



The Secret Life of Puppets

Victoria Nelson

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In one of those rare books that allows us to see the world not as we've never seen it before, but as we see it daily without knowing, Victoria Nelson illuminates the deep but hidden attraction the supernatural still holds for a secular mainstream culture that forced the transcendental underground and firmly displaced wonder and awe with the forces of reason, materialism, and science.

In a backward look at an era now drawing to a close, *The Secret Life of Puppets* describes a curious reversal in the roles of art and religion: where art and literature once took their content from religion, we came increasingly to seek religion, covertly, through art and entertainment. In a tour of Western culture that is at once exhilarating and alarming, Nelson shows us the distorted forms in which the spiritual resurfaced in high art but also, strikingly, in the mass culture of puppets, horror-fantasy literature, and cyborgs: from the works of Kleist, Poe, Musil, and Lovecraft to Philip K. Dick and virtual reality simulations. At the end of the millennium, discarding a convention of the demonized grotesque that endured three hundred years, a Demiurgic consciousness shaped in Late Antiquity is emerging anew to re-divinize the human as artists like Lars von Trier and Will Self reinvent Expressionism in forms familiar to our pre-Reformation ancestors. Here as never before, we see how pervasively but unwittingly, consuming art forms of the fantastic, we allow ourselves to believe.

The Secret Life of Puppets Details

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From Reader Review The Secret Life of Puppets for online ebook

jeff says

This should probably be a 5 star book, but I read a lot of it before bed, so there are parts that are a little sketchy in my memory. It is one of those books that now that i have read it, i need to pick it up and read it again in a year or so, knowing what to expect. The very basic argument is that in a world that is constantly becoming more secular and scientifically-oriented, the human need for connection to something sacred/transcendent asserts itself in art. Part of that need presents itself in the re-creation of humans as demiurges, re-shaping our reality and bestowing some quasi-sacred qualities to simulacra, like puppets, for example. I am drastically under-representing the book, and it covers everything from HP Lovecraft to Plato to psychotopography. It's scope is impressive. It was published in 2001, and i would love to read an updated version with further consideration of how the internet has evolved in the last 8 years. Definitely academic and definitely worth reading.

Joshua Buhs says

Nelson argues that there is a split in Western culture between the Aristotelean episteme of reason, the Platonic episteme that allows for a spiritual world--a world of Forms. Platonism and Neo-Platonism held sway until the 17th century, when the world became increasingly seen through an Aristotelean lens: everything was material and mechanical. Even Protestant religion mostly banished the soul and Gods. The other world, the spiritual world, then came to reside in popular entertainments and was understood psychologically. In a series of chapters, she shows how to see popular entertainments not just as psychological projections of an urge for spirituality, but actual examples of spirituality working itself out. To this point in history, though, this supernatural realm is almost completely dominated by demons: there is no good here, yet.

The book is not always clear, nor does she wear her substantial erudition lightly.

Chapter 1: religious impulse deflects into supernatural, which is mostly demonic and now mostly exists in popular entertainments--the imagination. In the Renaissance, the last time all this had been bound up in a Platonic matrix, there was a single man of learning--he breaks into four: theologian, philosopher, scientist, and the imaginer (magus, artist).

She sees this in spatial terms--must go to the grotto--above or below, perhaps underwater, to reach the dark place of transformation.

Protestantism turns the supernatural into the imaginative one.

The uncanny becomes merely a psychological category.

Older modes of experience are repressed--but come back in different forms.

Chapter 2: Describes Platonic episteme. No division between organic and inorganic, mortal and divine.

Connection through soul. Meaning of soul very contested in the first three hundred years after the death of Christ, given the polyglot variety of Hellenistic culture at the time. Gnosis allows human access to the divine.

Puppets also allow connection with the divine; they can speak the will of the divine.

As Christianity consolidated, Aristotle came out of hiding, and science developed, this Platonic strand marginalized. Idolatry. Culminates in 17th century.

Now gnosticism persists in the world of imagination and popular entertainment. Transcendent now only achievable individually, through subjective--psychological--experience.

NB: at least as stated in this chapter, she over-emphasizes practicality of religion. May be true of a few Great Men trying to accord it with science, but popular religion something else altogether.

Argues, then, that 'imagination' is an invented concept.

Chapter 3: Clarifies--transcendent still available to the religious, but mostly internal, not through world, which has been made dead. Soul is now in machines--they are one way to reach the transcendent. Puppets.

Chapter 4: The fantastic in America--splits between Poe and the Gothic.

American had a gnostic popular religion--another caveat to above. But official culture remains pragmatic and realistic. She can't really explain why the split. Poe's influence is big in Europe, not so much in America. American fantastic exists in the low culture--pulp, comics, etc. It does poke through here and there, with Edith Wharton and Henry James, for example, an eruption in the 1960s--which peters out as the focus becomes on (realistically) describing the lives of marginalized women, blacks, and other groups. It also slips in as the exotic--in the writings of Toni Morrison or Latin American magical realism. Mainstream culture, she says, flatters its middle class patrons, and so it is either narcissistic or voyeuristic.

For reasons that she does not explain, supernatural becomes increasingly mainstream in the 1980s and 1990s. Chapter 5:

Psychobabble about H P Lovecraft. He is trying to reach the numinous, right? And this plays out in a psychological play of his life. He just cannot admit he is trying to reach the real transcendent, because he is trapped in the Aristotelean episteme.

Chapter 6: Stories of polar exploration, including hollow earth tales, reflect psychological journeys--attempts to get to the transcendent.

Chapter 7: Plays with the saying, 'Is this real or am I crazy?' Both, it is real. And you are crazy only because you accept the psychological terms, rather than the spiritual ones--you are confronting the transcendent, the numinous. Not just imagination--real. She uses the example of P K Dick and Valis--sure, he was a schizophrenic, but he touched something real, too. She also points to the cults created by fans of fantastic literature, and the way they speak invented language. This is a pallid way of getting at what Dick did: using the imagination, the fantastic to touch, or invite in, the transcendent.

Chapter 8: Memory is a Platonic thing: Forms. Need to peel away and reconnect with the transcendent.

Chapter 9: Applies previous insight to loosely allied revivalists of German Expressionism in the 1990s.

Chapter 10: Odd. A sudden attack on Umberto Eco for his dismissal of occult tradition. Why here?

Chapter 11: Modern puppets are robots, androids, cyborgs, VR: connections to the divine. As she follows their history, she sees that supernatural is cleansed of some of its evil; there is a divine good, too. All of this is influenced by Gnosticism.

Chapter 12: Most recent Neoplatonic popular culture is finding its gods and demigods to replace the demons that have dominated the last three hundred or so years. A new aesthetic is emerging, a positive Neoplatonism, different than postmodernism, which was parodic. This new aesthetic will not reject science but will explore the spiritual, about which we are vastly ignorant. Aristotle still needed: but need to integrate Plato, too.

I did not see her cite the book, but hers seems to be an answer to Mark Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street*, 1999, which asked where gothic was going--still stuck with the ghosts getting revenge. now moving beyond.

Carl Waluconis says

Victoria Nelson has a challenging idea and a wide grasp of film and literature. This book is about life that humans assign to what start as inanimate forms. Looking at this through history, the analysis includes robots, cyborgs, and entire virtual worlds. The puppet's life was a kind of early virtual life. The author connects this to the way science fiction provides a place that, previously, transcendent literature supplied readers. The book has many insights with ideas such as: "In the history of puppets and other human simulacra after the decline of religion we can read... the underground history of the soul excluded from its religious context in

Western culture." I love this claim. I think a religious kind of belief cannot disappear. It will resurface somewhere else in a culture. Victoria Nelson also displays her erudition with quotations from many different sources. Her many examples vary widely, but at times some of them become a little tedious. Just the same, focus on places you want and this is a "fantastic" non-fictional read, in all the positive meanings of that word.

Odile says

The Secret Life of Puppets is a complicated and fascinating study that incorporates analyses of literature, film, esotericism, philosophy, and culture in general. The central thesis is that our fascination with the supernatural - frowned upon by mainstream secular/rationalist culture - has been driven underground, but is resurfacing in the popular cultural expressions of film, genre literature, etc.

The book incorporates a vast amount of cultural study, ranging from authors as diverse as **Umberto Eco**, **H.P. Lovecraft** and **Bruno Schulz** to the study of films like *The Truman Show* and *Dark City*. At the same time, the author manages to place the themes of these works in the context of a very broad spectrum of religious and philosophical tendencies.

At times it is difficult to keep track of the central line of reasoning of this book; the title is represented by an analysis of the evolution of 'the puppet' as an archetype, embodied in the robots, androids and cyborgs of modern day popular culture. The amount of references in the book is large and diffuse, and aggravated by an opaque note and reference system.

However, I do believe Nelson is on to something significant with this excellent study: that the (Neo-)Platonic/supernatural and Aristotelean/rational are two modes of thinking that both permeate the very fiber of our culture. In different periods, one may have the upper hand, just as mainstream Western culture currently celebrates the 'victory' over superstition and religion, but there is reason to believe that the most interesting things happen at the intersection of these two, I believe ultimately compatible, ways of thinking.

This is a book that I'll be returning in the future, as I'm sure there will be much more to discover upon its rereading.

Jim Coughenour says

I read the first 99 pages of this book when I bought it in 2001, then shelved it and forgot it. Recently I've been reading *Puppet* by Kenneth Gross, and decided to read it again. I'm glad I did: it's a fascinating look at the emergence of the *grotesque* and the concomitant disappearance of the *transcendent* in Western consciousness, or more accurately, its displacement into the "fantastic" literature of Kleist, Poe and their successors as well as the mass-art media of horror-fantasy films, fiction, graphic novels and games. In broadest terms, Nelson investigates the evolution of the numinous from religion into art, the inner tensions of an unstable materialist worldview.

The journey, fortunately, is far more interesting than my congested summary. Nelson's *Secret Life* is one of my favorite kinds of books – a history of Imagination; an eccentric, deeply intelligent meditation on the forms of art and consciousness, packed with specific examples and excursions, as well as sweeping statements such as "This drastic reinterpretation of reality [around, roughly, the Reformation] in which one's only transcendental link to God is internal marks the real dividing line in Western culture." It's the sort of book in which one enjoys the ruminating endnotes as much as the text itself.

If you're the type of reader who enjoys the historical analyses of writers like Ioan Couliano; C S Lewis (literary criticism, not apologetics); Frances Yates; Owen Barfield; James Hillman; Roberto Calasso – you'd probably enjoy Nelson. She has a new book (*Gothika*) coming out this spring; I've already ordered it.

Dean says

I love this book completely. This is a lovely hodgepodge of essays that would seemingly be unrelated but are, and Nelson's prose would make any topic exciting. Just read it.

David says

In *The Secret Life of Puppets*, Victoria Nelson focuses on "the way the larger mainstream culture, via works of imagination instead of official creeds, subscribes to a nonrational, supernatural, quasi-religious view of the universe".

What the author presents are the cracks which have emerged between the dominant discourse of Aristotlean Materialism and Neoplatonic Idealism. What is meant by this is that the sacred space, now eroded by secularism, has moved into the imagined spaces of entertainment: film, tv, books, graphic novels, etc. The argument suggests that "we nonbelievers allow ourselves, unconsciously, to believe".

Ultimately, the author believes that the world is experiencing another sea change, not experienced since the scientific revolution [the Aristotelian revolution] of the 16th Century. Nelson is not suggesting materialism/secularism will disappear but space will be made for Neoplatonism/Idealism [non-material/non-rational].

There is a strong case to be made for the idea that as secularism has spread in our public and intellectual spaces so the supernatural has spread throughout the imagined spaces of the entertainment industry and this feeds a yearning for a deeper sense of purpose, wonder, and terror/the sublime.

Unfortunately, the book is written by an academic for other academics and the reader will have to wade through a great deal of post-structural obfuscation and self-reflexive sentences in order to get at the meat of Victoria Nelson's argument. If this can be done the reader will find much to enjoy in the writer's observations and readings of popular culture and its central place in our modern lives.

Recommended for those interested in literary studies, pop culture analysis, cultural anthropology, the function of the supernatural in our lives today, and the nature of the sacred and the profane in the 21st Century.

Rating 4 out of 5 stars.

Warning: As of writing, the Amazon ebook version of this book is very poor--stick with the print version.

Zachary Powell says

This book is a fun read. Nelson designs her chapters well and she touches base with a plethora of stories--old and new, genre and literature, books and film. Lovecraft and Philip K. Dick are here. It inspired me to rent the anime *_Ghost in the Shell_*. It mentions one of my favorite sci-fi books and movies: *_Solaris_*. And there is an academic side to all this fun.

The Platonic to the Aristotelian is interesting stuff. Better yet, is the idea that literature holds the spiritual residue of the days of Gnostic and Hermetic thought, those neo-Platonic days between 100-300 AD. Anyone that has read Alan Moore's *_From Hell_* or Cormac McCarthy's *_Blood Meridian_* would agree. The fact that post-Enlightenment, in a society that has--dominantly a secular worldview--it makes sense that art becomes our religion, our spiritual realm. This helped me understand why authors are treated like sages. Recently, when Junot Diaz was at KU, the Q&A basically turned into people posing dilemmas and asking Diaz to save them. The author as the messiah. For Nelson, she says that "the rest of us also seek form the arts what we once sought from religion, from the cultish worship of 'stars' at one extreme to the genteel passion for extracting moral examples from novels at the other" (9).

However, some of the best moments, for me, are when Nelson seeks to classify and clarify art types. She makes distinctions between genre literature as a type of retelling akin to madness while art/literature reaches a satisfying catharsis. She is speaking of Lovecraft, but she says that "to read a genre story is to participate in a Sysphean reenactment that is not the kind of complex, deeply identified reexperiencing a reader undergoes with the works of a writer like Kafka" (133-134). Through Kafka, she argues, you are satisfied not thirsty for more. The story has had an original thought and completed it in a way that allows one to sit back and think, not lust for more. When I teach, I often try to get students to realize the difference in order to better appreciate art over pure entertainment. Nelson's ideas allowed me better logic and explanation to employ in this battle.

A third dilemma it solved for me was talking about endings. I've always taught and discussed ambiguous endings in the simple way of saying that it allows for the artistic by causing you to think. Sometimes, I think this is a bit cheap thought, such as the endings to the movies *_Inception_* or *_Birdman_*. Even more recently, I watched the movie *_Take Shelter_* where the last scene is hard to discern; is it a dream or reality? Nelson uses the idea of the Platonic bonding of paradox--the idea that reality and the uncanny (insanity) must be accepted at the same time in certain endings (and her argument is that these endings are becoming more common today). She uses Henry James's *_Turn of the Screw_* as an example: it is typically read as a psychological story and not a ghost story. She supposes it is both at the same time, adding, "To read and reread the final scene receiving first one and then another meaning until both mutually exclusive scenarios are operational is the deeply unsettling kind of repetition only high art can motivate," and she then asks "Does reality run on a single track?" (173). So I must pause and reconsider whether or not the fore-mentioned endings are just an easy ploy or suggest something bigger about our new reality and art's place within it.

Ana says

Despite what the title suggests, this is not a book about puppets (at least most of it isn't); it is not even a book about theatre. So what is it about?

Indeed, when I got it, I did so thinking I would read about the history of puppets or geeky things like those I enjoy; after all, it was recommended in a book written by puppet theatre company Handspring Puppet Theatre. But, although I couldn't be a geek in the way that I wanted to, truth is I have nothing to complain

about. The book is about the evolution of human thought and beliefs, and how this is reflected in art (particularly literature, and a little bit in theatre and cinema).

I must admit it gets a bit hard to read at times; Victoria Nelson, the writers, sometimes uses a language that is a bit difficult, but in general it is understandable, even without having previous knowledge of the works she is talking about (although I must admit that knowing about them, even just having heard of them, helps to understand her points better). But, me, for instance, if I knew half the books she was talking about, it is a lot. The big advantage (or disadvantage - depending on the point of view), is that I have added a bunch of recommended books to read and movies to write, recommended on the book: where will I find the time to do so, is a different matter.

So, the name of the book, I guess, comes from the whole reflection Nelson makes from the idea of idols, but it is more focused on self-knowledge and how it is reflected on what we do and the things we live with. This is why I say you don't have to be theatre fans necessarily to enjoy it; read it if you like literature, science fiction, cinema, philosophy, history, art, technology... Just read it.

Shel says

An excellent, critical examination of the appeal of imaginative fiction and discussion of literary versus genre fiction, high art versus low, and the intersection of art, philosophy and popular culture.

A worthwhile read for: American writers of science fiction or fantasy or fans of the genre; writers who, having been told to read *even* more to improve their craft, are wondering, "But, read what?"; people who want to ponder interesting answers to questions such as: "Why do I like those Chucky movies?"; "What need does Dungeons & Dragons fulfill in our society?"; "How come I can never get enough of those formulaic vampire/werewolf/fairy stories?"; and "What do the films *Ghost in the Shell*, *Terminator 2*, *Dark City* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* have in common?"

The first time I read this it inspired a flurry of highlighting. On second read, a few years later, I was wildly adding to my to-read list and pausing along the way to read E.T.A. Hoffman's "The Sand-Man," Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

This is a work of literary criticism, insightful and academic. It can be read front to back if the subject matter strikes a chord in the reader or try it chapter by chapter to explore areas of interest: "The Strange History of the American Fantastic," the works of "H.P. Lovecraft and the Great Heresies" or the arctic mythos, "Symmes Hole, or the South Polar Grotto".

Pairs well with: Karen Armstrong's *The Case for God*, which also makes a point about the human need for the mystical and supernatural and how we satisfy it in a secular, scientific world; works by Plato, Poe, Bruno Schulz, H.P. Lovecraft, E.M. Forster, Stanislaw Lem, Philip K. Dick, Leonora Carrington, Cynthia Ozick and Will Self for starters.

Of note: Neil Gaiman blurbed this, "A wonderful, unlikely, *necessary* book which links high and low pop culture, the sacred and profane, into a magnificent webwork of pattern and gnosis—it is erudite, irreverent, and profound."

Anna Springer says

Where I learned of the origins of the "grotesque" and one of the best-written intellectually fabulous history and criticism books ever. A MUST for writers interested in fabulism and perversity.

John Jr. says

The rational, materialist worldview seems to have triumphed or at least to hold the upper hand in Western culture, yet nonrational and supernatural elements abound in our art and entertainment. Think about it: in the same summer in which a spacecraft achieved the feat of flying past and photographing Pluto, we're amusing ourselves with superhero movies such as *Ant-Man* and *Fantastic Four*. What accounts for this? I have a vague notion, borrowed from Northrop Frye, that the historical progression of Frye's literary modes, from the mythic to the ironic, is beginning to repeat itself—that we're more or less returning to tales of gods and great heroes. That amounts mainly to an observation, not an explanation, and I won't go into it, but you can get a grasp of the overall idea from the Wikipedia account. In *The Secret Life of Puppets*, Victoria Nelson makes a detailed study of the question and offers, if not a genuine answer, then at least a deep analysis of how the supernatural and the transcendent have persisted.

More than 10 years have elapsed since I read her book, and it's beyond me now to give a proper account of it, but some of the Goodreads reviews are quite good. An overview is this review, and a thorough report is here.

Szplug says

Nelson is a Californian scholar who has bestowed upon the reading world here a work of relentless and restless intelligence. Conceived as a single tome after receiving avid encouragement in that direction subsequent to her completion of a handful of independent—but thematically linked—essays, *The Secret Life of Puppets* pursues the fortunes of the losing side of the Enlightenment duality conflict—the *transcendent*—and its relegation to the shadows of the *grotesque grotto* during the three hundred plus year reign of empirical materialism. Nelson believes that this outgrowth of Platonism has nevertheless endured in Western culture, resurfacing (often inherent within various simulacra) at a higher frequency—and one that has become more open and acceptable over the past two decades—than most reason-embracing citizens would be aware of.

Nelson sets the stage for her argument by an engaging summation of early belief systems, with focus upon the Platonic and Gnostic. The former had its influential postulation of a divine realm of ideal and perfect forms that were mirrored in the material world in which man interacted with his mind—and human knowledge (reason, *logos*) and divine knowledge (intuition, *nous*) were interdependent, a combinatory mental and soul construct that would help man to achieve understanding of the true and the real. The Gnostics took from Plato's basic tenets and added their own twist in declaring that the Divine Ideal lay beyond the material universe, the latter being the creation of an evil or ignorant Demiurge and his Archons who created man in his current fallen form of a fleshy body imprisoning a divinity-sundered soul and conspired to keep him from knowledge of the true God. Such knowledge could be achieved through *gnosis*, the process of knowing, a spiritual intuition that would carry the believer beyond the demiurgical limitations of *episteme*, the state of knowing derived from reason alone.

From here Nelson covers the merging of Platonic and Gnostic dogma with Christianity in the fourth century

CE into Neoplatonism, in which the perfect Divine was separated from the imperfect world by a complex hierarchy of enjoined spheres (macrocosm to microcosm) in which the divinity flowed earthward in an increasingly diluted stream. Neoplatonic thought would dominate Christian theology for centuries, until the resurrection of a more materialist Aristotelianism in the late Middle Ages. The duel between Platonic and Aristotelian patterns of thinking would be initiated in the Renaissance, when previously lost (Neo)Platonic writings were discovered and championed by such intellectual fire-breathers as Giordano Bruno (Nelson's clear favorite), who crafted a fusion of Neoplatonic, Hermetic, Gnostic and Jewish Cabalistic doctrine into a potent blend of Pagan-Christian magical and occult ritual. Although Bruno's body was consumed by the flames, his powerful admixture continued to live on.

This Platonic/Aristotelian conflict would eventually be decided in the Enlightenment—and Plato was banished as the *episteme*, reason-oriented scientific thought concerned solely with a natural world of phenomena, assumed pride of place. This change deeply affected Protestant Christianity, which purged itself of belief in divine intervention via miracles and in the existence of the Devil and supernatural spirits outside of allegory. As the Enlightenment gave way to an industrialized modernity, the works of Freud and Jung completed this ascendancy of *episteme*, in which any lingering traces of outside supernatural or transcendent intervention in human affairs were completely superseded by that of the newly discovered consciousness: the ego, the id, the unconscious, examined and explained through psychoanalysis. No longer was man afflicted by exterior supernatural agencies: all his troubles were found to be brewed up from the benighted depths of his own human mind. Yet the strains of the supernatural and the transcendent had existed for millennia, rooting themselves deeply in all aspects of life, and they were not condemned to disappear. Nelson explores how they were instead banished to existence in the *grotesque grotto*, the underground where they were continually plucked to invest and inhabit high-cultural art (on continental Europe) and low-cultural works and *kitsch* (in both Europe and North America), which Nelson hereafter refers to as the *sub-zeitgeist*. The divine could no longer be accepted (other than as delusion) in the realistic rationality that was coming to dominate the literary field—but it was acceptable in the *fantastic*, as exemplified by chap-books, detective and horror stories, fantasy tales and comic books, and pre-cinematic puppet shows. Nelson had shown how Neoplatonic philosophy had engendered a strong belief in the ability of simulacra (statuary, icons, dolls, etc.) to tap into the ideal divine; being constructed of earthly material that bore the holy imprint of God, and shaped like the imperfect forms that existed on Earth, they functioned as stand-ins for those perfect forms at the apex of the Great Chain of Being. This fervent acceptance of the divine potentiality of simulacra carried through to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the twist that, amidst a rational society, the *transcendent* mutated into the *grotesque*, the *demonic*, the *profane*; simulacra were now firmly linked with negative consequences: hubris, pride, madness, evil, greed, and other such follies.

Nelson pours through a wide variety of examples to buttress her arguments, tracing the development of low-cultural art by way of genre fiction and comics, puppet theatre and cinema, moving through the expanding realm of simulacra as puppets became robots, then androids, culminating in cyborgs which increasingly blur the line between the human aspect and the artificial. With the onset of the World Wide Web and its concomitant electronic genesis of *virtual reality*, which exerts a powerful attraction for both the desire for demiurgical creation and that of a mirror of the material world that tends more towards the perfection of the Ideal, there has been an influx of cinematic and literary works that explore the supernatural in milieus where it is neither explained away as delusional belief or imaginary suspension-of-belief, but as *actually existing* in the material world without any rationalizing strings attached at all; it merely *is*.

Thus, Nelson perceives that the *transcendent* has begun its emergence into the open as an acceptable part of twenty-first century discourse. She deems this a desirable state, as she points out how mankind's greatest renaissance flowerings have coincided with a complementary rivalry between the empirical *episteme* and the spiritual *transcendent*; as long as this duality can manage not to claim mastery of ground where the other has right of place, there is no reason they cannot exist side-by-side in a complimentary fashion. If Christianity expelled the supernatural in an effort to achieve peaceful co-existence with a growingly secular society, perhaps there can be acceptance by the latter of certain aspects of existence that cannot be disproved by

empirical reasoning—that perhaps the truth *does* lie in the centre between the *spiritual* and the *material*.

If the above paragraphs seem to cover too much ground with too little detail, it's because Nelson examines such a thorough and broad swath of subjects that it proves almost impossible to summarize easily. Indeed, in some of the middle chapters—which, as noted at the outset, were culled together from previously written essays—the reader can occasionally sense Nelson beginning to diverge from her overarching theme, particularly in the chapter that covers several works by Umberto Eco. With such a disparity of exegesis performed, this is always a very real danger—nevertheless, such tangential forays are always arrested before stepping completely off of the baseline, an impressive feat in and of its own. For myself, the highlight of *TSLOP* is the chapter that compares the primary texts of three exemplary representatives of her *underground transcendent* hypothesis: the pulp-horror fiction of H. P. Lovecraft (low-cultural *fantastic*); the short fiction and essays of Bruno Schulz (high-cultural *fantastic*); and the memoir of Daniel Paul Schreber, an educated civil servant from turn-of-the-century Germany who suffered from schizophrenia (realistic *delusion*). Nelson points out the demiurgical streak in all three writers, the manner in which all three—knowingly in the case of Schreber, unknowingly in that of the other two—plumbed the unsettled contents of the unconscious in their writing and used *psychotopography*—the projection of interior unconsciousness upon exterior forms, whether existing in reality or merely in fictional milieus—in the crafting of their disturbing body of work. The fantastic and demiurgical makeup of their writing, along with the closely linked time period in which they wrote, are marvelously deconstructed and examined by Nelson's acute eye and sharp mind; these three serve as linking figures with the other chapters of *The Secret Life of Puppets*, bearers of tropes whose fruits will be discovered and discussed in the following chapters that pursue avenues of the *transcendent* in the mid- to late twentieth century.

Nelson clearly set herself a formidable task. However, she argues her cases brilliantly and persuasively and manages to re-tie whatever loose ends were showing in a very tight and convincing final chapter. As she seeks support for her theme in a wide variety of high- and low-cultural settings—literature, theatre, cinema, philosophy—the sheer amount of evidentiary material seemingly required would appear to threaten to bog down a book less than three hundred pages in length; yet the examples she selects are surveyed with such skill that she has no problem whatsoever with both persuading the reader *and* keeping her wonderfully, wittily written text flowing at a brisk-but-informative pace. One of that exemplary breed of non-fiction that not only educates the reader by divulging new information but also casts that which is already known in a different and revelatory light. Highly recommended.

Sarah says

Best characterized as a series of loosely connected essays on art, technology, spirituality and the ways in which these themes interconnect. In fact, very little of it has anything to do with puppets! But every page of it is fascinating.

Michael Klein says

Just my favorite book of the year. From grotto to AI, this is the story of how we became puppets of our puppets.... Brilliant, beautiful written and approached, I cannot recommend this book enough.
