



The Reflection

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Hugo Wilcken's first novel, *The Execution*—a taut, psychological mystery about an average person who commits an accidental murder—got the kind of rave reviews authors dream of: He was compared to Camus and Hitchcock.

Now, in his second novel, *The Reflection*, the comparisons seem even more appropriate: It's a smart, creepy, steadily absorbing mystery about an average law-abiding citizen who finds himself inexplicably caught up in a case of mistaken identities—with one of his own patients.

When psychiatrist David Manne is asked by a friend who's a New York City Police detective to consult on an unusual case, he finds himself being asked to evaluate a criminal who's the exact opposite of himself—an uneducated laborer from the Midwest who seems overwhelmed by modern day Manhattan circa 1948. But when that laborer tells David that he's not who the police say he is, David slowly begins to believe it may be true

Unable to stop himself, David begins to look into how the police handle the man, and the hospital they take him to . . . and begins to suspect that the man is caught up in some kind of secret governmental medical testing. Realizing he's got to rescue his patient, David quickly finds himself battling forces that seem to be even bigger than he suspected, and that now have him in their sights.

When he suddenly finds himself caught with a patient's i.d. papers on him, he decides on a risky course that seems his only way out: To change his identity, and enter even deeper into the conspiracy, if he's to find out how to escape it.

Written in relentlessly probing prose with a delicious plot complication seemingly on every page, this is one of the most thought-provoking, chilling, and suspenseful novels you'll ever read.

The Reflection Details

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From Reader Review *The Reflection* for online ebook

Jill Olswanger says

Quite an odd book- reads like a noir detective novel, takes place in post WWII US. But quite post modern, a mystery of sorts, with no resolution, about the malleability of identity. Frustrating at times, but clever nonetheless.

David Yoon says

It's 1940s Manhattan and psychiatrist David Manne is called out by the police to diagnosis a violent husband and subsequently has the suspect, Mr Esterhazy, committed. It doesn't sit well with Manne who finds himself checking Esterhazy, who maintains his name is Smith, out of the institute he's been sent to and bringing him into his home. After a series of tumultuous events Manne finds himself living as Smith - or maybe he was Smith all along?

Clues and echoes reverberate as we dive into this möbius strip of a book. It's a credit to Wilcken that he manages to maintain the conceit throughout the book. It's an incredulous plot that should strain believability but on the page it turns into an engrossing puzzle that leaves the heavy lifting to the reader. Pay attention.

Steve says

I never warmed up to this one the way I did to Wilcken's earlier novel *Colony*. I enjoyed the noir atmosphere, but ultimately found myself more interested in the construction of the novel (especially the way elements and images recur and echo throughout the book, which was really cool) than on the novel itself. Perhaps because it was a claustrophobic read, so deeply set in the narrator's view that the rest of the world and other characters never quite felt complex in their own right, and it all ended up a bit flat for me. More than once I wanted some bigger sense of the novel's "world at large" to offer a parallel momentum to the narrator's own account, to raise the stakes for someone(s) else in addition to him. I have to admit, though, that the psychological thriller isn't usually a genre that engages me very strongly, so my reaction to *The Reflection* isn't so different from my reaction to other novels of its type.

Blair says

Review originally published at [Learn This Phrase](#).

A terrific book - as readable and entertaining as it is intelligent, so basically exactly what I want in a piece of fiction. There's a scintillating film noir feel to everything that happens around our narrator, psychiatrist David Manne, in what is indubitably a very Paul Austeresque plot. The book opens with a few pages of pure dialogue, as Manne is informed his ex-wife, Broadway star Abby, has died. He's still preoccupied by this when he agrees to do a favour for a detective friend, and is drawn into a bizarre domestic scene in which - he believes - all is not as it seems; is the distraught woman in the next room really the patient's wife, or merely

an actress hired to play the part? What of the man's insistence that his name is not Esterhazy, but Smith? Troubled by the incident, he decides to help the patient, a mistake that sends him plunging headlong into a deep - inescapable? - identity crisis and a conspiracy that may exist only in his mind. All of this takes place against the backdrop of 1940s New York, rendered as a maze-like, shifting contrivance - I couldn't help but see it in black and white (my imagined soundtrack to the book was Artie Shaw's 'Nightmare'), but Wilcken's Manhattan also reminded me of the Paris streets in that scene in *Inception*, bending and folding in on themselves.

The Reflection is cleverly written to ensure the reader is often just as discombobulated as the protagonist. The potentially off-putting opening, wherein there's an immediate challenge - to figure out who's speaking, why we should care and, in the absence of context, what any of it means - is just the first example. Memories and scenes recur in different situations and settings as Manne (if he is, in fact, Manne) loses his grip on reality - or is an increasingly hapless victim of some villainous scheme, depending on how you interpret the story's many twisty developments. His suspicions that people around him are actors turns out to be something of a motif; he continually describes his surroundings as false, comparing streets to movie sets, the things on them to 'stage trappings', and people he meets to 'actors from my past... continually coming back in different form'. Everything seems to overlap. Reading a book in which phrases and descriptions are repeated, often with very slight modifications, creates constant déjà vu. In this way, Wilcken employs language to create the same round-in-circles frustration Manne experiences. The reader leaps towards 'clues' just as Manne does, only to be thwarted again.

With its cinematic atmosphere and relentless intrigue, *The Reflection* is an incredibly enjoyable story - but it doesn't have to be *just* that; you can read it in many different ways. It's certainly a book that would bear, even benefit from, repeated reads. And of course, I now want to read everything else Wilcken's written.

David Ärlemalm says

Snyggt hantverk och engagerande för stunden, men hade förväntat mig något köttigare än *Processen möter Shutter Island*.

Katia N says

This short novel reminded me New York trilogy by Paul Auster. It is atmospheric, cinematic and dark. But it is not quite there as Auster's novel in the terms of emotional impact.

Peter Boyle says

What a peculiar novel this is. One review compares it to an M.C. Escher drawing and I can think of no better description- the narrative folds in on itself so many times that we are left to ponder exactly where the illusion ends and the truth begins. But I guess that's all part of the fun, isn't it?

In the beginning we are introduced to Dr Manne, a psychiatrist in 1940s Manhattan. He is told of his ex-wife's passing, which causes him to re-evaluate his life and steepens him in melancholy. Later on he is called to aid the police in a downtown apartment, where a fellow named Esterhazy has become psychotic and attacked

his own wife. Ezterhazy insists that his actual name is Smith and that his real wife died years before. Manne commits him to an institution, as these fantasies seem to confirm the man's fragile mental state. But the doctor soon finds events occurring in his life that belong in Smith's past and he starts to take on characteristics of this mysterious stranger. Just what the hell is going on?

I don't know how much I actually *enjoyed* this book, but I certainly found it compelling. Wilcken does a wonderful job of stringing the reader along, and I always felt like an explanation for this head-scratching puzzle was sure to appear on the next page. But ultimately this story is more like a Hall of Mirrors, with dozens of reflections gazing back at us - we are never really sure who the chameleon of a narrator really is. This unsettling novel may prove a frustrating experience for some, but for me it is an intriguing exploration of identity and a daring experiment in unconventional storytelling.

AC says

Though presented as a kind of mystery-thriller, this is really a piece 'experimental' contemporary fiction. But it is quite good. A devilishly clever, spinning, vortical, explosion of splitting, merging, melding, and separating identities -- that the author effectively pulls off. It feels like Hitchcock, a noirish NY 1940's, like *Vertigo*, mixed with Christopher Priest and John Franklin Bardin. Some readers may find it claustrophobic (it is), so I'll give it 4 1/2 stars.

Gary Strauss says

At heart this book is a noir throwback to New York in the 40's, however the deeper down the rabbit hole you go, the longer you will sit back trying to understand if the story is a way for you to look at your own insecurities, trying to understand what one's identity means and if we could just become someone else and if our departure holds as much worth as we once thought it would.

Credit goes to Hugo Wilcken, for creating a story that makes you keep turning the pages, telling yourself that surely the answers are coming. Some readers may be annoyed at potentially not getting the "cookie cutter" simple conclusion that you might want. However you may just like the feeling of being in a mirror maze and having the choice of what version you want to look at.

The way Wilcken paints the picture of New York is worth the read alone, describing a cityscape full of potential, intrigue and helplessness all the while making the reader feel like the city is exactly how it should be, perfectly imperfect.

Can I recommend the read? yes and no, one half of me loved the book, the other is so perplexed by it all, that I'm not sure if I want to understand it, or could even if I tried...

Ashley Lambert-Maberly says

The description of the book sounds ever so much more exciting than the book itself. "David quickly finds himself battling forces," or "he decides on a risky course that seems his only way out" ... these are not the

way I would describe this book. I would use phrases like "David weirdly decides to do nothing," or "David makes choices that seem incomprehensible to the reader," and not just David, so really it should be more like "all the characters behave incomprehensibly" ... so if you want that kind of book, boy, are you in luck!

It adequately conveyed a sense of post-war New Yorkness, but that's about it. Strange plot that never paid off (it feels like the kind of book that will Suddenly Make Sense 95% of the way through it (which is why I kept reading), but no, sadly, it's not that kind of book. In fact, the ending makes no sense at all, really), ciphers as characters--it's frustrating.

If you really dug Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* you may get a similar kick out of this book. If you found that a bit of a slog, this is only slightly less sloggy.

Ian Mond says

In his review for The Guardian John Self describes Hugo Wilcken's *The Reflection* as a "roller coaster, a helter skelter a whole literary fairground" where the "truth is just out of reach". It's a perfect summation of the novel and if I was smart and not prone to rambling I'd leave things there and suggest you read the rest of John Self's review or better yet the novel he's talking about. Because *The Reflection* is precisely that a roller coaster ride, a literary fairground, filled with sly winks and literary allusions, many which I'm sure went over my head. With its noir tone and Kafkaesque plot with a hint of M. C. Escher, Wilcken brilliantly deconstructs one of the mainstays of literary fiction, the question of identity.

Describing the plot of *The Reflection* is a fool's errand. Not because it's so opaque or twisty and turny that it defies elucidation but because there's this need to constantly contextualize why Doctor David Manne (psychiatrist) might be suffering from a mental breakdown – assuming that our point of view character is, in fact, Doctor Manne. What I will say (Self does this far better in his review) is the novel opens with Manne discovering that his ex-wife, Abby, has died unexpectedly from an aggressive form of throat cancer. Soon after being told this news, Manne is asked by the police to consult on a possible domestic abuse case where the husband, a Mr Esterhazy, is denying that (a) he hit his wife (b) that he's married and (c) that his name is Mr Esterharzy – he refers to himself as Smith. Manne agrees to have Esterhazy committed, but this experience coupled with the death of his ex-wife tugs on Manne's fragile sense of self.

This is more than just a novel about a man who is mistaken for being someone else or who in the final pages, via a massive twist that no-one, including the author, saw coming, discovers that he was Jack The Ripper all along. Yes, Manne / Esterhazy / Smith is the most unreliable of narrators, but that's clear a third of the way through the novel. Manne's inability to piece together who he is, while almost seamlessly swapping between identities and origin stories is both confounding, but also clearly laid out by Wilcken. There's no trickery here. And yet this pervasive sense of dislocation that Manne / Smith / Esterhazy experience means, as Self aptly points out, that the truth is always out of reach.

This novel will frustrate some readers because it is a puzzle box without a clear solution. But that's part of the enjoyment. While it might not have been Wilcken's intent the novel did make me question how fiction frames the question of identity. Whether it's the hero's journey or an epiphany during a moment of high drama, there's a general sense that a character's arc, their journey through the narrative, is about shoring up that person's sense of who they are. Wilcken says: fuck that for a game of cards. Identity has never been that

simple, it's far more fluid than that. And for Doctor David Manne – if that's his real name – this fluidity makes for a fantastic and dark and surreal reading experience.

Andy Weston says

This is a wonderful novel, a proper pageturner set against the background of New York City in 1949.

In his Acknowledgments Wicken notes a debt to Bardin for *The Deadly Pecheron*, and Priest for *The Galmour*. Perhaps so, the apprentice learns from the master and then becomes stronger himself. For me this book is better than either of those.

Reviews don't tell the prospective reader more than what happens in the first 10% of the novel, the epreason being that there are several twists. Much better to read it that way, or indeed do what I did, read the review, add to the tbr list, and by the time you read it, you have forgotten the review anyway. David Manne is a doctor who while treating a patient, and after receiving some disturbing news, suffered a bad accident. That's it. That's all you need to know.

The tension and atmosphere is very much enhanced by the city and the period, something that Priest and Bardin succeeded far less in.

Thoroughly recommended.

Tadzio Koelb says

My review from *The Brooklyn Rail*:

Psychiatrist Dr. David Manne is tipsy and tired when asked by a police detective to evaluate Esterhazy, a violent suspect. Reports suggest Esterhazy is in a psychotic state, threatening his wife with a broken bottle and claiming to be a bachelor named Smith. Manne agrees to go, but knows it's wrong: he is reeling from the news that his ex-wife has just died, and he shouldn't be seeing patients at all, let alone those in crisis.

When later his head clears, Manne will recall a number of inconsistencies – the generic apartment, the stranger who seemed to choreograph the scene, the fact that a broken bottle had left behind no glass – leading him to question his recommendation to have the patient committed. Concerned that he is an unwilling accomplice in a plot to abduct Esterhazy (by the police, the hospital, or both), Manne decides to investigate. Although nothing he learns is conclusive – the apartment is believed empty by an unhelpful neighbor, and the detective is at best non-committal when pressed – none of it is very reassuring, either. He springs Esterhazy (still insisting his name is Smith) from the asylum.

Manne's investigation into "the Esterhazy case" is cut drastically short, however. Heading downtown with Esterhazy/Smith's social security card in his pocket as evidence, Manne is followed and, just when he thinks he has lost his tail, pushed in front of a subway train. He wakes in a hospital, where he is being treated as a failed suicide suffering post-traumatic fugue. His attempts to claim otherwise are of course interpreted as symptoms of his psychosis. Finding himself increasingly uncertain of his own history, the narrator notes that "Mental asylums bred insanity, just as hospitals bred infection and prisons criminals."

We might well add to that list, “and just as literary genres bred conventions”. The Reflection openly shares many such conventions with the classic private-eye novel: the early 20th century urban setting; a marginal, first-person hero who is attacked, imprisoned, and threatened with worse (in this case, lobotomy); corrupt institutions; and a series of crimes that point past simple matters of legality to an immorality at the heart of the status quo.

It becomes clear early on, however, that despite its unapologetic borrowing, The Reflection is not a traditional hardboiled detective story. Whereas the conventional PI thriller would invite us to wonder at Esterhazy’s true identity, The Reflection wants us to ask whether there is, in fact, such a thing as identity at all. To achieve this shift in focus, author Hugo Wilcken deftly mixes in devices from other genres, specifically the post-Modern thriller, and, somewhat less successfully, the fashionable indie-press genre known as “innovative fiction”.

These become more prominent once the narrator enters the hospital and himself becomes the reflection of the title: once a doctor, he is now a patient – named Smith – whose own doctors discount his protests just as he had originally discounted Esterhazy’s. To gain his freedom, Manne decides that he will pretend to be Smith. He invents a history and persona convincing enough that he is eventually considered cured. As Smith, he is released from the asylum, given a room in a flop-house, and offered a job as a stevedore.

Instead of returning to the world as Manne, the narrator accepts the identity he has been offered, and becomes a reflection in a different sense: that of the man he pretended to be. Disfigured by his accident, the narrator is now often mistaken for a Smith people knew, who is startlingly like the Smith he invented. In fact, his imaginary backstory – based on the case histories of similar patients – is so eerily accurate, and the effect of the persistent coincidences so powerful, the narrator decides truly to become Smith, and leave Manne behind forever. Manne after all was lonely and timid; the narrator likes Smith’s gregariousness better. There is even some uncertainty about whether he ever was Manne. He can’t find articles he is sure he published, for example, and no one who might have known him – the waitress who served him breakfast every day – seems to recognize him, even as his scars heal. Smith’s former lover, on the other hand, has no trouble accepting him.

Unfortunately, there are obstacles to an easy transition. Much of Smith’s life overlaps with Manne’s – rather implausibly, they did their dating at the same midtown bars – and he often feels driven to visit places associated with Manne. Breaking into the building where Manne lived, the narrator (so disassociated that he at times refers to both Manne and Smith in the third person) is convinced that “The apartment was no projection of Manne, it was Manne” just as he had come to feel that a map of New York hanging in the hospital common room “was real and the city a mere abstraction of it.”

This section of the novel is driven by a Murakami-esque mixture of coincidence and personal foible (Manne/Smith often “finds” himself heading to one place or another, among other random choices), and a kind of plotting by association: some things in this new life are reminiscent of things in the discarded one. Must he (and the reader) therefore see a connection? Should those potential connections be pursued?

The clues, however, grow increasingly substantial: places linked to the Esterhazy case show up in the newspapers, and there are a number of (sometimes shady) people who seem to have played a role in both lives. When the man who would be Smith discovers that Esterhazy is now practicing psychiatry under the name Manne, he feels forced to resume his investigation.

If all that sounds unlikely, it is – but in fact the sense of implausibility is what makes the final act of the novel so engaging: how far can the author take the “reflective” coincidences and retain your interest? How

much of a reflection of Manne's original stalker can Manne/Smith become? When the rolling juggernaut of the plot finally comes to rest, where will it lie? The reader is aware of the dirigiste author, but whereas that often undermines storytelling by removing any sense of character-driven causality, here it acts as a tonic, a bracing challenge in which you are invited to pit your wits against Wilcken's.

If the renewed investigation into the Esterhazy case is the novel's strongest section, this is a result of all the careful work that has come before it, but that work is not without the occasional slip. The approach known as innovative fiction has produced innumerable short stories of interest and power, but seems less suited to longer work. Novels in the style often try to build continuity through the accrual of strange or absurd details that, although treated as deeply important, ultimately have no long-term effect. Like flour in a sauce, these ingredients add bulk but no flavor.

Perhaps because the section relating Manne's long hospital stay relies so much on the narrator's inner monologue of guesswork and assumption – Is the doctor's question a test? Should he answer as Smith or as Manne? – Wilcken seems to have worried about bulk, and given in as a response to innovative fiction's worst tic. When Manne/Smith inexplicably discovers a dead bird in his hospital room, for example, it is treated as a matter of such potentially grave significance one might imagine Norman Bates sleeping in the next bed. Once the chapter ends, the bird is never mentioned again. A woman regularly appearing outside Manne's hospital room window is the object of similarly intense scrutiny, only to disappear without trace or effect.

The climax of *The Reflection* will not surprise many readers, but this is a study in genre, and the inevitability of a certain outcome – white hat wins high-noon shootout, underdog makes touchdown and kisses girl – is one of genre's most important guarantees. In this particular genre, that outcome is the revelation that identity is likely little more than a social construct.

As many readers will recognize, *The Reflection* is written in a style on which Paul Auster's name is stamped, seemingly in indelible ink, and indeed comparisons to the maestro are easily made. That is not to say, however, that *The Reflection* is any less enjoyable, engaging, charming, or insightful – and it is all these things. It is only less revelatory of what can be done when philosophy and popular art are skillfully blended and no apologies made for either ingredient.

Syche says

I've been reading mostly books by women this year. This had such a different feel to it. It was so obviously written by a man.

Icewineanne says

This story is about a cold & aloof psychiatrist who is paranoid, and slightly delusional (?), suspects he is being watched/followed. Then someone pushes him into a subway (or did he jump?). He wakes up in a mental institution. A large portion of the book takes place in the hospital where the doctors try to persuade him he is deluded, that he isn't a psychiatrist after all, but a dock worker. He decides to go along with the ruse while in hospital, but once he gets out, he continues playing the part of the dock worker. He is aware

that he was a successful psychiatrist but chooses to play the part they gave him at the institution. He feels more connected to his new identity. Again he feels that someone is watching him.

A very frustrating read. The main character is so detached & unemotional that it is impossible for this reader to care what happened to him, or to care about what was really going on. I almost quit reading numerous times but because it was a short book, i pressed on, just to see how Mr. Wilken ended this bizarre tale. Book-wise, my reading went from the sublime (The Runaway) to the ridiculous (The Reflection). Don't waste your time with this one.
