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The Devil And Pierre Gernet: Stories



Synopsis

Brilliant scholar and wordsmith David Bentley Hart turns his mind and imagination to narrative fiction in this volume, *The Devil and Pierre Gernet*, a thought-provoking collection of four short stories and one novella. Anticipating questions about his shift in genre, Hart writes that "God is no more likely (and probably a good deal less likely) to be found in theology than in poetry and fiction." These stories -- "The Devil and Pierre Gernet," "The House of Apollo," "A Voice from the Emerald World," "The Ivory Gate," and "The Other" -- beguile and entrance the reader through Hart's engrossing, opulent writing style and the complex characters he evokes and explores. Often bedazzling, sometimes heartbreaking, and ultimately mesmerizing, Hart's wide-ranging stories are united by a common thread of haunting religious and philosophical questions about this life and the next. Here is fiction to fully engage both the mind and the heart.

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Customer Reviews

I believe C.S. Lewis once defended his turn to fiction by noting that fiction is a much more compelling and subversive means by which to affect and influence an audience's thinking, as opposed to overt theological reflection. David Bentley Hart seems to be taking a similar tack. As an avid fan of Hart's non-fiction work, I was extremely curious how his foray into fiction would turn out. Based on some of his imaginative and creative essays at *First Things*, along with the ingenuity as a wordsmith on display in his theological writing and other works, I was expecting great things and wasn't disappointed. The titular novella is the piece in this volume that is the most quintessentially

Hartian, I would say. Employing heavy chunks of dialogue -- as he does through much of this collection, but especially here -- Hart cleverly places concepts, intentions and values in the mouth of his devil which he finds to be in some manner distasteful or false, but which can nonetheless be defended eloquently and rationally. Hart's prose is often opulent, but it was particularly florid and decadent in this piece, serving to accentuate the fantastic conceit of having a devil as long-time friend, as well as all the trappings of high culture. Along with Hart's devil, the character of Pierre Gernet is also highly memorable because of the vivid portrayal of his pure soul, his tragic end, and the supernatural significance of the events surrounding it. 'The House of Apollo' is another fascinating tale that features Julian the Apostate as a central character. The piece depicts Julian's impotent attempts to restore the pagan gods of antiquity to their former glory, after "the Galileans" and their God had already driven them out and displaced them. True to form, Hart (as a classicist) doesn't go for any derisive, cheap apologetic shots but candidly (and fantastically) portrays a world in which the old gods were in their twilight. In 'A Voice from The Emerald World' Hart is at his most human and profound, exploring the dynamics of a family coping with grief. The emotional center of the piece is a touching, haunting relationship between a father and his son who has behavioral and social abnormalities. Together they regularly retreat to their fabulous bamboo garden which is their Emerald World. As a father of a child who has behaviors which are on the "autism spectrum", this story resonated in a very intimate way. At first, the occurrence of a seemingly abstract, egg-headed theological argument seems out of place in the narrative (though it's quite entertaining), but by the time the story reaches its conclusion, the theological implications of the earlier argument are decidedly immediate and real and not at all abstract. Like 'Inception' -- the 2010 film by Christopher Nolan -- the central conceptual conceit of Hart's next story 'The Ivory Gate' (which he wrote in 1985) is a multi-tiered oneiric (one of dozens of words I learned while reading this volume) dreamscape, which the main character describes from memory. Unlike Nolan's film, Hart's conceit isn't primarily employed as an action set piece, but as a multi-layered emotional and experiential world which depicts the way in which our dreams aren't necessarily solely pale reflections of our waking life, but that the influence can run in the other direction as well. The way in which our dreams can coax us out of, or into, new understandings and depths, and the way that, since our reality is fundamentally anthropogenic, dreams are, in a sense, just as 'real' as anything else. None of those observations sound particularly original, at least as rendered by me, but the particulars of the story are what make it enjoyable. Finally, 'The Other' is a short and oblique look at intense longing. There is always a temptation to seek out some common thread or theme in a short story collection, and Hart reveals in an introductory apologia what it is for us: "I had originally intended to make the subtitle of this

volume *Elaborately Artificial Stories*, since I have chosen five stories which are willfully extravagant in form and content, rather than any of the drier, more 'realistic' stories I have also written." There you have it. Though I would add that one other common thread is, of course, the voice of the author. Sometimes breaking through in quite overt ways, usually from the voice of characters, many ideas and subjects of Hart's other works make appearances. One character proclaims a familiar disdain for (or perhaps pity of) materialists; there is at least one mention of the basilica and its effects, which featured prominently in a recent essay on religion in America by Hart; he has previously written an essay on Julian the Apostate; the denunciation of the pitiless, calloused theology of certain forms of Christianity, which he has renounced elsewhere etc. Within the context of these stories, though, all of his ideas seem fresh and are given a new texture, depth and life, which lends credence to his claim that God is no more likely (and indeed perhaps less likely) to be encountered in theology than in poetry and fiction.

When I first heard that the inimitable David Bentley Hart was publishing a collection of short stories I was almost as excited as when I heard that Hart is publishing a (still forthcoming) translation of the New Testament. Hart is a Greek Orthodox theologian and classicist. He authored the staggering book, *Atheist Delusions*, a few years back, for which he won the Michael Ramsey Prize. He is also a frequent contributor to *First Things*, where he is currently authoring the concluding article for each issue. Furthermore, his *The Doors of the Sea* is one of the more erudite and provocative takes on theodicy that I have ever seen. Hart is an intellectual who writes theology and history and observations with a certain literary flourish that stops just short of being pretentious but just after the point of establishing his brilliance as a thinker and writer. He is a wordsmith with a keen sense of insight and perception. I almost never read him when I don't come away bettered by the experience. The thought of DBH writing fiction seemed only natural to me when I first heard of it, and it was with bated breath that Mrs. Richardson and I dove into the collection which we finished just a couple of days ago. *The Devil and Pierre Gernet* is vintage Hart: lush and occasionally recondite writing that never leads the reader so far afield that they cannot see at least the shadows of the intended gist. I kept thinking of Umberto Eco while reading Hart's fiction, an analogy that he perhaps would not appreciate given his recent piece on Eco, self-explanatorily entitled "The Inertia of Reputation." What I mean, though, is that Hart's writing and style and approach is Ecoan at its best, which is to say that it tantalizes with arcanæ without losing the reader in the author's own idiosyncratic intelligence. The stories are quite interesting. "The Devil and Pierre Gernet" reads somewhat like a more nuanced *Screwtape Letters* set in narrative. It is less didactic in nature, but

equally forceful in its effect. "The House of Apollo," perhaps my favorite of the stories, deals with Julian the Apostate's efforts at the re-paganization of the Roman Empire. It is pitiful and humorous in its depiction of the frustrated Emperor's misguided efforts and, perhaps more than any of these stories, depicts the central themes of Atheist Delusions in a fictional vehicle. "A Voice from the Emerald World" was probably the most moving of the stories, depicting as it does a married couple's efforts at coping with the death of their child. "The Ivory Gate" and "The Other" are both well-written but curious stories on which I continue to ruminate, the former being about a dying man's struggle with transcendence and the implications of his own recurring dreams, the latter being about...well...as I say, I'm still ruminating on it! The reading of these stories requires some effort and some work, as the reading of most great stories inevitably does. If you would like to read some very well-written, occasionally challenging, frequently humorous and always worthwhile tales, this is a great book to which to turn.

Well, I discovered the devil has as big of a vocabulary as David Bentley Hart, who would have thought? :) This book resulted in well over 100 words added to my vocabulary builder on my kindle and those were only the ones I looked up. It was a bit obnoxious. The worst part was reading his descriptions of the physical surroundings; he would occasionally carry on and on, and well, it was rather hard to visualize; since I would need to look up every other word to even know what he was describing or the definition of adjectives being used to color objects known. But with those complaints aside, there was much beauty, emotion and depth within these pages. The "A Voice from the Emerald World" completely wrecked me, when I finished my cheeks were wet with tears and I walked through my house in a daze. "The Ivory Gate" actually resulted in the following nights being filled with dreams more vivid and rich. Every story Hart wrote stirred within me the desire to write something myself.

Okay, I'll 'fess up. I did need the dictionary from time to time. DBH has a somewhat broader vocabulary than I. This is just fun reading. While it's fundamentally different from all his other great stuff, it still has his distinct fingerprints all over it. If you like David Bentley Hart, you'll enjoy The Devil and Pierre Gernet. And, if you're like me, you'll need a few readings to begin to dig beneath the surface.

He is an evocative writer, a bit verbose, but only a bit, and do not let that stop you from reading his short works. Imaginative, interesting and relevant for our spirit's hunger to see and grow

wondrously.

Hart goes fictional, with a first piece (title of book) that echoes Lewis' Screwtape, but goes a fresh direction. He's a treat.

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