is called 'brave' for it."

When Margot looks back on her friendship with Quin, she is angry at him for his foolish behavior. Then she thinks, "more than half of the women [in his office] had signed the endlessly circulating online petition, given interviews, demanded that Quin be fired, sought damages, made threats to boycott any company that would dare to hire him. They were angry, too."

Where does this anger come from? Quin later speculates that "they are angry at what's happening in the country and in the government. They can't strike at the king, so they go for the jester." Perhaps Quin the character can go no further with this train of thought, but surely the author ought to.

It is no surprise, as in Lasdun's work, that the causes of the #MeToo frenzy in American society at this moment do not trouble any of the people in *This Is Pleasure*. They are probably the last people who would understand the process. Their outlook is self-centered: Quin, like Marco, can ask, "Why is this happening to me?" but not "Why is this happening to society?"

What we said in a review of Gaitskill's *The Mare* can apply to both *This is Pleasure* and *Afternoon of a Faun*:

"Gaitskill has no doubt aspired to be independent of—or even oppose—the reactionary official atmosphere that has prevailed and the varieties of crude middle-class public opinion. Unfortunately, it is not so easy to get away from those things."

These are both short fictions about the ambiguity of human behavior and deserve credit for questioning the prevailing witch-hunting disposition in sections of the upper-middle class and, for revealing, to some extent, how the process works.

But a rigor is missing. The real question is the decay of cultural and intellectual life under the impact of brutal social inequality and the disintegration of American bourgeois democracy. Why are Lasdun's narrator's fantasies of revolt tepid? Why doesn't the publishing world drive Margot crazy? The character in revolt against the conditions at the root of the #MeToo campaign but also against the self-obsession and general callousness toward other people has yet to make his or her appearance in or, more correctly, return to American literature.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>