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Review: Tao Lin's Taipei has poetic passages hidden amid the junk

Latest novel focuses a lot on illegal drugs. Maybe you need to take them to enjoy this book

By Michelle Lalonde, THE GAZETTE June 28, 2013

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Like Tao Lin's other novels, Taipei is generating a lot of buzz — both positive and negative — on the literary scene.

Photograph by: Noah Kalina

Taipei

By Tao Lin

Vintage Books Random House Inc., 256 pages, \$14.95

As I slogged my way through the first hundred pages of *Taipei*, a controversial new novel by 30-year-old New York author Tao Lin, I couldn't help feeling like I was stuck in some endless undergraduate creative writing class, forced to develop a literary opinion on the thinly fictionalized personal journal entries of a smart and creative but almost belligerently self-indulgent, drug-obsessed classmate.

After warning my editor that my review would not be favourable, I noticed a subtle change in my internal response to the second half of the book. Acknowledging that I was viscerally hating Tao's writing seemed to free me to like it a little, or at least notice what I didn't hate. Instead of angrily trying to tease out some logic or some shred of significance in every run-on sentence (and believe me, Tao's run-on sentences are much more convoluted than this one) or raging at every formulaic

transition (Tao has a grating habit of beginning virtually all transitions with a vague time reference: "An hour later" ... "A week later ...," which seems a lazy replacement for a date in a diary), I began to just allow my mind to float along, lulled by Tao's annoying writing style into a kind of bored trance, occasionally registering pleasant, amusing or even meaningful passages, without harshly judging the filler in between.

If that last sentence annoyed you in its attempt to convey too much negative, self-observing emotion in one long, complicated sentence, don't bother with this book. It is a compilation of hundreds of those. Keep in mind that I read every word, a reviewer's duty, and in the order it was presented. Perhaps it is designed to be read aloud, in random passages, by a reader on drugs. I don't know. The book is getting a lot of buzz on the literary scene, both positive and negative, much like Tao's first and second novels, Richard Yates and Eeeee Eee Eeee, did. (Tao has also published a novella called *Shoplifting in American Apparel*, a story collection called *Bed* and two poetry collections.)

In *Taipei*, Tao painstakingly reveals the thoughts, actions and feelings of Paul, a 26-year-old author in Manhattan as he first awaits the start of, then embarks on, his latest international book tour, goes to parties and cultural events, uses a seemingly impossible quantity and variety of drugs, grocery shops and coldly observes his stunted relationships with friends, lovers and his family.

Much of the dialogue consists of what could be actual transcriptions of recordings of conversations between unemployed or recently employed people on drugs. These conversations are sometimes amusing and thought-provoking, as people sometimes are when they are drunk or high, especially when those people are naturally intelligent and creative. But they are not thought-provoking or amusing enough to support the amount of ink Tao devotes to them.

The purpose of the constant drug use seems to be simple curiosity, both positive and negative, as well as a quest, depending on the situation, for calm, intimacy, energy or just a slightly improved mood. There is no transcendent realization; no ecstasy despite the constant MDMA consumption; no discernible improvement of his situation.

Tao gives as much or more space and creative energy to his descriptions of absurdly mundane moments, like Paul's grogginess on waking up most mornings, and to pointless scene-setting, as he does to major plot developments, such as the moment his main character decides to get married.

I actually found Tao's descriptions of Paul's relationships with Erin, and with his mother, to be intriguing and occasionally poignant. Erin is as enthusiastic about drug use and as awkward in and mystified by human relationships as Paul is, and her vulnerability is moving. And Paul's love for his mother is so understated yet intense, it almost hurts.

Paul's principle sources of conflict are with his mother, on her insistence that he move to Taipei or at least visit regularly, and her disapproval of his drug use. Paul seems to equate her concern about his drug use to his concern over her moderate use of sugar, as she has been diagnosed as pre-diabetic. This is at once hilariously hypocritical and endearing, a message to the reader that Paul is completely lacking in insight, but capable of love.

It is as if this author is saying, "Look, I'm going to write it all down as it happens or occurs to me; you decide what's relevant." This certainly keeps the reader in sync with the main character, who lives so completely "in the moment" that he can't or won't acknowledge what is important to him or even that there are any consequences to his actions. The effect on the reader, or at least this reader, is tiresome, but, eventually, one adapts. I found myself skimming along, happy when, every few pages, some lovely kernel of existential truth would reward me for pushing through.

My overall impression is that Tao is a natural and gifted poet (I really like his poems, incidentally) who in this book has tried to simply expand his poetic style into novel length. It doesn't work for me. The narrative arc is flat, the characters (Paul excepted) mostly unrevealed and the focus foggy. If I return to my initial impression of reading the journal of a creative writing student, and I realize that is condescending as hell, I finished the book sincerely hoping Tao buckles down, pushes on and eventually creates some truly masterful fiction.

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