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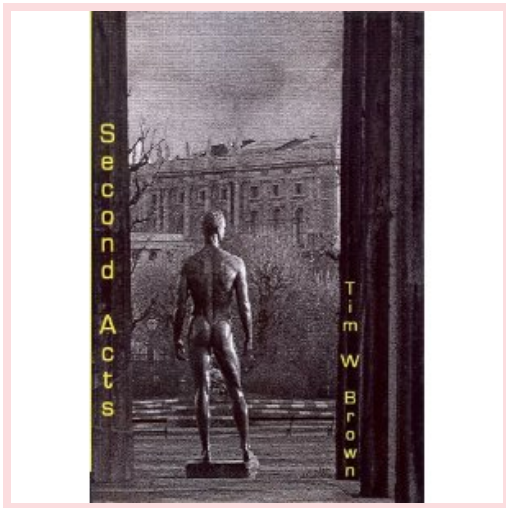
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Curtain Call: Shaun Randol on Tim Brown's Second Acts

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[Second Acts, Tim W. Brown, Gival Press, 2010](#)

“There are no second acts in American lives,” said F. Scott Fitzgerald. Tim W. Brown’s highly engaging, informative, and often humorous story claims otherwise. *Second Acts*, Brown’s fourth novel, follows Dan Connor, a man on a time-traveling mission to win back his adulteress wife, Rachel. In 1833 America, Connor and his newfound partner, Bunny, a transvestite Potawatomi Indian, negotiate the bustling sites of Chicago, Buffalo, and New York on the trail of his cheating wife and Bruce, her eminent, scientific co-conspirator. At first blush, *Second Acts* could be mistaken for an amalgam of Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*, and anything by Jules Verne. The

assumption is not unfounded, but Brown's imagining of a time-traveling romance peppered with comedy and glazed in historical details stands on its own merits.

Second Acts leaps out of the starting gate so quickly that the reader must accept the story as given. There is no time to ask questions that might bog down the action. For instance, when Connor jumps into his time machine, he is careful to bring along the currency of 1833 (gold coins), but we are left to wonder: was he also wearing a pair of Nikes? Or was Connor also careful enough to strap on some period boots? Because Brown refuses to slow down the story by carefully addressing the minutiae of time travel logic, *Second Acts* easily and quickly slides into the realms of fantasy, science fiction, and escapism. In other words, we are free to enjoy the ride.

Not everything in Brown's tale can be easily forgiven, however. A glaring oversight of the novel is that from cover to cover it remains unclear for whom or what the narrator is writing. *Second Acts* is told in first person, as if Connor is recalling the story of his time travels fireside, or is conveying his thoughts in a diary for some historical record. Clearly the tale is meant for Connor's mid-19th century contemporaries, for throughout the story anachronistic references are explained parenthetically. For example, recalling a moment in 2015 (from whence the story begins), the narrator speaks of "heating foods in the microwave oven (a miraculous invention that cooks meals in mere seconds without fire)." Or late in the novel, a hair permanent is described as "a hairdresser's technique used in the modern world to curl hair chemically." For whose benefit are these references made? In *The Time Machine*, it is clear that the narrator recounts his time travels to dinner guests, and in *A Connecticut Yankee*, the story is first told to the narrator by a stranger (before turning into a first-person recollection). Brown's narrative device remains unexplained.

Further, there is a lack of the "wow factor" one might expect of time travelers, or "time pilots" as they are called in the book. In both Connor's recounting and in Rachel's diary (through which we are able to follow her journey) there is an apparent lack of fascination with a) the act of time travel itself, and b) how people actually live in 1833, compared to our own expectations. Admissions along the lines of "I can't believe they actually do/wear/believe this, when our history books teach us Americans of the 1830s do/wear/believe that" are minimal, to say the least. Instead, Rachel and Connor seem to accept their circumstances with a shrug, as if they went out for milk one day and were taken on an unexpected, but not out of the ordinary, detour.

Despite these shortcomings, *Second Acts* remains an engrossing read. Brown's research really shines through in the many pockets where details are richly brought to life. While Brown glances over the specifics of Chicago 1833, the year of its founding, Buffalo and New York City are colorfully depicted. As to the latter:

Next, I turned my attention to the surrounding neighborhood, the city's main commercial district straddling Broadway. I walked past dressmakers' shops, food emporiums, furniture makers' workshops, and sundry other stores that sold every imaginable trinket and gewgaw. In their display windows I saw stylishly dressed mannequins, skinned rabbits and sausages hanging from strings, cherry-wood cabinets emblazoned with flags and eagles, silk scarves and stockings, gold rings and pocket watches, silver and tin cutlery, china plates and crystal goblets, linens for bed and table, wooden animal pull toys, pipes and cigars, spectacles, and, everywhere, false teeth carved from wood or ivory.

With such vivid description, the reader can't help but feel transported to another time. Genuine historical figures, too, like once-presidential candidate Samuel Tilden and New York University founder Albert E. Gallatin, make their appearances.

The punctuation of historical personages and events in *Second Acts* becomes a game for the reader: was there really an annual pig hunt in Central Park in the mid-19th century? Is Bunny based on an actual, historical person? Did a small, upstate New York town actually burn down in the 1830s? Time and again I found myself taking notes in order to conduct queries on these references. And in an especially inspired twist, one of the novel's historical figures also turns out also to be a "time pilot." Brown smartly introduces this fanciful turn by forcing the reader to simply accept the fact, rather than bog down the action with a possibly circular—albeit fascinating—discussion on the implications of multiple time pilots existing and acting in history simultaneously toward different ends. What effect would this possibility have on history? On the future? On the re-telling of history in the future? What scientific, philosophical, moral, and ethical wrinkles would such a possibility introduce? There's no time to get into it—a romantic chase is afoot! The story moves along. Such are the treats of the seamless weaving of historical encounters through the plot that make this story an easy and tasty pill to swallow. *Second Acts* will be a hard one for Brown to follow.

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