



Some Trick: Thirteen Stories

Helen DeWitt

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For sheer unpredictable brilliance, Gogol may come to mind, but no author alive today takes a reader as far as Helen DeWitt into the funniest, most yonder dimensions of possibility. Her jumping-off points might be statistics, romance, the art world's piranha tank, games of chance and games of skill, the travails of publishing, or success. "Look," a character begins to explain, laying out some gambit reasonably enough, even if facing a world of boomeranging counterfactuals, situations spinning out to their utmost logical extremes, and Rube Goldberg-like moving parts, where things prove "more complicated than they had first appeared" and "at 3 a.m. the circumstances seem to attenuate."

In various ways, each tale carries DeWitt's signature poker-face lament regarding the near-impossibility of the life of the mind when one is made to pay to have the time for it, in a world so sadly "taken up with all sorts of paraphernalia superfluous, not to say impedimental, to ratiocination."

Some Trick: Thirteen Stories Details

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Author : Helen DeWitt

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From Reader Review Some Trick: Thirteen Stories for online ebook

Jaclyn Crupi says

DeWitt is a 'read anything and everything she writes' author for me and even at her worst she's better than most. Her worst is pretty darn good actually. But that said this was a mixed read for me. I loved DeWitt's obsession with statistical modelling in fiction but found some stories hard work and others just baffling. The stories are related without being interconnected and I just wish this packed more punch.

Elise says

Frenetic and incoherent. I'm glad to support the author of *The Last Samurai* and *New Directions*, but all except two of these stories were a huge waste of time.

Lee says

One loud LOL at this line: "the rationalist is socialised to mug for the camera, trotting out recondite facts, objecting to logical fallacies, using polysyllabic words in sentences with a high number of dependent clauses, with the quizzical air of one who knows he is amusing the interlocutor by conforming to a fondly held stereotype."

Loved the first half of "On the Town" with Gil from Iowa in NYC excited to see famous European art movies, living with the bitter, alcoholic son of a famous YA novelist -- the juxtaposition held such promise, could've been a hilarious satirical New York novel, but it seemed like it lost its way, the way pretty much all of these stories seemed to lose their way for me, or not even engage enough at first to establish a way to lose.

Sometimes felt like she'd condensed some of her famously unpublished novels into stories.

I love her two published novels . . . would like to see a memoir or a collection of essays from her.

Tony says

SOME TRICK. (2018). Helen DeWitt. **.

This book is heralded on the cover as being "Thirteen Stories." I wasn't able to find any stories in this collection. I did manage to find thirteen potential nuclei for subsequent stories which were never developed. The author likes to play with words, but neglects her role as a story-teller. Each snippet of what was supposed to be a story loses itself in its own 'profundity'. It seems as if the author is more concerned with showing the reader how smart she is than in delivering the goods. I was not impressed. The author has previously made her mark with an earlier novel, "The Last Samurai," and was attempting to branch out into another genre with this one. I haven't read the previous novel, but would certainly shun any additional 'short story' executions. The use of the word executions is aptly used.

Hadrian says

Wild grab-bag of short stories. Some are meandering pieces that felt incomplete (by design?), others are more linguistic or mathematical investigations as seen in *The Last Samurai*.

A recurring theme is of the intellectual or the artist within a hostile/predatory society - an art collector on an artist, male student against female student, a writer against an agent.

Peter says

Good short stories for academics, writers, and amateur intellectuals. Their wit is a bit too high-falutin' for me, though. Perhaps if I had much leisure time to spend sipping aromatic tea in an oak paneled manor library in rural England, amid classic paintings and highly manicured lawns, I would find them quietly amusing. But for reading on the Tokyo subway, they just don't have sufficient satiric lift.

Philipp says

Unsure what to make of it, I definitely liked it, but it's hard to find out what I liked - many of these stories' themes are extensions already touched on in the extremely brilliant *The Last Samurai*: a love of knowledge for knowledge's sake.

What's added here is a wonderful celebration of *Kauzigkeit* (I prefer the rarer/non-existent(?) *Kauztum*), a good German word. It comes from the old word for owl (*Kauz*), and is a kind word used to describe someone who has devoted their life to something 99.99% of people see no meaning in. A *Kauz* is the weird old professor every uni has and no student knows what they're even doing (prime example: John Kidd.)

Some of DeWitt's characters are such *Käuze*, they love knowledge and not much else. However that makes some of these stories feel unfinished. You can't do much 'traditional' story with such characters, they can't develop much. They appear in love with knowledge, say their bit, and disappear with their love. Sometimes that love can feel snooty, but often, when it gets *too* snooty a touch of irony breaks it:

‘The thing that interests me,’ I say. ‘One of the things that interest me is the way there is this emphasis on inserting the body of the writer into the scene, as if making a connection between this physical presence and the *derniers mots* will somehow make these specially valid. Look at Noyes.’ I pick up the book.

“‘We must obviously not picture him here with the ‘eternal grin’ of Mr Lytton Strachey, but with the blood-stained rag at his lips, and eyes that had been looking into the face of Death. Those eyes are turned for a moment, with the curious wonder which is a sick man’s only way of reproach, upon a secretary who is trying to defeat a purpose definitely decided upon before this illness occurred.”

‘The blood-stained rag,’ I say, ‘says this is real and true. The document is genuine. Its statements may be *attached* to Voltaire.’

X is flipping through Pomeau.

This also must be the first book I read that featured R-code. Several 'greats' of the R programming language are mentioned by name (Hadley Wickham etc), there's actual R-code with a few plots, some characters fight about white-space vs. tab (of the many boring fights 'nerds' have, this is one of the most boring), data pervades some, but not all of these stories.

Favourite story: Entourage, about a rich man (Kauz again!) who travels with suitcases full of books, each book carried by someone who spoke the language the books in their suitcase were written in. Just look at those two quotes:

It was now unexpectedly necessary to purchase a small suitcase and fill it with books replete with the letters z, w, y, j and k. It was necessary to hire someone to fly with him to Berlin to accompany the suitcase. S?owos?aw was the applicant whose name had the best letters.

(He had been entranced to discover that the Russian for Protopope was ????????)

Aaaaah, *nice*. Still, The Last Samurai struck me deeper. But then again, at least two stories tell you how good Stanislaw Lem's Robotermärchen are, and that alone makes this a recommendation.

Chris Via says

Check out my review in *Rain Taxi Review of Books*: Volume 23, Number 4, Winter 2018 (#92).

Tom says

UMLAUTS UP THE GAZOO

Some excellent stories, tho nothing as good as the sexual codes of the europeans

Most of the stories are in the recent HdW manner - content and style. Content: obsessional application of theoretical if not mathematical models to creative or artistic problems, and the absurdity of progressing from a reasonable point via reason to an eccentric point. Style: dry, laconic authorial control, generally indirect free speech, that is to say third person heavily laced with the expressions and thinking and reasoning of her enthusiastic and excitable characters or doubtful pragmatic characters. Managing the filo thin layers of control, voice and irony (rationality, sympathy, humour, contempt, enthusiasm, tragedy) so that both the dexterity and a unity of HdW 'voice' is apparent is one of the main thrills of reading her, aside from the content (tho the unexpected juxtapositions and logic of that content is very much part of that layering. To expand on that, the mathematical, rational 'mode' which drives the direction of many stories, is absolutely a voice, a layer, a structure.

There is a sprinkling of stories from her time at Oxford in 1985. These are different in style. Clearly more juvenile works, less tight in style, more juvenile in their expression of cleverness (of course another excitement of HdW is the cleverness). Their subject is often an intelligent female voice existing in a pragmatic, wry and doubtful space created by forceful or dullard men, or just men who aren't as clever as

they think they are. These are less successful, I think, though *Famous Last Words* is very enjoyable.

It does raise the question of why these are collected here in this way. It's not, as far as I can tell, a retrospective or collection as such. The collection has a good, elliptical poem as an epigraph.

Next time someone tells you desire
Is a trick of grammnar
Tell him
If what I have is what I said I wanted
It's not what I wanted
I know what I want
But I don't know its name

and later

Some trick

So using this, and the title, to try and draw things together a bit:

It's a trick of stories in the card-playing sense there are thirteen, and i'm not sure whether there is an interrelation or symbolism relating to that at play – nothing jumped out at my, but I'm afraid to say some of my reading was a little inattentive (tipsy on tube or interrupted by things, and just generally i haven't felt as sharp recently as i'd like to be). I might need to look at that again.

It's the trick of grammar, of letters, of foreign words and foreign mores creating and canalising desire: (Brutto about an Italian art dealer's enthusiasm for an incredibly ugly suit ('ma che brutto!') an artist made in her sempstress training.

It's the trick of managing artistic control for the vision you want in a world that is trying through enthusiasm, fandom or lack of understanding to grasp hold of that indifferent to the things that make important to its creator.

It's very much the calculus of money and creativity – something that affects Helen de Witt directly.

Matt says

[Thoughts from a little more than halfway through:]

It's hard to explain what I love about Helen DeWitt's writing. It's partly her cast of mind: the best way I can put it is that she has the brain of a nerd and the soul of an artist. And while she's always taking the piss out of someone or something, she doesn't come across as smug, and there's an intense (even desperate) seriousness underlying even her relatively flippant passages. Her attitude toward the world (and many of the people in it) ranges from fury to contempt to despair, but not only does she see the funny side, she communicates a powerful sense of the richness of the life of the mind.

I don't know how much of this is actually apparent in these stories; I'm definitely reading them against the backdrop of *The Last Samurai*.

Some Trick is not a patch on The Last Samurai, and so far there's no single story in it that I'd enthusiastically recommend. The endings are mostly underwhelming (or, in the case of *Improvisation Is the Heart of Music*, baffling) -- it's not that I need a payoff or a twist, but I think there's an art to writing a quiet ending without leaving the reader feeling like they're missing something. Still, the stories are enjoyable and clever and sometimes funny, and there's enough of DeWitt's distinctive sensibility in this book that I'm very glad to be reading it.

[update on finishing:]

A mixed bag in both senses -- with the exception of a few groups of two or three that overlap quite heavily, the subject matter and tone vary considerably; but so does the quality, or at least I feel that way after reading the final story, *Entourage*, which did not work for me at all. There's still no single story I wholeheartedly recommend, but I'm very glad I read this and I hope DeWitt keeps writing and publishing.

To anyone who wants to begin by sampling a story or two, I'd probably suggest *Brutto* (a satire on the art world with something a little darker running just beneath the surface), *Famous Last Words* (a quiet meditation on intellectual/physical relationships), and perhaps *On the Town* (a fun riff on the absurdity of the entrepreneurial, jack-of-all-trades, self-made modern American success story).

David says

Helen Dewitt is incredibly good. So, just read the dang book. I will admit that 2 or 3 of the middle stories did considerably less for me than the rest, but even those fit conceptually in this whole. (It's not *just* a short story collection. There's definitely some overarching themes and motifs here.)

Clever, funny, and carrying out, here, some of the task she set for herself in a great blog post. Speaking as a mathematician, she does a good job of capturing certain aspects of the mathematically-inclined (or obsessed) person.

And of course, if you're frustrated by the state of our currently organized reality and especially sensitive to how dismally the current system supports and encourages artists? Read this. Read this. Read this.

Alison Hardtmann says

Some Trick: Thirteen Stories by Helen DeWitt is a collection of short stories all focusing on people who are very intelligent in one way or another. They struggle with money, compulsions or simply with everyday life. The academics value quick, erudite conversations, peppered with untranslated French, German and Latin. Each story, taken alone, comes across as clever and unusual, taken as a whole, the stories become variations on the same thing.

The first story, *Brutto*, is about a young struggling artist who comes to the attention of a prominent art dealer and then sees her vision over-whelmed by his, and she's faced with the decision of whether to stick to her ideas, and perhaps have to give up art entirely to support herself, or allow her art to be changed into something unrecognizable. And in *Famous Last Words*, a young woman makes the following observation:

There is a text which I could insert at this point which begins, 'I'm not in the mood,' but the reader who has had occasion to consult it will know that, though open to many variations, there is one form which is, as

Voltaire would say, potius optandum quam probandum, and that is the one which runs 'I'm not in the mood,' 'Oh, OK.' My own experience has shown this to be a text particularly susceptible to discursive and recursive operations, one which circles back on itself through several iterations and recapitulations, one which ends pretty invariably in 'Oh, OK,' but only about half the time as the contribution of my co-scripteur. I think for a moment about giving the thing a whirl, but finally settle on the curtailed version which leaves out, 'I'm not in the mood' and goes directly to 'Oh, OK.' X and I go upstairs.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Really just not very good. Perhaps it's unfair to have read it between Orlovitz's poems and Divine Days.

Even so ::

- 1) ND did the right thing.
 - 2) I'm going to buy DeWitt a coffee :: <https://ko-fi.com/dewitt>
 - 3) I did the poli=correct thing and bought her Lightning Rods new at full=\$\$\$ from The Independent Village Bookshop.
-

Ian Scuffling says

What happened? Were my expectations too high? Was I wanting this book to be something other than it was ever going to be? Whatever is going on, I felt like Helen DeWitt's *Some Trick: Thirteen Stories* was a series of unfinished riffs on topics and themes rather than any kind of coherent collection of stories. The design may have been to have the book (and its stories) stand in as blank integers where the reader has to solve for X. But, even there, I'm not sure DeWitt's project works because there's not enough "there" there to adequately do the math, so to speak. This is alluded to in the "Publisher's Note" in the back of the book, which clarifies a few things that seem like they could have been style inconsistencies, and highlights one story which uses X and x in a way that seems to suggest the same person. The note expands with an excerpt from an unpublished novella by DeWitt from which the story in question was carved and explains these are integers (two different ones) which the reader can fill in on her/his own because anyone could stand in those holes.

A few stories have their moments, and perhaps the best of these is "On the Town" which transplants a starry-eyed Iowan into a riveting Manhattan where he quickly is able to put practical skills to use, much to the bewilderment (and happiness) of New Yorkers who were more than content to let the water leak continue in their apartment. However, the story falls apart as quickly as it gets up on its legs, and just noodles for a little while before ending. Many of these stories do this; they have promising beginnings but seem then to get lost. I can't help but wonder if most of these weren't longer pieces originally that were chopped down into stories.

I can't help wonder, too, if DeWitt's bad luck in the publishing industry didn't inform a lot of this content so focused on the matter of misguided and stupid contracts that constrain and ruin and inhibit the production of great art (writing or music or otherwise). Another theme seems to be about the impracticality of the impossibly reasoned mind—logical reasoning is a guiding motif in the lives of the characters in these stories, which often spins out to extreme conclusions, such as in "Entourage" where a man has an entire entourage of translators spanning virtually every language on earth so that the protagonist can experience the great writers in their true original form.

I'm happy that New Directions is dedicated to DeWitt. She deserves to be published. Even where these

stories fail, I'm happy to have had the opportunity to read them and I'll wait eagerly for whatever she puts out next—I just know she'll re-capture the lightning that formed *The Last Samurai* again.

Scott says

From the outside, Helen DeWitt's stories always sound like the kind of conceptual art piece that have an interesting premise, but depend on flawless execution to actually live up to the promise. Fortunately, on the inside, her stories are flawlessly executed, filled with life, humor, character, and neatly rendered frequency plots. These stories may or may not be interconnected (but are related), featuring a group of people who may or may not know each other (but certainly know of each other), but each and all are wonderfully made.
