

EXQUISITE CORPORATION

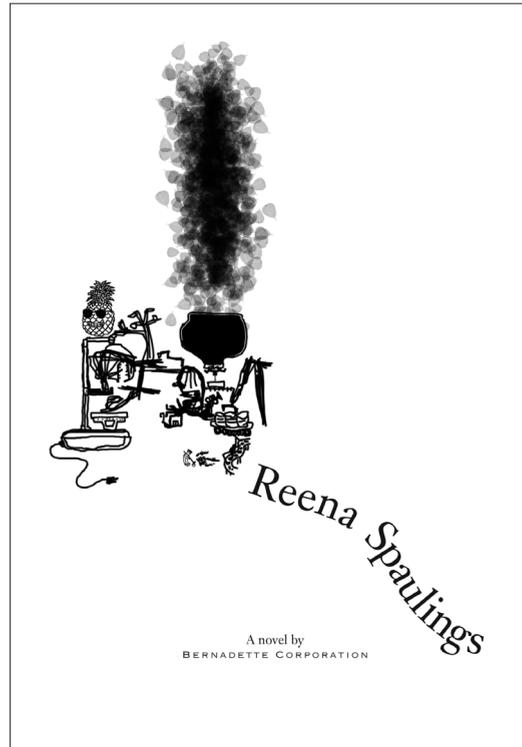
CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN ON *REENA SPAULINGS*

BOOKS

***Reena Spaulings*, by Bernadette Corporation.** Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 216 pages. \$14.95.

THIS IS A STORY you've read before. It follows a narrative arc familiar to anyone who's consumed Edith Wharton, Jay McInerney, Tama Janowitz, or any of today's marketable wave of chick lit. The setting is New York and the protagonist is an attractive twenty-something female who follows the trends and parties and love affairs all the way from dead-end nothingness to the toxic, eviscerating flash of superstardom. A line toward the end of the novel provides the best overview: "Reena is repeatedly destroyed and reanimated: She is put to work, drugged, made into an advertising image, fucked, robbed, paid, made to speak, shut up, desired by individuals and abandoned in crowds, erased, rewritten and reshaped. And like a burlesque actor, Reena endlessly survives her treatment." Orchestrated by the artists' collective Bernadette Corporation ("150 writers, professional and amateur, have contributed to [this book]," the novel's preface declares), *Reena Spaulings* is a sprawling work of crypto-impressionistic fiction that purposefully elides individual authorship for a sort of rarefied mechanical groupthink.

Such a collaborative spin on a commercial genre resonates in a very specific way within today's literary world. In a recent piece in *The Nation*, Lee Siegel commented on a marked shift of priorities in the contemporary publishing industry, from the significance and quality of the prose to the marketability of the author: "To a large degree, writing a book has become just another form of producing and selling. . . . That makes most of the books being published social, not cultural events." Some would argue that a similar shift has taken place in the art world—and, in fact, it's precisely along this jagged edge of a social-versus-cultural distinction that BC has operated since its inception roughly a decade ago in New York's downtown art scene. Continually underscoring "culture's demand for marketable identity in [an artist's] person, products, style, and career" in order to evade it, as one writer noted in these pages [*Artforum*, September 2004], the group has flirted with the terms of cultural commodification through enterprises ranging from party-planning and a fashion label during the '90s to publishing a magazine and producing films more recently, including the 2002 pseudodocumentary *Get Rid of Yourself*, made with the German Black Bloc contingent during the 2001 Genoa G8 summit demonstrations (with a cameo by Chloë Sevigny). With *Reena Spaulings*, BC flaunts the object of Siegel's literary lament as if in direct reply.



STYLES COME AND GO IN THIS NOVEL LIKE PATRONS OF AN OPEN BAR—HERBERTIAN SHAPE POEMS TO DESCRIBE BREASTS; GUIDEBOOK SHOPPING ENTRIES FOR CHELSEA; PRESS RELEASES TO DEPICT FUTURE EVENTS.

Book reviews frequently commend a novel because with, say, Norman Mailer or Zadie Smith, we know from the outset that we are "in safe hands." In *Reena Spaulings* the reader is unmoored from such a reliable tether. Through its two hundred pages, styles come and go like patrons of an open bar—Herbertian shape poems to describe breasts; guidebook shopping entries for Chelsea; press releases to depict future events. Moreover, without the author ego, a single, coherent ethic disappears. ("Dear New York, this is your novel," the book jacket reads. Inside: "There is no New York story.") On the one hand, this compositional approach seems an intentional perversion of the well-established Hollywood screenwriting process whereby writers work simultaneously on different assigned sections, which are then heavily edited together until the production is an invention of an institution, free of any personal trace. On the other hand, the collaborative, *cadavre exquis*-like execution and self-aggrandizing hyperbole (the novel took two years to finish, filled with "thirty-six bleary-eyed howling dinners of beer and cocaine") clearly summon both yesteryear's avant-garde and more recent experimental projects

by Oulipo. That the novel is named for its female protagonist, who is a provocative cipher for urban psychosocial phenomena, also brings to mind Andre Breton's *Nadja* (1928), and Raymond Queneau's *Zazie dans le metro* (1959), or, even closer to home, William Gibson's *Idoru* (1996) and that novel's notion of virtual celebrity—where an identity is completely fabricated within the mass media.

Like the latter, sci-fi tale, *Reena* is set within a very select nucleus—here a Manhattan of art, sex, rock, and fashion, i.e., the downtown scene of 2005 AD. The book opens with Reena as a guard at the Met (pointedly someone whose job it is to watch and not *be* watched), a mere fragment of the glassy downtown world "competing crazily for attention, drugs, jobs, beauty." She is then discovered at a nightclub by a legendary image-maker named Maris Parings, who hires her to model for an underwear campaign. Soon Reena becomes a celebrity, an image to be looked at, a blank to be consumed. ("When you're selling nothing you're selling an essence which is priceless," she says.) Later, seeking the ultimate New York rush, Reena and Maris plan an artistic death spectacle that will outdo all others; in the meantime, the novel winds its readers through sexual altercations, violent tornadoes that

destroy Manhattan, and even a cancer charity event that finds our heroine chatting with Slavoj Žižek in the VIP tent while the Strokes play on stage.

These ethereal confluences of glamour and trendy intellectualism point to the experimental novel's underlying polemic. To quote one passage: "It's a book written by images, about images, to be read by other images." In other words, rather than having any meaningful ties to subjective identity—which gave foundation to avant-garde artistic and literary conceits in the past—now we are following the cues and customs, merely performing subversive roles in a continuing quest for the ever-rotating "New." At one point Reena meets designer Karl Lagerfeld, who, in Q&A format, delivers just such suspension: "I have no preconceived ideas or principles. . . . I like to keep my process constantly open to change, otherwise I'm dead." Arguably BC's artistic hopscotch could be written off as a Lagerfeldian endeavor—if only its by-products weren't so intractable. In the end, Reena escapes death and leaves New York, to which she declares, "Reality is not capitalist, get that through your head!" Reality, indeed, and still the stuff of fiction. □

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