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The Blood Oranges



A Novel by

JOHN HAWKES

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"Need I insist that the only enemy of the mature marriage is monogamy? That anything less than sexual multiplicity . . . is naive? That our sexual selves are merely idylers in a vast wood?" Thus the central theme of John Hawkes's widely acclaimed novel *The Blood Oranges* is boldly asserted by its narrator, Cyril, the archetypal multisexualist. Likening himself to a white bull on Love's tapestry, he pursues his romantic vision in a primitive Mediterranean landscape. There two couples—Cyril and Fiona, Hugh and Catherine—mingle their loves in an "Illyria" that brings to mind the equally timeless countryside of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.

The Blood Oranges Details

Date : Published April 17th 1972 by New Directions (first published January 1st 1971)

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Author : John Hawkes

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From Reader Review The Blood Oranges for online ebook

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

My apologies for the mere two stars. I must have ruined this novel by having first watched the movie which was quite close to the text such that reading it I had already only the movie in my head. What a shame.

Nate says

Blood Oranges seduces with its surreally idyllic world and sumptuous, lyrical prose; although, the intoxication is both poisonous and blissful.

Hawkes has birthed a dubious yet charming narrator, Cyril, akin to Nabakov's Humbert Humbert in persistence of will, self-delusion, and manipulative prowess. The narrative weaves threads of memory and sensual moments, past and present, in order to flesh out Cyril's polyamorous philosophy. Hawkes adeptly intertwines exquisitely rendered moments of pleasure and idle revelry with the dark disintegration of sanity that comes from pushing the boundaries of the human psyche.

Blood Oranges is ripe with imagery, in fact each page is absolutely dripping with it. I could barely put the book down and when I did, I would often return to it minutes later to reread a passage or linger over a phrase. Hawkes' command of prose allows him to eroticize even the most mundane details and experiences, in turn fantastically conveying Cyril's dream-like world of indulgence and desire.

Kevin Tole says

Utter tosh.

A collective wank mag for the upper middle classes.

How anyone can say this is well written is beyond me.

Its like 70's Tresoddit-in-Greece or wherever the f*** in the eastern Med. Nobody works. They're all of independent means and all so tanned 'n' bootiful and full of 'emselves.

Possibly the most unlikeable characters I've met outside the pages of a Martin Amis book.

I found myself reading it with Welsh voices for all the characters with the regular use of the words 'boy(o)' and 'babe/y'. This made it even more hilarious.

Still Mastermind syndrome saw thru and once started I had to finish it..... however the time spent has been time wasted.

John says

Didn't really enjoy this book. The narrator, Cyril, is so self-absorbed, self-admiring, self-centered that it is beyond irritating, annoying, maddening. Didn't really care for the main character and since he only cares for himself and all we get is his views of everyone else, I didn't care about them either. The book read alright, but the style was vexatious, bothersome, heavy sigh inducing. Why does every noun, pronoun, verb, need to

have exactly three adjectives, adverbs, sometimes epithets. And the seeming random question marks? A sentence would start out normal enough, but end as a question? Beginning a long list of other random non-questions? I could wait to finish this book, novel, story?

Greg says

This might be one of my favorite books that I just couldn't get engaged in what was going on in the book. The book is sort of about a pair of swinging couples (were there swingers in the late 1950's?), and their kind of gay (in a non-homoerotic or judgmental kind of way) activities they engage in. Not quite as gay (really forgive me, I can't come up with a better word right now, and if you are offended by my use of this word, at some point you'll stop being offended and think about how I'm going to use it when I stop this aside and you'll go, 'yeah that is pretty gay', trust me), as say the wrapping flowers in the 'pubis' (what would be the plural?) scene in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, but still pretty gay in the lets all hold hands and dance around a bush kind of way, or spending an afternoon playing the 'grape' game, which is a bunch of adults hold hands while another adult tries to bite grapes off of a tree. Actually there is lots of group holding hands and admiring things going on, which maybe is a metaphor since one of the dudes only has one arm.

Even though the subject matter and the story were pretty unspectacular to me, there was something I can't quite put my finger on that I loved about this book. Some of it was the language, some of it the strange pathos running through the book, the darkness and amorality. There was something sinister feeling in the book, and it pervaded as a layer running parallel to the narrative or exposition or whatever. I don't know what the fuck I'm saying except that I liked this book even though I wasn't crazy about the story.

Anthony Vacca says

*Gilbert Sorrentino's defense:

To the Editors:

Must we, at this late date in the history of the novel, be subjected to the kind of silly frothings at the mouth found in Roger Sale's assault on *The Blood Oranges* [NYR, October 21]? "We have only the nightmare vision of a narrator unable to see how awful he is," says Mr. Sale. But the narrator, through the elaborate meanderings of his tale, through his self-justifications, through his insistence on the glory of his adulterous life, is showing us "how awful" he is, through (one is almost ashamed to point this out) the artifice that is Mr. Hawkes' novel. How is it possible that a reviewer cannot know that a first-person narrator is also an invention of the author, as much as setting or conversation is? One suspects, with a sinking feeling, that Mr. Sale is representative of hidden thousands, that he somehow thinks that fiction is "real," or worse, that it should be.

Mr. Sale goes on to say that many of Mr. Hawkes' admirers "will note that I have completely missed the fact that it is all a put-on." *The Blood Oranges* is, of course, not a put-on, but a wholly realized tale of meanness and tragedy, related by a narrator who is revealed (not to Mr. Sale, I assure you) to be as mean and tragic as the tale itself. "When horror becomes a pastime," Mr. Sale notes, "it should announce itself or at least know itself." The "announcing" and the "knowing" are both accomplished—by the novel that Hawkes has given us.

Yet further, Mr. Sale speaks of the “narrator and author” as if they are one. One is amused at what Mr. Sale might have to say of the inseparability of John Dowell and Ford Madox Ford, or, for that matter, of Nick Carraway and Scott Fitzgerald. Mr. Sale’s cheaply trite attack on Hawkes’ masterpiece is a disgrace to a profession that, one thought, has already sufficiently disgraced itself.

Gilbert Sorrentino

New York City

*The full editorial throwdown can be viewed here: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1971/...>

Mala says

4 stars for John Hawkes' prose style.

Variety is the spice of life, so they say. Then why is it that in sexual matters that variety is not allowed? Moral reasons aside, do human biology & psychology support the idea of monogamy? Who can look within their heart & still claim that other than their spouse/partner they have never felt attracted to anybody else? Most people, regular people like you & I, would acknowledge that desire but wouldn't really act upon it, treating it as an aesthetic curiosity, treating it as a proof that they are still alive as sexual beings, because:

Between the idea

And the reality

Between the motion

And the act

Falls the Shadow (...)

Between the conception

And the creation

Between the emotion

And the response

Falls the Shadow

But the characters in this book not only act upon their erotic impulses; they also seduce others into doing so. I didn't much care about the story or the characters. (Except for the three kids— children are always the casualty in such hedonistic lifestyle, the collateral damage as it were.) In the film version, Charles Dance enacted the role of Cyril! I mean look at him, the guy personifies CREEPY. I only cared about the way the story was told— in a beautiful lyrical prose full of lush imagery with more than a hint of the sinister...As Barth wrote in his NYT obituary of Hawkes that, his books, "have in common a preoccupation with the horrific, suffused with the erotic and redeemed by the comic. One sees affinities with Faulkner, Djuna Barnes, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor; to mention such affinities, however, is to be reminded of Hawkes's difference from those compatriots, all of whom he admired. Like theirs, his fiction is in the American Gothic grain, but his material is more cosmopolitan -- closer in this respect to that of his bookshelf neighbor Hawthorne, or to Poe. A Hawkes novel may be set in England, Germany, Maine, Alaska, the Caribbean, "Illyria" or some Transylvania of the soul; literal places are less important to him than the geographies of passion and language. His imagination, like Kafka's, is powerfully metaphorical. And dark. And comic."

There's really nothing new about open relationships, marital infidelity, sexual ennui—Truffaut handled it with devastating effect in Jules et Jim, Antonioni in La Notte. Even a mainstream movie like Two for the

Road, tackled the subject with sensitivity & bittersweet irony. Love can never be free because we've commodified it & like any other commodity, it comes with strings attached.

In lieu of a *proper* review, I share excerpts from Sorrentino's review of this book & a few interesting links: "I see *The Blood Oranges* as one of the best novels published in this country in a decade. It is a virtuoso performance that never flags, and one has to go all the way back to *The Good Soldier* to find anything comparable to it.

Written, as in Ford's novel, through the screen of the first person, it tells a story, through the narrator's, Cyril's eyes, of sexual license, sweet carnal abandon, and adultery raised to the level of the sublime.

"Some of the reviews I have seen of this novel have been astonishing in that they have mistaken Cyril's voice for Hawkes'. Is it possible that after all these years there are still people who think that the voice of the narrator is the author's voice?

From: John Hawkes' *Oranges*, *Modern Occasions*, 1972

Sorrentino's rejoinder to the dismissive NYRB review:

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archi...>

The text is the ultimate source for interpreting a novel but sometimes authorial interpretations muddy the waters:

http://nickm.com/vox/blood_oranges.html

An interesting overall comparative view:

<http://www.believermag.com/issues/200...>

Reid says

How would you expect the lives of swingers to turn out? Exactly. As great as it sounds, it's, like, never a good idea. That's what Hawkes seems to portray here, as much as his fabulous imagery engages our senses and tantalizes our desires. He sets two couples in the beautiful Mediterranean Illyria, yet even though more than one of them are a "goer" (to quote Monty Python) it just almost never feels right for any of them because we know there are serious consequences lurking, not to mention three innocent children. The main character is a willful middle-aged privileged self-assured delusional arrogant prick (or is he?) who has very little concern for the possible damage that his sexual cravings may cause, and goes about his escapades like everyone else is repressed and ignorantly tradition-bound. Yet he is convincing and has enough rationality and erotic power to convince mere mortals, some of them naturally more willing than others. While "fun" may be had in the short term, you can bet your destiny, or someone else's, that all will turn a little bit foul in the not too distant future.

Hawkes' prose is fantastic, and most scenes are memorable. The setting is vivid, and the sensuality is alive, especially with mouthwatering descriptions of a crock full of live black snails, a dinner of sparrows layered with onions and butter, and "the grape game". The blood orange sunsets and flowers and fruits are prominent images, and the land and seascape are beautifully rendered. If this was a more uplifting story, or had positive emotion, this would clearly rate five stars, but because of the depressing melancholic menage, if you will, I can't give this the highest rating that the prose deserves.

(PS, I have to add, without giving anything away, that there IS a tiny little scene that reminded me instantly

of Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado*, but I've told you nothing there - you'd have to read the novel to know what I mean.)

Cody says

I've long copped to the fact that post-60s Hawkes and I were not made for one another. The only problem with this conceit is that I hadn't read anything 1970-on since my early-twenties. A person goes through a lot of changes, one would hope, in the intervening 20-odd years. Thus, at the urging of a friend and Hawkes completist, I decided to embark upon examining whether my old issues with the work were still legitimate.

I am happy to report that they were not, and that whatever I took instance with was due to my own narrow, cloistered view of sex. I'll admit that my Catholic upbringing instilled a pretty huge share of body shame in me that, aged 20-21, I was still in the grips of. Not just body, but *SEX* shame to be more accurate. I harbored a completely parochial outlook on sex—it was male-centric in that I gave no rat-ass about much other than my own pleasure; thought of women who acted upon their desires as slatternly 'sluts;' and, of course, saw any manner of deviation from the popular 'norm' to be not just a deviation but deviant. I'm not talking about sexual preference—I've never in my life cared whether someone was LGBT—but the more exploratory side of sex: bondage, sado-masochism, orgying; that sort of thing. Sex, to me, was something that happened between two consenting people behind closed doors, and the less that was spoken about it in any capacity all the better. I was a prude and, concomitantly, probably a horrible, horrible lay.

But, hey, ya grow up. You start to question whether the above qualifies you as a chauvinist prick (it does); whether you have any place judging the consensual actions of other sentient beings (you don't); and basically realize that sexuality, like so many other pleasures in life, is variable, fluid, and idiosyncratic to every person (as it should be). Also, sex loses some of its mystique and one realizes that pleasure is a rare gift that comes where it may (and it's damn well none of my business where others seek or find it.)

I'm not proud of my cavalier, caddish attitude towards young women when I first started adventuring in skin. It is the absolute God-truth that I was terrified of a female's sexual agency, plain and simple. Sure, I know 100 guys that were/are a million times worse than my provincial ass, but a sliding scale on shitty human behavior is not justifiable—it's justification. I really wish I could talk to a few girlfriends now and say how sorry I am. It was all my fault. Always.

Anyway...what the shit does this have to do with Hawkes? Probably not much, other than I urge anyone who has reservations with his post-'classic' period to give this and his other work a shot if it's been a long time since you last read it. You'll likely see, like I did, that if all you are getting out of it is a whole lotta fucking, then the issue is probably with you. Or, unlike me, maybe you were mature enough to have understood that the first time 'round. I hope it's the latter.

Christian Schwoerke says

This was an intriguing novel, with some very beautifully articulated set pieces. Some of the early chapters, in particular, were paced and arranged as if descriptions of an Antonionio film, full of languorous shots and little dialogue, an intermix of vista and close-up, all with a quiet stateliness. Something in this elegance conjures an urbanity—not of thought but of sensibility—an old world knowledge that verges on a decadent

creepiness.

Long passages were composed with crystalline clarity and perfection, but they ended up reflecting back on the principal character, the narrator, making him peculiar and off-putting. His voice was measured and every utterance dignified and almost serene, and there was in his version of things assurance that his was both inevitable and right, that even those things withheld from him at a particular moment would, with patience, rightfully come to him. His manner seems so willfully assured, and his representation of events come to seem self-serving, rather than truth told straight.

Cyril is the narrator, a tall slender man in his 40s, with glasses and blond hair, and he and his wife Fiona live in the fictional Mediterranean land of Ilyria. Cyril and Fiona are amorous hedonists, loving each other and whomever else strikes their fancy. They appear to have no occupation other than to enjoy themselves and their surroundings, and to judge by the duration of their marriage (18 years) and continued affection and good health, they do so with vitality and success.

The novel begins with Cyril describing himself and his aesthetic vision of his erotic purpose in life, to bring love to everyone whom he desires, to do so without force and purely for pleasure. At the moment, however, he is in a temporary limbo: his wife is gone and his former mistress Catherine is recovering from some tragedy, and he vaguely, though persistently conjures some way to make a mistress of his very common native housekeeper with whom he cannot converse.

Cyril alternates telling about the events that led to Catherine's seclusion and recuperation with updates on his current loveless limbo. Eventually the novel is almost entirely the story of those past events, when the other couple—Hugh and Catherine and their three children—came to occupy the adjacent villa and become enmeshed in their erotic activities. Even accounting for the children, Cyril is able to find the time to be with Hugh's wife, and Fiona to be with the one-armed Hugh. While Cyril and Catherine shortly become carnal intimates, Hugh and Fiona long maintain a chaste, though highly charged engagement, which causes Fiona anxiety and apparently makes Hugh wary, shameful, and belligerent. Cyril concludes that Hugh is frail (he does have only one arm and a bad heart) and high strung, that he is unable to comprehend and accept a polyamorous existence, that he craves absolutes and cherishes his aloneness.

Some altercations occur, and a dark scene or two feature an iron chastity belt. While Hugh appears finally to acquiesce to participation, he is soon after his first sexual encounter with Fiona found hanged in his distant private studio. It is of concern to Cyril that the death was really an accident, that it was apparently masturbatory auto-asphyxiation gone bad, as evidenced by the picture of the naked peasant woman Hugh clutched in his dead hand.

After the death, Fiona leaves with Hugh's children, and Catherine lapses into some sort of catatonic grief wrought of guilt. By novel's end, Catherine has recovered enough to live chastely (for the moment) with Cyril, and the housekeeper still appears to him as someone he must have. Cyril abides. Patience will win for him what he desires.

The novel's vision of the perfect life is disquieting. What is wrong? Do the events inevitably lead to Hugh's death? Is there some connection? Is Hugh's aloneness—his unwillingness to share, to be open—a canker in the apple? Or is his the innocence that is corrupted by Cyril and Fiona? Cyril is a seducer, and his art is protracted and insistent, gentle and enticing. A lovely scene is his manipulation of the three children, getting all three—even the suspicious Meredith—to do his bidding, picking and then weaving flowers to make themselves crowns. There is an unsettling quality to the serene beauty of his words when describing his passions; in fact, his passion is dispassionate. His is the devil's apologia, a dispassionate, objective account

of the facts in Hugh's death, an exculpation and denial of responsibility.

There is in this novel some magnificent prose and imagery in the service of some very dubious behavior—and it's the contrast that makes the novel so disturbingly memorable long after it's been placed back on the shelf.

Lisajean says

Painful, turgid prose.

Lucy says

This book is not, as you might expect, about sex. It is about hedonism, and self indulgence - it is about a man who can deny himself nothing, who indeed sees no reason to; a smug, self-satisfied and very complacent man, a man who weighs up the chances of getting his domestic servant into bed, even as he works patiently at seducing the wife of his friend and neighbour. A man who enjoys himself, all day, every day; a man unrattled even by tragedy and death, a man who who feels no doubt, no guilt, and no shame. He is an oddly neutral character - you cannot like him, he is so conceited, and so selfish, but you cannot condemn him, either. He is simply as he is, as he must be, and contemptible as his behaviour is, joining him on his adventures is infinitely pleasurable as we experience the world through the medium of his senses. The writing is richly, languorously sensual, the novel textured through and through with colours, smells, sensations, shadows, and light - the descriptions of 'Illyria' read like one of those Rough Guide travel books, to the point where one aches to go there, to be there, amongst the villas and the lemons and vines and peasants and fishing boats and sunsets. Beautifully written, infinitely strange.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

Review to Come on Completion:

Meanwhile...

The Blood in the Oranges [As Opined by Sorritoni]

"Is there then"
According to Ford,
"Any terrestrial
Paradise
Where amidst
The whispering
Of the olive leaves,
People can be

With whom they like
And have what they like
And take their ease
In shadows
And in coolness?"
Yes, there is,
According to Hawkes,
The author,
According to Sorritoni,
The critic,
But only for
A little time.
For the ease
Of unending,
Leisured and
Totally free
Sexuality,
Of sexual licence,
Sweet carnal
Abandon
And adultery
Must be paid for
In misery
And in blood.
This is the one true
Impediment
To love,
The blood
In the oranges.

SOUNDTRACK:

Jefferson Airplane - "Triad"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Aej9...>

David Crosby - "Triad"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_aK2e...

CSN&Y - "Triad" (Live At Fillmore East (1970-06-04))

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3Nwm...>

Michael says

(some spoiling awaits)

Mother of God. I don't believe I've ever before had a reading experience like the one I've just had with *The Blood Oranges*. For the first three quarters of the book, I, having never read John Hawkes before, struggled to believe that it was the author's intention to portray the protagonist Cyril as a douche bag and his three companions as lesser degrees of annoying. In this struggle, I largely failed, which gave way to a new struggle, emerging to run concurrently: to not only finish the book but to do so without letting my imagination race before the text in anticipation of a scathing 2 star review.

So here are two couples stumbling through the oft cited idyllic/lyric atmosphere of this book – a Mediterranean island profuse with pastoral villas, funeral cypresses, lemon groves, ancient ruins, sea, sun, flowers, wine, seafood, etcetera, etcetera - a whole lot of stone and sun and foliage to luxuriate in. And that's just what these two couples do, playing day and night, perhaps quite like anyone who could afford such leisure in lieu of working for sustenance. So of course as they are flirting with each other, pretending they know what they are doing, they are also flirting with some disaster seemingly to be correlated to their eager foray across the boundaries of monogamy. All well and good.

The problem is that throughout this lengthy stretch of the book, the reader new to Hawkes, never has much reason to believe that they are securely in capable hands. Cyril, our narrator, seemingly cannot speak of his own leg without telling us how thick it is (every single time) or mention his chest without adding that it is broad and tan and smells of lemon juice. His wife Fiona speaks in five word (at least one of which is "baby") sentences, seemingly intent to rival the frequency that her husband praises himself. The other couple, Hugh and Catherine, are merely different combinations of meek, reluctant, spineless, normal - nothing too offensive except for the fact that they will allow the whims of such an annoying pair to instruct their existence.

And yet, slowly the narrative yields a moderately redeeming state of intrigue. 'Fine then,' I say, '3 stars; let's wrap this up.' And a mostly forgettable 3 stars it would be, if not for the last three pages in which Mr. Hawkes hammers the reader home with full brunt of his capability, pivoting the entire insight of the book in one sentence:

'Only a half dozen or so crude sketches of innocence joining the thick wall to the vaulted darkness, small panels of hazy paint invisible except when, once a day and thanks to some cosmic situation and the faulty construction of the squat church, the sun at last becomes a thin blade that slips beneath each of my brief glimpses of the Virgin and for a moment illuminates the three hooded attendants and their rigid and yet somehow submissive charge.'

This is a bolt of lightning, illuminating as it is condemning. We are given to the unknowable force operating behind the scenes of this nightmare. We understand that of our foursome, one was always the sacrificial lamb and the other three were always the coaxing ushers bringing him to ritual slaughter. As if there was a crudely sketched god hungry for such a death. We understand that - annoying, narcissistic, negligent, meek, idealistic - whatever these people are, they are human; they are beings looking for meaning. They are learning like children – playing like they know until they do. And so, in this way, they are both innocent and eager not to be. In a certain light it is the endless mystery in the complicity between the sex drive and the death drive. It begs the questions of free will and reality. The *'Blood Oranges'* is the hunger for sugar that inevitably draws the blood. The 'faulty construction of the squat church' is the skewed order we attain from our play. And with the myths of this skewed order we somehow join the 'thick wall' of it to the unknowable 'vaulted darkness.'

So at last, I can neither get over the transgressions stippling and stifling the beginning and majority of the

book nor the brilliance its final pages sharply lend it. But I imagine, despite the allocation of their size, I'll sooner forget the former than the latter. Some day I might just change my rating to 5 stars. The silver lining is the ability to reap the lion's share of the brilliance of this book by having only to reread the final 3 pages - although, if it was my style to do only this, I would never have gotten close to reading those pages in the first place.

Adam says

Hawkes' best novel feature a disintegrating mind out of the pages of Poe and Nabokov as a story of swingers in a romantic Mediterranean landscape gets turned into a blasted lunar gothic landscape of fearful desires and urges.
