'My Heart' Lays Bare a Con Man's 'Game'

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My Heart Laid Bare
By Joyce Carol Oates
Dutton, 531 pp.
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Peripheral as they might seem in real life, con artists,
quacks, humbugs and cheats boldly ply their illicit trades in some of the most celebrated pages of American literature. In the hands of a master — a Melville, Fitzgerald or Flannery O'Connor — such figures call into question the nature of legitimate social relations and transactions.

In My Heart Laid Bare, Joyce Carol Oates bids to contribute to this literature by means of her protagonist, Abraham Licht, a con man of the late 19th and early 20th centuries whose elaborate and ingenious schemes often misfire, but who nonetheless remains devoted to the art of his craft.

In his memoir, which has the same title as the novel, Licht records his theories about "the Game," as he calls it, and chronicles fantastic if fleeting triumphs, narrow escapes and agonizing failures. Now we are to appraise these accounts is made clear in the novel's epigraph, an Edgar Allan Poe passage asserting that anyone who wishes to "revolutionize" the world need only "publish a very little book" titled My Heart Laid Bare. Yet, "No man dare write it. No man could write it, even if he dared. The paper would shrivel and blaze at every touch of the fiery pen."

Excerpt

Yet the Harding years, from 1921 to summer 1923, proved keenly disappointing....

For Abraham Licht, even as Gordon Jasper Hine, began to feel an aesthetic revulsion for thievery so gross and undisguised it resembled a "shark feed" or... hogs grunting about a common trough. Where was the subtlety, the ingenuity, the sport? The Game had become mere plunder! It was true that as Gordon Jasper Hine he made a good deal of money, both from his salary as a government agent (for he and Means were immediately hired full-time by Harry Daugherty) and from various fees, gifts, loans, and so forth provided by un-easy citizens who were being investigated by the Bureau, or threatened with that possibility.

— From My Heart Laid Bare

The premise entices. Indeed, the epigraph promises a novel of unflinching honesty and harrowing insight; and the opening chapters suggest that the crafty, commanding, irrepressible Abraham Licht is precisely the man to venture such an effort, even if it is doomed to fail.

Alas, the promise is unfilled. Oates' novel — her 28th overall, and the fourth she has published in a series of interpretations of American history using the conventions of Gothic romance, horror and detective fiction — squanders much of its potential in extraneous description and maddening, mantralike repetition of names, and events. Clearly, Oates seeks to capture the tone and mood of a 19th century Gothic-styled memoir, but rather than stretch the formulas that govern the genre or alter them in interesting ways, Oates settles for claptrap and mannerism.

Not that the novel isn't rich in incident, or that the pages don't rapidly turn. It's just that only on occasion do we see at work a purpose more compelling than that of spinning a tale in an antiquated style. When late in the novel Oates permits her aging protagonist to wonder at the political corruption that passes for public justice and morality in America, we glimpse something of the potential that the novel might have laid bare more fully.

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