Words bring order to a chaotic world

The plot may be a fraud, but this novel of a writer is compelling.

Man in the Dark
By Paul Auster

> Henry Holt. 192 pp. $23

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

As he pulls up the blankets and ponders whether to turn out the lights, 72-year-old August Brill wishes that Miriam, his daughter, would learn "that the rotten acts human beings commit against one another are not just aberrations - they're an essential part of who we are."

> If Miriam let go of her conviction that people had the power to change, he tells himself, "she wouldn't be crying herself to sleep every other night."

> Like many of the main characters in Paul Auster's novels, Brill is a writer. He senses that his life doesn't really belong to him, "that I had never truly inhabited myself, that I had never been real." And he's compelled to "think dark, and go down into it, see it through to the end."

> After the death of his wife from cancer and the brutal murder of his granddaughter's boyfriend by terrorists, Brill's dark thoughts take him to Iraq and then to an imagined parallel world in which the United States is at war with itself.

> But the plot is a bit of a bait-and-switch, fizzling into a familiar Auster theme: In a world of contingency and chance, without order or meaning, where disaster always seems imminent, "reality" must be sought in and structured through language. "Coining phrases in the middle of the night, making up stories in the middle of the night," Brill muses, after a cough sets him momentarily adrift, "we're moving on, my darlings, and agonizing as this mess can be, there's..."
poetry in it, too, as long as you can find the words to express it, assuming those words exist."

> A narrator's writerly reflections - and not dialogue - is Auster's strong suit. In 2008, 23-year-old Katya, Miriam's only child, probably wouldn't call her grandfather a "fathead" or tell him she's "been around the block." And, we can only hope, Brill wouldn't call her "chum." Many of Auster's readers, moreover, have been around the block with him once too often to be stimulated by more navel-gazing about fiction's engagement with itself.

> Nonetheless, Man in the Dark is at once haunting, thought-provoking, emotional and compellingly readable. One minute you're in Brill's "house of grieving," filled with wounded souls, and the next you're out in the "weird world" - imagined and real - with "chopped-off arms in Africa, chopped-off heads in Iraq . . . and America, cracking apart, the noble experiment finally dead."

> As he often does, Auster lets a few beams of light seep into the darkness. Confession, he suggests, yields some solace, if not salvation. "Touch me, someone," Brill prays. "Put your hand on my face and talk to me." As they lie side-by-side on his bed, in the darkness, he tells Katya about his "dumb-assed flings and dalliances" and the pain he inflicted on those who loved him. She, in turn, gives voice to her guilty fear that she was somehow responsible for her boyfriend's death. In that moment, grandfather and granddaughter persuade themselves - and each other - to accept what they've done "and try to start living again."

> Determined now to confine his thinking and remembering to the daytime - and the daylight - Brill proposes a cross-country excursion in search of the best hamburger in the United States. And an intergenerational collaboration on a book of short stories. Instead of looking at images of destruction and desolation, "why not make up our own?" Brill has always liked farces, tragedies, and historical dramas, he tells Katya: "But if you accept my offer I think we should start with a comedy."

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