

DAN'S PAPERS

You don't know what you're in for when you start reading David Schmahmann's *The Double Life of Alfred Buber* (The Permanent Press), but a few pages in—well, maybe a few more for those who won't pick up immediately on the oddity of “Star Trek's” being invoked in an opening paragraph of slightly stilted, florid prose—you'll see that this first-person tale slips into (and out of) the narrator's also styling himself in the third person. And you'll begin to sense that the story, the protagonist's mocking “Chronicle” of his thoughts, described as a “residue, a creaking membrane of abandoned ideas, a scaffold without substance,” reflects both fact and fantasy.

And then, as you continue to read, wondering what kind of person this is, this “short, round, orotund,” balding Alfred Buber, you may suddenly pause and let out a joyous shriek of recognition if you're familiar with T.S. Eliot's “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” If this is the case, you may think you've been teased into an expanded version of “Prufrock's” themes of longing and loneliness in a sordid world. Images, phrases, rhythms, stylistic mannerisms from Eliot's iconic 1917 poem come and go as Buber types out his bizarre life, addressing someone not yet identified. Like Eliot's 1917 lyric, Schmahmann's novel is both a self-mocking account and a sardonic critique of the wasteland of our day.

But the novel is also, unlike “Prufrock,” witty and absurdly tragi-comic. Prufrock wonders if and how he should presume, whether he should or can act to assert a sense of being. Buber, a “quaint,” careful, diligent, respected attorney, “with a flat, fruity, English accent,” a “portly little Jewish chap out of Southern Rhodesia,” emigrates to America to go to college and becomes a highly respected partner in a prestigious Boston law firm. Unlike Prufrock—most decidedly, most erratically—Buber presumes. He does not want to be a “sterile hermit content to putter about his days, there is a frigid law office, here in my solitary cell.” And so . . . and so, he tells his colleagues he's going to Europe, but secretly travels to Thailand to engage in sex and winds up obsessing over a young girl, Nok, who openly fallates him in a seedy sex bar in Bangkok. “Oh, it is not love . . . It is much more compelling.”

Given the subject matter of this splendid, original tale, the increasingly tenacious infatuation of a prissy, conventional, well read middle-aged man—“an aging and pudgy frustrato” whom “time and tiredness have frayed” —Nabokov's *Lolita* may come to mind, not to mention Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Though Buber does not directly invoke Humbert Humbert, he does perversely refer to himself as a Henry Higgins as he entertains plans to educate his lovely, semi-literate impoverished concubine and bring her to Boston, community, colleagues, acquaintances be damned.

Or so he believes to the point of constructing (reconstructing?) scenes and dialogue set in the elaborate mansion he has built for himself out of money saved from years of spartan existence. He's rich, he writes, then adds, “in metaphor and allusion.” And an honest chronicler, too. “Captain James T. Kirk, whom I watch on occasion at three in the morning, is scrupulous in the accuracy of his log, and so too will I be.” Hmm. . . . Like the starship Enterprise, Buber would slip through the “space-time continuum” and end up in a strange place, but what a place—geographically and psychologically: “The heart may be a lonely hunter [hello, Carson McCullers]. It is also an irrational demon.”

As if crafting such a complex “Buberesque” character were not enough, Schmahmann outdoes himself with descriptions of Nok, the Asian sex trade and the squalid Asian countryside. No *Lolita*, Nok impassively, pathetically, plies her trade because there is nothing else. When Buber comes upon her she is off in a corner trying to learn English from a tattered book. Sympathy for her, seen only through Buber's eyes in his exquisitely ambiguous notes from the underground, ensure that *The Double Life of Alfred Buber* will—and should—be seen as a major literary achievement.

—Reviewed by Joan Baum

