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BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

Fiction: Between Here and the Hereafter

A bug in the afterlife's official protocol sends a soul back to Earth until further notice.



PHOTO: ALAMY

By Sam Sacks

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At the start of Amy Bonnaffons's **"The Regrets"** (Little, Brown, 295 pages, \$27), Thomas Barrett gets into a motorcycle accident, killing himself and his best friend. Only not quite—due to an "institutional error" on the part of the afterlife's bureaucrats, Thomas is "insufficiently dead" and has to be sent back to Earth to wait things out for a few months until exit procedures are brought into order.

Thomas is left with strict instructions not to form any relationships during his "Lazarus half-life," at the risk of incurring regrets that he'll have to carry with him eternally. But he was always the love-'em-and-leave-'em type, and soon he's jumped into bed with a lonely librarian named Rachel. There's no hiding the truth of Thomas's condition from Rachel, since parts of him become invisible whenever they sleep together. Yet his semi-reality is what most attracts her. "It turns out that an absence can penetrate you much more thoroughly than a presence," she discovers. Thomas is part person, part figment—basically the perfect guy.

Thomas is using Rachel to keep a purchase on life; Rachel wants to be attached without attachments. Neither wish can be sustained for long and “The Regrets” plays out a thwarted romance whose ending lacks proper closure and seems destined to haunt its lovers to the grave (and apparently beyond it). Ms. Bonnaffons is excellent at depicting the unreasoning nature of desire, the physical yearnings that can make shacking up with a sexy ghost seem like a good idea. Love is a tinglingly sensual phenomenon in this novel, thrilling but frightening for how little it alters when it transforms into grief.

“The Regrets” is, to its detriment, less interested in thinking about death. I know it’s just a novel, but it’s still strange that the characters spend so little time pondering the implications of the afterlife Ms. Bonnaffons has devised for them. In the conclusion, Rachel makes the pragmatic decision to find a new lover “who lived in reality.” But doesn’t that miss the point? Every leap of love is made in the full knowledge of eventual heartbreak. No one escapes without regrets. The alternative is never to live at all.

Enid Campbell, the central character in English writer Eleanor Anstruther’s **“A Perfect Explanation”** (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 312 pages, \$24), seems to be searching for the loophole to that rule. Blamed for the accident that disabled the eldest of her three children, threatened with disinheritance by her brittle, aristocratic mother, looked down upon by her husband and sister, Enid packs a suitcase one fine afternoon in 1924, steps out on her family and doesn’t come back for two years.

Her hiding place is a compound for Christian Scientists, whose beliefs have recently crossed the ocean from the United States. Enid sees the dream of freedom in her escape, but as the months pass she becomes disturbed that her family hasn’t tracked her down, as she subconsciously hoped they would. She returns, unannounced, intent on securing a divorce and otherwise reclaiming her former life, but finds that custody of her children has been given to her sister, Joan. “A Perfect Explanation,” which switches between these events and scenes from 1964, when Enid is confined to an old-age home, delves into her tortured relationship with her children in light of the miserable court battle she wages against her family for the rights to them.

In a postscript, Ms. Anstruther writes that this material comes from her family

history—her father is Ian, Enid’s youngest son and the focus of the litigation because he was chosen as the heir to the family fortune. You might guess that this would inform the author’s biases, but there is a striking absence of retrospective judgment in “A Perfect Explanation.” Ms. Anstruther powerfully complicates these characters; all are unnervingly real in their mixture of confusion and self-justification. Enid, trapped in a torment of indecision, both needing and despising the burdens of motherhood, is the most haunting riddle of all: “There was too much life, it was too fragile, it hung on a finger-point of God,” she thinks. “It was before her, in all its endless maybes—a thousand ways to travel, a trip on the stair, an heir ruined, another child she couldn’t love for fear of loving.” The writing is as good as that across the length of this flinty, memorable debut.

Innocence and experience: These are the mingled traits that characterize every baseball season, and explain why the sport has always been so seductive to writers. Philip Roth’s Alexander Portnoy rhapsodized about “standing without a care in the world in the sunshine” like his hero Duke Snider. “Oh, to be a center fielder, a center fielder—and nothing more!” But here’s what the Duke himself said in a jaded essay co-written with Roger Kahn: “Last autumn when I played in my fourth World Series, I was still dreaming. Only the dream has changed. While we were beating the Yankees, I was dreaming about being a farmer.”

Emily Nemens’s “**The Cactus League**” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 274 pages, \$27) is the latest work of literature about the boys of summer in their ruin. Her book is a novel-in-stories set in the spring-training facility in Scottsdale, Ariz., for the fictional major-league club the Los Angeles Lions. The team’s star is the center fielder Jason Goodyear, whose maniacal competitive drive has made him one of the highest-paid players in the country but has also manifested as a full-blown gambling addiction. Jason is either the centerpiece of the stories or the man stirring up trouble in the background by getting arrested or going into hock with dangerous loan sharks.

Elsewhere the stories settle their gaze on Goodyear’s teammates and coaching staff, as well as on stadium employees and various Lions hangers-on. A cruel line is drawn between the young and the old, the healthy and the injured, the players who will survive “cut day” and those who won’t. There’s an intensely moving depiction of a

pitcher struggling to come back from Tommy John surgery and realizing that the sacrifice has left him with nothing but a Vicodin habit. Less successful are the romantic interludes with a middle-aged Lions fan who so closely resembles the femme fatale from “Bull Durham” that it takes you out of the scenes.

“The Cactus League” is probably too erratic in quality to become a classic of the genre. But I hugely enjoyed it nonetheless. Ms. Nemens is clear-eyed about the disillusionments of America’s pastime, but she knows, too, all about the timeless pleasure of “swinging a piece of wood at a hurtling knot of leather and yarn.”

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