

God Jr.

Reviewed by Lenora Todaro

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Fiction. By Dennis Cooper 163 pages. \$12. Black Cat/Grove/Atlantic.

After 20 years and almost as many books, it's possible to compile a dossier on Dennis Cooper. Obsessions: sexual abuse, youth culture, drugs, death, paradoxes of authorship. Worldview: a Nietzschean realm without meaning, gilded by porn, pop culture, cyberspace and video games. Characters: gay or bisexual teenage boys, often unambitious artists desperate to feel love, if only they weren't so numb.

Compared with the snuff murders and sadomasochism of previous novels, "God Jr." seems positively benign: a sexless, largely violence-free novel about a 40-something, pot-smoking, straight father in a wheelchair, struggling with his guilt over having accidentally slammed his Lexus into a pole, killing his teenage son, Tommy.

But the preoccupations of some of Cooper's former outcasts persist: the dead haunt the living; love is life's unattainable prize; imagination can resurrect the dead, usually in a weaker, imitative form - in this case, a monument in the front yard that is based on a video game. And as always there is the surround sound of pop culture (Tony Hawk, Christina Ricci, Green Day, to name just a few figures who make cameo appearances in "God Jr.").

"God Jr." is the literary equivalent of machinima (films made from video-game images). Cooper casts the father, Jim Baxter, into a purgatory of binary code and sets him loose to seek absolution and knowledge of his son. The book's first two sections revolve around Jim's crackpot scheme to build a monument to Tommy based on a puzzling image inside the video game with which the boy was obsessed.

The second half takes place mostly under the influence of the pot Jim smokes as he plays the game, which he feels connects him to Tommy. He merges his consciousness with that of the game's protagonist (as Tommy once did), a digitally animated bear. Cooper's prose teeters along slippery distinctions between reality and phantasm: "The bear is a jewel among millions in a broochlike world. Then he knows his name is Jim and his body's my little costume. ... He's a figurative shot glass, and I'm the whiskey of his consciousness. When he moves, my ideas slosh around and cause his legs to lope toward whatever I want."

The bear, mistaken for a god by other creatures in the game, is a type of unmoved mover whose "inactivity meant God was distant and uncaring," a subtle nod to the static, formless grief Jim loses himself to. The bear's sluggishness (controlled as it is by a stoned mind) unwittingly inspires the digerati creatures programmed to "kill or be killed" to speculate about their existence, which is more thought than Jim can muster.

Often compared to William Burroughs, Jean Genet and Kathy Acker, Cooper now seems, with this novel, the unlikely spawn of Flannery O'Connor; his damaged souls are the kind of people she might have written about had she lived through the punk era. By now, however, Cooper is his own stylistic wizard, appropriating teenspeak and the expansive imagery of cyberspace. Short vignettes move the story along at a strobe light's clip. But Cooper doesn't always knot the loose threads of his narrative. Jim's wife is more prop than person; a psychic claims to channel Tommy but any messages remain off the page.

In "God Jr.," Cooper manages to find a language for yearning for transcendence amid human disconnection. The narrator indirectly leads the reader around to the question of whether our fates are predetermined or we have the will to break free from our programming, so to speak. If one believes Cooper is a subversive writer, one assumes the latter. But the scars on his broken spirits tell another tale.

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