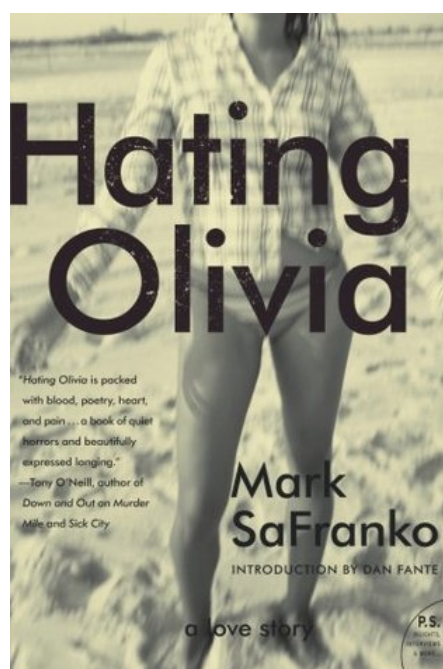




Hating Olivia: A Love Story

Mark SaFranko

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“A book of quiet horrors and beautifully expressed longing. . . . SaFranko’s prose is precise, flawless, and the work of a man who truly loves and understands great writing.” —Tony O'Neill, author of *Sick City* and *Down and Out on Murder Mile*

“SaFranko writes from the heart, and the balls, crafting a furious and passionate piece of work that is entirely his own, with some scenes that would make even Bukowski blush.” —Susan Tomaselli, editor of Dogmatika.com

Hating Olivia is acclaimed underground author Mark SaFranko’s darkly twisted story of two people’s descent into sex, obsession, and mutual destruction. A gritty confessional tale, *Hating Olivia* is sure to appeal to fans of Charles Bukowski, John Fante, and Hubert Selby, Jr.

Hating Olivia: A Love Story Details

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From Reader Review Hating Olivia: A Love Story for online ebook

Lei Kit says

Comparison is hell, we all know that. But when asked how he felt about his work being constantly compared to those of Charles Bukowski, Mark Safranko, the brilliant yet little known writer who wrote about this impossibly soul-sucking love-hate relationship between Max Zajack and Olivia Aphrodite, said that such comparison is a "misplaced compliment". I don't think it could be better put.

Sure, an author and his/her book have to be put somewhere once they get thrown onto the scene, and my interest was certainly piqued when Dan Fante said in the introduction that if I love Charles Bukowski's work, I'll also love Mark Safranko's Hating Olivia. So, I kindled it up, read the first paragraph and felt the walls trembled:

"The war was over. I'd managed to avoid it, but it didn't mean a thing. Since that time....."

Such clarity. Such simplicity. Such power. There's a promise in those words, that the writer wasn't gonna shit me, not like many other writers. So, through days and nights, through laughter and tears and more laughter, I devoured the book - yes, I tasted every word, every sentence, every turn of events and emotions, chewed on them until they're officially mine before letting them slide down my throat. When I finished the book I had a big belly full of sadness and hope, ready to burst any moment.....

Anyway, my point is, this comparison with Bukowski wasn't at all without merits: they had both slogged through some real nasty shit, and they both had the spunk and daring to write about it, with the kind of grace and style that are rarely seen in other writers. I guess this, for Mark, is where the "compliment" came from. But again, like Mark said, such "compliment" is a "misplaced" one, as Mark differed from Buk in some very fundamental ways.

Mark's right on the point when he said that Buk was more a philosopher than a poet. Having gulped down a good chunk of Buk's work - poems, short stories, novels, essays, letters - I started to see that there's indeed a heightened, almost otherworldly, sense of What-It-Really-Means-To-Be-Living running through his writing: if I have to vote for one person who's closet to that shit called Truth, I'd vote Charles Bukowski. The beauty of him is that he'd seen through it all but didn't care that he did. He's like a prophet who preferred sleeping in the gutter, a bullshit detector who's living in and through and beyond pain all at the same time. I could almost imagine him slow dancing in the fire, screaming, laughing AND watching himself doing these things from above, feeling and recording and mocking his own hell simultaneously, just for the hack of it. Then he'd write it all down and showed us just how full of shit we all are but didn't care.

By contrast, Mark - as reflected by Max Zajack, our main man in the novel, Mark's alter-ego - is much more relatable: he's no philosopher, no prophet. He hadn't known it all yet. He's still trying to understand life, just like the rest of us. He's living in and through his shit but was still struggling to rise above it and amount to something, just like the rest of us. That's why he would find himself explaining things, resorting to internal monologues and occasionally fancy words and sentence structures - it's because he *had* to; he still cared. He's still trying to make sense of this crazy love-turned-sour for one Olivia Aphrodite, a woman who's every bit as crazy as she's beautiful.

Yea, this book is about love, which, by default, could mean a lot of melodramatic doo-doo. A few over-wrung scenes here, a few false tear-jerkers there, and the book will be sitting alongside Twilights or Moonlights or Sunlights in the Romance Section. But hey, I don't mean to take a jab at those books and their writers, I'm just saying that love, as a subject matter, is extremely difficult to write about, because love is an

inside fart joke, and we're always either too far from it to understand it or too close to it to judge it. But mostly we're too far from it because we're really only close to the love that we are in touch with. That's why there're mostly two types of love stories out there: those that are real and nauseating and boring, and those that are unreal and nauseating and boring.

So here's what made this damned book so gut-wrenchingly beautiful: Mark managed to put us right into his shoes and make us experience the love exactly as he'd experienced it, without making us yawn or flinch or vomit. It's both sensical and magical that this story was written some 15 years after the events took place - it's sensical because, as Mark himself pointed out in the afterword, it took him that much time to grow distant from what had happened, so as to acquire that clear mind and heart necessary to look back on it with some clarity and hopefully a sense of humor; but at the same time it's magical how, given such detachment and maturity and even wisdom as endowed by the lapse of time, he could re-simulate that psychological journey to such a painful extent, by showing us all the sex and joy and boredom and struggle and suspicion and hatred and hope as he experienced them for the first time, in their rawest and hottest and grittiest form. Here on these pages nothing is censored or filtered, nothing cool or post-modern or fragmentary or devised. There's no ready-made wisdom, no subtle nods to the Greats, just line after line of total honest emotion. It's as if the man didn't just look back; he jumped right back in and lived it out once again, just to show us exactly how it was to be lifted and trapped and tortured and tossed around by Love and Life, how it wasn't our call to decide in or out, and how all we could do is ride along and be damned.

And imagine all this honesty served with a bittersweet layer of humor

Alright, I feel like I'm making it lame already. Just read the damned book and be grateful for being literate.

Jayme says

At the end, I hated Olivia too. And her whiny boyfriend protagonist.

Brittany says

This is definitely not a feel-good book, but it is beautifully written and gives a realistic glimpse into the evolution of a co-dependent, destructive relationship.

Caleb Ross says

(this review originally appeared at Outsider Writers Collective)

The first page of Mark SaFranko's *Hating Olivia* mentions the narrator's possible suicidal tendencies, which immediately associates this novel with so much self-indulgent, faux gutter dreck that has come before. So, considering that *Hating Olivia* not only dodges those preconceptions, but instills its susceptible characters with a well-crafted sense of empathy makes overcoming that initial hump all the more impressive.

Hating Olivia presents a situation we've read many times before, that of the struggling writer eschewing traditional employment on the romantic ideal that he will sustain himself (mentally more than financially) by

way of his prose. Sharing Max Zajack's dream is his live-in, on-off girlfriend Olivia Aphrodite, who he lovely calls Livy. It becomes quickly apparent that the couple is more in love with the idea of writing than the act. Months pass without a single scribbled sentence, and ultimately the couple resort to what they consider the worst of all outcomes: they get jobs.

Perhaps best appreciated by a writer rather than the casual reader, SaFranko's story propels along with Zajack's various writerly phases, from the finding of his voice (page 20) to the unexpected epiphany (pg 129), throughout, mentioning (re: paying homage to) writers who have come before him:

"So like Bukowski entering the U.S Postal service, or Melville at the customs house, or Kafka and his nameless insurance company, I reported like an automaton to the front desk, to be inducted into the ranks of corporate America" (pg 76).

Of particular note is the way SaFranko periodically embodies Henry Miller, particularly his Tropic of Cancer:

"I'd had a few women in my life, but I was to learn something new about sex from Olivia Aphrodite (her true middle name). We were to take the plunge together into the subsoil of raw concupiscence, from which both ecstasy and madness spring, and forgo the dusty, worthless upper strata of passionless habit and duty that most humans know. I would come to live for fucking Livy. For the first time I knew what it was to truly bang a woman, to ram like a batter, to bury my body, obliterate my self, in the mysterious folds of a cunt. Like a devoted master of the Kama Sutra, I discovered the rude pleasure of enjoying the female in an infinite number of contortions, to forge onward when there was no juice left, to bludgeon myself into insensibility from the sheer act of fornication. We would finish our sessions in a state of complete and utter exhaustion, in a delirium, really, oblivious altogether to the outside world" (pgs 25-26).

Hating Olivia wavers constantly on the verge of falling to a juvenile tale of romantic idealism and angst against the Corporate Machine, but SaFranko navigates those cliffs beautifully, always artfully rescuing and re-establishing the book to its deeper, emotional heart. I know a book is good when I've reached the end to realize that I've written hardly any notes. Hating Olivia escaped with barely a half page.

Melissa Lee-Tammeus says

Disturbing tale of a love gone bad - very bad. It becomes blantly clear early on that this story of two people - Livy and Max - are codependent on one another and it's not going to turn out well. But it also reminds us that some of those relationships we have had in our own past had red flags all over them too, but we paid no heed. Falling down the rabbit hole and realizing you need to get out, but having no will, means, or confidence to do so rings true with many and that is what this book is all about. Written from a male point of view of a tormented artist, we see not just the struggle of love but the struggle to make or break it in society and whether we really truly want to or not. It took me a bit of time to get into the book, but once I sunk my teeth in, I was hooked. Just like poor Max was with Olivia.

Paca (Caroline?) says

I read this because a friend (whose opinion I normally trust) told me it was great.

It was, honestly, one of the worst books I've ever read. The only redeeming factor is that it was short.

After the first fifty pages, I considered stopping. I did a cursory Google search, and I found that many people really loved the book and it was a borderline cult classic, so I kept reading. At times, I sincerely hoped that the book was a parody of an unintelligent, self-important jackoff. After reading the author's notes, I discovered that was probably not the case.

The only real conclusion I could draw from reading this book was that Mark SaFranko has never had a female friend—his characters have all the depth and nuance of an airbrushed centerfold from the 80s.

Kind of bummed I spent any time reading this, but at least it didn't take too long.

Jim Ament says

Every book I read these days is an opportunity for me to evaluate writing styles. And when I think back on all the crime thrillers, suspense novels, and noir fiction that I've enjoyed over the years, it's the punchy dialog, the brevity of words, and "the short declarative sentences," as in reference to Hemingway, that I liked. This was often coupled with poetic prose that gave these books a contrasting feel—where one can get a sense of the author's soul.

I've only recently been introduced to authors John Fante and Charles Bukowski, and although their subjects are depressing, they're style is somewhat similar. It's unfair to say that Mark SaFranko's *Hating Olivia* is exactly like them, but as Dan Fante, son of John Fante, said in the introduction, "*Hating Olivia* is fresh meat, a gift tied together with a bloodstained bow."

There's another thing: Mr. SaFanko has written a "hundred short stories, fifty of them already in print. A box full of poetry and essays. And ten complete novels, eight of them yet to hit the bookshelves. A dozen plays, some produced in New York and others staged in Ireland. SaFranko writes songs too, a hundred and fifty so far." So, unpublished old guy that I am, I'm intimidated before I've finished the introduction!

One gets the sense of where the book is going early on. It's written in the first person where the protagonist mostly tells the truth about himself. Max is a flawed character. He drinks and smokes too much, quits jobs because he's bored or somebody pissed him off; debt and hitting the bars when he has a little cash is a way of life. He wants to be a writer, but he doesn't write. He is obsessed with beautiful women, at least having sex with them. About one he said, "Like a beggar who covets the palace of the kingdom, I wanted what I couldn't have...." Self-analyzing his general state of affairs, he says, "When I contemplated what a man had to endure in order to get along in this world, it turned my stomach. Nevertheless, an undefined guilt dogged me. Why was it I detested all things conventional and bourgeois? My head was in the clouds, for sure. Or up my ass, as my blue-collar old man liked to say...Worst of all...I never listened to anybody."

Note the style and the tone here: After visiting an astrologer who wanted his phone number so she could follow-up on getting paid, he writes, "I wrote it down. She saw me to the door. The street was as quiet as a morgue. As lots of people said, Brooklyn was a place for nonbelievers. And, as someone else wrote, it was only known by the dead."

Max meets Olivia in a bar. “We were to take the plunge together into the subsoil of raw concupiscence, from which both ecstasy and madness spring, and forgo the dusty, worthless upper strata of passionless habit and duty that most humans know. I would come to live for fucking Livy.” The reader knows that this “love story” is not going to go well. The title alone tells you that.

He moves in with her. He’s not even sure who she really is, but he’s stuck. “I had the growing sensation of being caught, like a fish swimming blindly into a seine....” Olivia spends money they don’t have. Max see a shrink and self talks: “And what did I have to feel lousy about, after all. Wasn’t I merely the victim of my own laziness, my own ability to cope with the world as it was? And whose fault was that? Nobody ever asked me to think of myself as an “artist,” nobody had forced me at gunpoint into a ditch of debt. I was young. I was healthy. I could work. Most of my life lay before me—maybe....And, too, I had Olivia.”

They have to get work because they can’t pay their bills. Max joins the corporate world and offers some interesting insights into its bureaucratic absurdities. (Since I came from that world, I could argue that it isn’t as bad as described everywhere, but I’ve been places where it is.) Max thinks about suffering and misery. He can’t take it. He quits. Max and Olivia fight—slammed doors, vile oaths, screaming and yelling, pots and dishes are thrown. Still, they go to bed and screw. The author writes some beautiful prose through this and speaks of the sheer misery of her god-awful beauty.

They’re headed for another collapse of their finances. They talk of doom. We’re more than halfway through the book and I’m not going to spoil it with further descriptions. It’s not so much a happy or terrible ending as a reconciled one. The path to the end is very much worth reading. You get the sense—you hope—that, in spite of the obsession with Olivia, the poor choices, the degradation, Max is going to be okay. Yes, *Hating Olivia* is quite good. It grabs you. I poured through the book, but had to stop every once in a while to savor how the author put together a thought or an act. The writing is crisp and well organized. I enjoyed the book immensely because SaFranko told the story so well.

When I read a book like this, I wonder if I could write like the author—a sign of admiration, it there ever was one. I didn’t live the kind of life depicted, but could I write it? Writers of crime thrillers never killed anybody (most, anyway), but they know how to put a good deal of murder and mayhem on paper—for example, one of my favorites, Elmore Leonard. Author Zadie Smith wrote, “You can either write good sentences or you can’t. There is no ‘writer’s lifestyle’. All that matters is what you leave on the page.” My as yet unpublished novel isn’t like Mr. SaFranko’s book. It’s more mainstream. But I think I’ll start with a short story—see where it goes....

Joseph Ridgwell says

One of the best books to come out of the new wave of american fiction, top drawer...

Meagan says

A decent book about a horrible relationship. If you're hoping this book will shed some light on why people do the f-ed up things that they do, it won't; It will only give you a clearer picture of just how f-ed up it is that they stay together. The language is pretty graphic and straightforward, especially concerning sex, the tense shifts are a little weird but understandable, but the book flows. It's a fairly quick and interesting read and

though it ends on a high note it was a bit depressing to read. I'm definitely interested in seeing what else SaFranko has written now, though.

Brooke Bove says

I could have easily hated this book. It sets itself up for ridicule so easily. The setting is cliché. Reading the synopsis of the book elicits a groan and an eye roll. I think that the publisher could work on their marketing and jacket description some. But in the end, the look at a passionate, failed relationship is simple, good, and the characters are not completely flat.

Max, as the paragraph on the back of the book tells us, is in a rut. He lives in a cockroach infested boarding house and works a manual labor job. But he has dreams and he has talent and genius. He just doesn't ever get around to exhibiting them. The world is against him and on more than one occasion, he considers ending it all. Then he meets Olivia, and his life gets worse. There isn't really a more trite or less interesting premise for a book than this.

However, the book was free, and there's a chance more books could come my way, so I took the plunge. Fifty pages in, I was hooked. Which is weird, because nothing ever happens in this book. It's full of philosophy and dream-like descriptions, which is stuff I normally hate.

The writing is good, if occasionally pretentious – it flows well, and for the most part, it did not distract me from the story. There is a lot of discussion of why things happen and almost no plot. Four years these two live together and nothing happens except craziness. Olivia can be sexy and fun, but she has a dark side. She's mean, she's manipulative, and after the first fight, each successive fight is the same. They're on a downward spiral from almost the first week. Eventually and inevitably, things boil over and the ending you thought would happen happens.

But I was strangely drawn to Max. I liked Max. I'm guilty myself of having dreams about writing or acting or traveling. I never follow through on these. Writing sporadic blog entries about what I read doesn't count as writing – it counts as vanity. I am guilty of wallowing in pity – my life isn't exactly how I dreamed it would be. I'm 33 years old and I have not really accomplished much – not compared to former dreams. I have some career prospects, and I'm almost done with law school, so I'm way ahead of Max in that area. I don't wish to imply that I'm unhappy with my life – only that it took a different direction than originally planned.

There's a scene where Max finishes writing a novel. He leaned back in his chair and exhaled with a calming and quiet sense of accomplishment. Maybe something big would happen with it. Maybe nothing would happen. The point was that he finished something. He created something. He was no longer just talk and dreams. That was the moment that I really began to like Max. I was happy for him, and for the first time I was rooting for him.

This is not a love story, as the title tells me it should be. There is no plot to speak of, and there is no real resolution. It's not even an evaluation of a failed relationship. For me, this book is about contentment and accomplishment in spite of life's craziness. Max is going to be ok. Little things mean a lot and the big things – even passionate, all-consuming love – end up meaning nothing.

Hosho says

Poetic and touching in such unexpected ways, SaFranko's HATING OLIVIA breezes through the fires and fractures of that great white unknown: a new love. Having long been partial to the misanthropic-artist-vs.-the-world blueprint, before even cracking the cover this book was already working for me. What surprised me was the effortless and entertaining prose--the story winding and writhing around the hard-scrabble daydreams and horrors. I'd blow through pages at a furious clip, always reluctant to close the book--even when some damn thing needed doing! And that is the first, best, and most compelling measure of a book--do you want to keep reading? My answer, without pause, is "Hell yes."

And when you think of your crazy exes (and you will), you'll thank SaFranko for reminding you that there were no easy reasons, no explanations, and nothing that makes any of whatever happened easier to understand--that we're all as lost and doomed as the next when it comes to the mystery. I'm already saving my pennies for GOD BLESS AMERICA. My only question for SaFranko is what ever happened to the sapphire ring? Maybe it will appear in some future novel? (which I, of course, will be buying)

John Zeck says

I picked up Hating Olivia in need of something in the worthy tradition of Charles Bukowski and wasn't disappointed. As long as we understand what we're getting into here, the tragic collision of maladjusted lovers against the backdrop of the New Jersey sixties, then enjoy, because SaFranko is a helluva writer.

Adrienne Conley says

This book is hard to describe...I really liked it but it was so depressing and the characters are so tragic. The couple in the book just go through so much and through the whole book you keep wondering why are they even still together and torturing themselves. Makes you think twice about love and bad romances. The real question of the book is how do you know when to walk away? And when enough and enough?

Jack Goodstein says

SaFranko's read too much Henry Miller.

Jennifer Hazlett says

I love chic-lit and it was interesting in comparison, to read a male author's interpretation of a dysfunctional relationship. I really enjoyed this book. Great story, gets deep into the crazy places in the mind that love can go.
