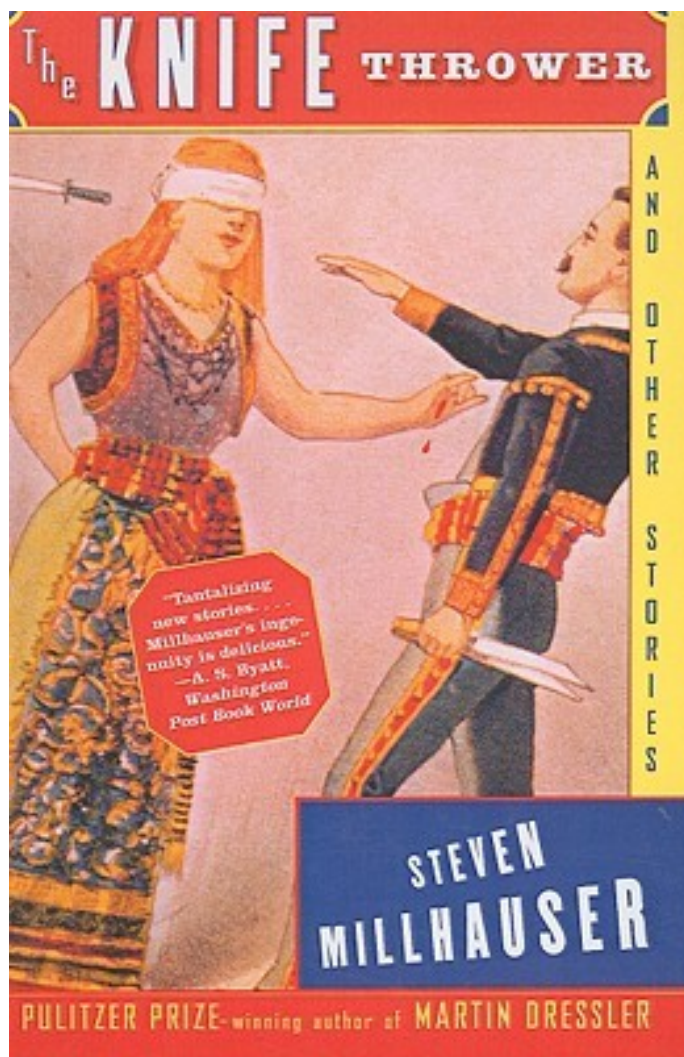

Steven Millhauser

The Knife Thrower and Other Stories



Title: The Knife Thrower and Other Stories

Author: Steven Millhauser

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Description

The Knife Thrower introduces a series of distinctively Millhauserian worlds: tiny, fabulous, self-enclosed, like Fabergé eggs or like the short-story genre itself. Flying carpets; subterranean amusement parks; a band of teenage girls who meet secretly in the night in order to do "nothing at all"; a store with departments of Moorish courtyards, volcanoes, and Aztec temples: these are Millhauser's stock-in-trade as a storyteller, and he employs them to characteristically magical effect. As in Millhauser's other books, including *Edwin Mullhouse* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Martin Dressler*, his subject is nothing less than the faculty of imagination itself. Here, however, the flights of fancy are unencumbered by *Martin Dressler's* wealth of period detail, and the result is fun-house prose whose pleasures and terrors are equally gossamer. Millhauser possesses the unique ability to render the quotidian strange, so that, emerging from his stories, the reader often feels the world itself an unfamiliar place--as do the shoppers at his department store, that marketplace of skillful illusion: "As we hurry along the sidewalk, we have the absurd sensation that we have entered still another department, composed of ingeniously lifelike streets with artful shadows and reflections--that our destinations lie in a far corner of the same department--that we are condemned to hurry forever through these artificial halls, bright with late afternoon light, in search of the way out."

Insightful reviews

Adam Rodenberger:

Millhauser is the guy I should've been introduced to long before I read any Calvino or Bolano or Marquez or even Barthelme. He absolutely falls into that whimsical/playful style of prose and story-telling that appeals to my left-of-center aesthetic, but something kept bugging me while I read the stories in the collection: he wasn't taking the idea far enough for me.

Twelve stories spread out over 228 pages, but only two genuinely seemed to keep my attention rapt, "The Sisterhood of the Night" and "The New Automaton Theater."

In "The Sisterhood of the Night," Millhauser sets up the story in a kind of mock court docket, splitting up certain people's testimonies versus passages like "What We Know" and "What We Assume." Right out of the gate, my interest is piqued because he's given the reader a bizarre and, as yet, unexplainable occurrence. The girls in this particular town are sneaking out at night to meet up with each other. Rumors abound; these midnight meetups are lesbian in nature or ritualistic in sinister, anti-establishment ways. Testimonies are given, members of the sisterhood are named, one commits suicide and stories change again and again.

It's told from the perspective of an adult, which I think gives the piece its strength. As I get older, I view the follies and idiotic nature of my youth in a different light than I did back then. This story's underlying strength is its focus on that dichotomy, that shift of mentality from youth to adult without outright saying it.

"The New Automaton Theater" was one of the few stories I wish had gone on longer despite it

already being one of the longer pieces at twenty-four pages long. A society has come so far as to have created entertainment in the form of automatons, or (basically) robots. But these automatons have been worked on and perfected and toiled over for decades by masters and their apprentices. At the time of the story, there are so many automaton theaters that their exact numbers are incalculable. One immediately imagines an entire city of shops and houses surrounded by theater after theater after theater.

Then one day, a young prodigy emerges. His skills are on par with the rest of automaton makers his age, but soon he surpasses them and becomes THE guy to see. He creates automatons that do magic flawlessly and some that do magic that men can't do, which both impresses and disturbs others in his craft. After creating a female automaton, one man weeps at her performance and falls in love with her. The prodigy's talents become world-renowned as he constantly improves upon his work year after year until finally he disappears for ten years.

When he returns with a new show, the product is disturbing to some, unsettling to others, and flat out wrong to most. What Millhauser has done by the time you arrive at this bittersweet ending is embedded you so deeply into mentality of the town that you almost begin to think like them. The biggest problem with this is that it takes him so long in the beginning of the story to set it up that you wonder what the story is actually about.

Overall, Millhauser's collection is an entertaining read. I wasn't overly impressed by it, but his writing is fluid and moves easily across the page. If he's not describing a mall that's become a kind of warehouse selling off bits and pieces of life, he's showing you the possibility of a carnival that goes several levels and several thousand feet below ground purely to keep attracting new patrons. And while these are conceptually interesting, there's something holding Millhauser back. You can almost taste how much further he wants to take the idea, but he never goes over the line - and he should. As it stands, many of the stories end before they get truly interesting.

Rhiannon Frater: People may disagree with me, but a lot of these tales came across as subtle horror. In fact, a few really unsettled me and haunted me well after I finished the novel. I really loved this book of short stories and highly recommend it.

Amy (Other Amy): *My father had taught me not to believe in stories about Martians and spaceships, and these tales were like those stories: even as you refused to believe them, you saw them, as if the sheer effort of not believing them made them glow in your mind.*

-The Flying Carpets

In a world dense with understanding, oppressive with explanation and insight and love, the members of the silent sisterhood long to evade definition, to remain mysterious and ungraspable. Tell us! we cry, our voices shrill with love. Tell us everything! Then we will forgive you. But the girls do not wish to tell us anything, they don't wish to be heard at all.

- The Sisterhood of Night

I am having the hardest time pulling together what I want to say about this book, so I apologize in advance if any of this is unclear, and I will come back and do this better if better ever comes together.

Remember when albums mattered? When you had to buy music not song by song but as a collection of connected songs? How some artists would actually arrange the whole album as a piece of collective art above and beyond the particular songs themselves? That is this book. The whole work taken together comprises a meditation much greater than the parts. Some of the parts don't even work all that well without the whole.

The theme of the collection emerged with surprising clarity as I was fighting with "Paradise Park," which at first appeared to be a reread of "The Dream of the Consortium." But as I picked apart analogies and worked the puzzles, it turned out to be a revisit to "The New Automaton Theater" and "The Knife Thrower." Then after a brief WTH moment with "Kaspar Hauser Speaks," Millhauser turns full back to the thread of the theme and expands it out with "Beneath the Cellars of Our Town." By this point the book is no longer an anthology of short stories. It is an extended meditation on imagination, particularly the creation and consumption of art and the relationships between art, artist, and consumer (reader). It is one of those books that almost need to be reread as soon as finished, because once its theme emerges in the last pages, the whole work needs re-examination with the new perspective in mind. (I am going to wait a bit on that myself, but I will do it eventually.) There is also a nice rhythm to this collection. The stories move from night to day and back again in an almost unbroken progression. There is also a pattern of rising and falling, from flights to explorations of subterranean worlds that begs for a closer examination. The seams of the work are showing in places, and the repetitive nature of the anthology is a little frustrating, but between the meat of the theme and the beauty of the writing (particularly "Flying Carpets," "Clair de Lune," "The Dream of the Consortium," and "Balloon Flight, 1870"), there is really very little to complain about here. I loved it even the moments of frustration.

(I see in other reviews that some have dismissed this as derivative of [Italo Calvino](#) and recommended [Invisible Cities](#) instead. I do very much want to read that (not just because I get Lorde's "Team" stuck in my head when I hear the title), but I think I will read [Dangerous Laughter](#) and [Enchanted Night](#) first. There is nothing new under the sun, and revisiting the same concepts from a different angle does not strike me as an immense burden.)

Zoe Brooks: Millhauser's brief tales fall into 2 types: the dreamlike extra poetic tales fascinated with members and sometimes written within the first individual and the extra formal virtually target bills of refined replacement history. The tales usually start off in an it seems that common mundane international earlier than getting into the paranormal replacement realities, drawing the reader with them. There are yes subject matters that run during the stories. His characters appear to be attempting to get away the world, flying above it on a carpet or balloon, going underground into the tunnels less than a city or right into a topic parks. In a fashion this can be paralleled by means of our adventure as readers. certainly the subject of art/artifice progressively changing into larger, possibly larger than lifestyles yet even as turning into annoying looks in different of the stories. different tales take care of formative years as magical/dreamlike, alien to the grownup world. My favorite tale used to be The Sisterhood of the evening within which the adults are frightened via what they understand as a mystery society of teen girls, who assemble at evening yet appear to say and do nothing. at the beginning one is eager about what the ladies are up to, yet after your time one all at once realises that the motion within the tale is

within the more and more paranoid reactions of the adults. How simply it may slip right into a witchhunt. We too were to blame of speculating. I am in awe at Steven Millhauser's stylistic mastery. He makes use of the 1st individual perspective with nice ease, even supposing he has little time in a quick tale to set up the voice. His descriptions are wonderful: poetic at times, particular at others. I really respect the delicate manner he shifts the floor lower than the reader until eventually suddenly, like the viewers within the name story, you're not definite what you're seeing. This overview first seemed at the Magic Realism blog: <http://magic-realism-books.blogspot.com> it truly is a part of my Magic Realism problem during which I learn and assessment 50 magic realism books in a single year.

Nicole: What I admire approximately this assortment is the specialist use of darkish components and a obscure yet pervasive experience of whatever sinister simply round each corner. This can be found in each tale here, yet struck me as such a lot profitable and strolling the best line within the name story. His information also are conscientiously selected and positioned with extraordinary precision. In different tales right here in particular, Millhauser shows an uncanny knack for singling out the single precisely correct element that might sum up the scene for us, sparing us pages of pointless description by way of providing up one short jewel of a paragraph. Good done. Other facets of those tales fell brief for me, though. So much disappointing to me is that, by means of the tip of the collection, I believe like every of the tales are primarily repeats of ones that got here previous within the book, no longer including something new or fascinating to the subjects already verified and hashed over within the earlier versions. The endings have been a bit uneven, with a few touchdown superb and others falling flat for me. Also, those tales are likely to paintings top after they stick as shut as attainable to the boundaries of reality, because the stranger parts consider that rather more extraordinary and sinister as a result of deceptively popular international round them... while he steps too far-off from the area as we comprehend and adventure it, the ability of those tales falters.

Sam: If ever one author had puppy obsessions that he recycles, tale after story, that author is Steven Millhauser. The development of artists in the direction of stranger and stranger varieties and obsessions or childrens becoming up via pseudo-magical capability shape the foundation of virtually each tale during this collection, and whereas the prose, as always, is sort of strong, there is an both robust experience of treading water. In "The Dream of the Consortium" we get an image of a major division shop promoting the world's contents that cannot aid yet think of the ultimate chapters of "Martin Dressler", and it really is tricky to learn "The New Automaton Theater" with out remembering "August Eschenburg", one other tale approximately life-like clockwork creations in his even more attention-grabbing assortment "In the Penny Arcade". The most powerful tales the following take flight whilst Millhauser takes a holiday from the conceptual and makes a speciality of extra reasonable emotional matters, specially "Claire De Lune", a few teenage boy taking a stroll on a summer time evening and stumbling upon a number of women enjoying a secrete baseball game. whereas none of those tales are slouches, I would recommend interpreting "In the Penny Arcade" first in case you are drawn to Millhauser's brief fiction, and as always, I like to recommend "Edwin Mullhouse" to a person with an curiosity in examining one of many most interesting American novels of the latter 20th century.

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