

*The Dinner Party* by Joshua Ferris

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Review by Melanie White

Joshua Ferris's collection of short stories, *The Dinner Party*, is heavily populated with the sort of needy, self-absorbed urban males familiar to readers of his Booker-shortlisted novel, *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*.

His characters repeatedly pace the ground of infidelity, rocky marriages, and empty social functions in search of greater meaning and invariably come up short. Despite the stories' pessimism, Ferris delineates his characters' experiences with such acute social observation and sharp satire that they end up seeming more comic than tragic. These elements often delightfully intertwine, as with an arguing couple: "She stopped resisting and swiveled to face him. Passersby, intrigued by the sight of another life on fire, skirted around them and turned back to stare." Even in the midst of relationship combustion, Ferris notes the comedy of human behaviour – treating others' lives as entertainment – with an accuracy that captures the harried, alienated nature of urban life.

In this collection, for the most part, that means life in cities like New York and Los Angeles, places where "life" means going to dinner with people you hate, gaining invites to parties graced by celebrities, and enduring hours of sweaty purgatory in the overcrowded subway. The subway, in fact, recurs frequently as a metaphor for stifled lives: "Here was the underworld of the city's infinite offerings: snags, bottlenecks, the growing anxiety of never arriving at what was always just out of reach." Stuck within the bowels of the city (and their marriage), characters miss simple pleasures like watching the sun set or a rare spring breeze. Trains stall, the subterranean air belongs to the "last century", and a crazy man drops his pants: the subway as psyche for both the city and its inhabitants.

While Ferris's male characters are universally pathetic, deluded and morally lacking, their wives repeatedly play out patterns of departure. A more accurate title for the collection might be *How Your Wife Will Leave You the Same Way Ten Times Over*. Stopping dead in the street and taking off in another direction without a word heralds marital breakdown in several stories. In others, wives simply disappear, failing to return home. Miscommunication is rife, whether through dialogue or outright silence. "Why do I have this life?" sobs one wife in the title story, to the blank confusion of her husband. In "A Night Out", the husband finds himself talking to the air when his wife stops dead in the street, turns and walks away: "She was in her own world. ... He stood there, uncomprehending, hot, annoyed: a man abruptly in the middle of something."

Spousal inability to communicate lies at the heart of "The Breeze", one of the best stories, sparked by this tragi-comic exchange:

"What should we do tonight, Jay?" she asked him.

His attention was diverted by a credit card offer. "I don't care," he said. "What do you want to do?"

"Is there anything you want to do in particular?"

"I want to do whatever you want to do," he said.

"So it's up to me to come up with something?"

He looked up from the mail at last. "You asked me to come home so we could do something."

"Because I want to do something."

"I want to do something, too," he said.

"Okay," she said, "so let's do it."

“Let’s do it,” he said. “So what should we do?”

All of the stories in *The Dinner Party* are written with elegant simplicity (unsurprisingly, most originally appeared in the *New Yorker*), but “The Breeze” is the only one with an innovative, non-linear structure. It follows a *Groundhog Day*-style pattern of replaying variations on the couple’s night out, building a crescendo of existential crisis out of an otherwise ordinary evening on the town: picnic in Central Park, drinks at a skyscraper bar, dinner at a downtown Italian. The story’s relentless retreading of the couple’s familiar ground draws a sense of desperation from the otherwise mundane (“I would literally rather kill myself than go to a movie tonight,” the wife says), emphasising the common anxiety that springs from fear of choosing the wrong thing to do: wasting time and, therefore, life.

One of the deepest satisfactions of these stories is that they often mete out cosmic justice to their sorry protagonists in ways that are surprising yet spring naturally from the characters’ actions. The final story, “A Fair Price”, asks, “What does a man do – and I mean a real man, now, what does a real man do – when he knows he’s done something wrong?” Though Ferris’s answer to his central question tends to be cynical, the effect succeeds in being deliciously gratifying.