

F I C T I O N I N R E V I E W



D A V I D G A L E F

Anna Krestler, age thirty-seven, ex-graduate student, e-mail junkie, and slightly lost (or mislaid) soul, has recently been downsized from her menial job at the law firm of Pinter, Chinski and Harms. Now she must confront her Internet addiction (including her spam collection) and think about what to do with the rest of her life. As the hapless but likable heroine of Alina Simone's debut novel, *Note to Self*, Anna may be smarter than some of the people she encounters, yet she's also burdened by an acute sense of justice in an unfair society. Determined to join the art world, she notices many suspect creations but can't do much about them: a filmmaker whose first work featured her "wearing nothing but knee-socks as she cavorted around a dorm room reciting the *Duino Elegies*," a Japanese sculptor who's constructed a giant outdoor installation from the dung of macaque monkeys, and a large percentage of the clips on YouTube.

This kind of setup is the territory of Sam Lipsyte, whose characters observe our society's successes and excesses with impotent

Note to Self, by Alina Simone (Faber and Faber, 256 pp., \$25.00 cloth)

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disdain. Simone's sensibility also bears more than a passing resemblance to that of Gary Shteyngart, with his eloquent dissection of absurdity, from products to institutions. Like Shteyngart, Simone escaped the Soviet Union at an early age, a subject she wrote about in her 2011 essay collection, *You Must Go and Win*. But Simone is her own creation, just as Anna is Simone's. The impressions Anna registers have an idiosyncratic but sharp angle of accuracy: a 99-cent store that smells "like naphthalene and Febreze"; a trendy bar with "illuminated rows of Stoli, Maker's Mark, and curaçao glowing behind the bar like the Manhattan skyline rendered in liquor." And of certain poetry readings: "No matter how dismal the attendance, a dude with a safari-grade lens on his camera would always be on hand, circling whatever scruffy trust-fund kid happened to be on stage, intent on documenting every itch-inducing minute of this nonevent."

Despite all the casual randomness, the plot is traditional enough: girl meets boy who's maddeningly evasive. Through a notice on Craigslist, Anna contacts a mysterious filmmaker named Taj, who includes her in a new project he's directing. She is sucked into his netherworld, jolted from the comfort of her cyberspace. For all the virtual activity in the novel, real life intrudes; in fact, it continually trips Anna up. Human contact is not her métier, and her trust is often misplaced: another way to describe the novel would be "semi-naïf encounters a gallery of weirdos as she becomes ensnared in someone's twisted scheme." This pattern, come to think of it, is not that uncommon in novels.

But our society and its social media no longer permit simple entanglements. Simone's narrative uses anomie as a cohering structure, which is to say that this novel deals in what's out there nowadays: our handheld devices, our fragmented attention spans, our universal desire to go public. The Internet has changed everything: witness Anna's lust for quality e-mail, or her preference for her laptop over urban life, even though she lives in New York City. A few cavils: Anna acts more like a woman in her twenties than her late thirties; texting has supplanted e-mailing in the set that Anna moves in; and Anna's cluelessness at times strains credibility. But most of the details strike the plangent note of today's struggles.

Simone's satiric and precise language is what makes the novel so enjoyable. Of a discussion between Anna and her friend and

adviser Leslie: "Last time they had talked about what to talk about this time." Regarding an unread e-mail in Anna's inbox: "It sat there like a goldfish in its parenthetical bowl, keeping her from feeling lonely." No matter how skewed the perspective, Simone's language always feels right, down to an irregular verb: "The doors were heavy and institutional and blammed shut too loudly behind her." Anna's Internet exchanges with strangers are also dead-on, reminiscent of a section from Simone's essay collection called "Three Random Facebook Chats with Men I Had Assumed Were Fans."

In any event, Anna tries; she really does. She's broke, overweight, and desperate to be liked. It doesn't help that her roommate, Brie, has all the self-assurance of youth that Anna has lost: "Brie was still young enough to make declarative statements. She could still put periods, even exclamation marks, at the end of a sentence, whereas Anna had already changed her mind so many times about so many things it was all question marks and ellipses for her from now on in." Brie goes to gallery openings, shows, and parties. Anna stays home and plans to buy film equipment to make her own movie.

So many realms to poke fun at — but the main one here is the world of art cinematography. The prime poseur is Paul Gilman, a minimalist film director who stumbles on the principle of Nowism, which is to say shooting footage of whatever one encounters. Listening to this brand of auteur is like experiencing a version of the emperor's new clothes, in which people embrace nothingness as true substance. Gilman's films feature a man with his head in a bag, paeans to porn, and titles like *Rurik*, *Rurik*, *Traffic Cop*. He's gotten his actors from Craigslist. His sense of self-importance is evident from his interviews: "I never use scripts. A script only imposes moral constraints on the actor. What I'm interested in is the uninhibited id. I take the actors and put them in a box. Then it's up to them to break out of the box." The critical accolades, from a fellowship at Cannes to an acquisition from the Museum of Modern Art, are equally nauseating. At times, the lampooning is just too easy, especially when all Simone has to do is point out what's there.

Of course, an art movement can't exist without people behind the scenes, or in this instance, front row and center. Taj, the object

of Anna's fascination, is a film guy with all the earmarks of Gilman's self-proclaimed genius: egomania, a penchant for self-important proclamations, and a careful regard for careerism. A fellow student of Gilman's in a class led by Werner Herzog, Taj is jealous of Gilman's extraordinary ascent. Flanking Taj and Gilman, as it were, is the filmmaker and installation artist Simone Weill, whose work can best be summed up as vagina art. It's all gloomily plausible. It's probably all happened.

Simone is also good at animating a supporting cast. She has a knack for the minor ranks: "There were two women and a man gathered around a laptop. The women both looked, as her mother would say, like they'd 'lived a lot of life.' The man had stringy hair and an uneven sunburn that reminded Anna of guys who hang around small-town bus stations asking for change of a twenty." She can also sustain prolonged scenes, as in the lunch between Anna and her judgmental mother, who wants to talk about her daughter's weight issues but won't go too far in that direction because of her own plastic surgeries and other beauty procedures: "the Botox treatments that were sometimes so fresh her face looked like it had been raped by bees." The recurrent figures in Anna's life include her friend Leslie, continually offering well-meant advice like "Reposition Your Disposition," though Leslie, who has married well, is out of Anna's social sphere. The chit-chat among the women at a hot-yoga class to which Leslie invites Anna shows that divide, from soy products to building superintendents and IVF.

In the cast is also the inevitable gay friend, Brandon, who still works at Pinter, Chinski and Harms, but who now wants to return to film. When he finds out that Anna is friends with Taj, he writes her a long e-mail, proposing, among other projects, a cheesy romance involving a twenty-thousand-dollar couture dress, with nods to everything from Japanese theater and commedia dell'arte to *Cinderella* and Gogol. When Anna protests that she can't handle a camera, he insists, "It doesn't matter. It's all about your *sensibility*." In cinematography, everybody wants to get into the act.

The further progress (if that's the right word) of the novel involves Anna's relationship with Taj, the controlling one of the two. Anna is the seduced party, though her eyes aren't completely

shut. And sometimes Taj becomes vulnerable, such as during an episode on board a plane when the two of them ingest psychedelic mushrooms, or during a few unguarded moments in an L.A. hotel room, where Taj has brought her, ostensibly to wean her away from her Internet addiction. That he eventually betrays her seems inevitable, though the way in which he accomplishes this act comes as a surprise. The ending is a bit of a letdown, partly because it seems contrary to character, but also because the reader has learned to care about Anna and her future. Still, the novel as a whole remains a pleasure to read, from any number of angles. At one point, Anna comes up with the idea that the opposite of pop culture is unpopular culture. *Note to Self* is neither. It's fine art.