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Europe Business

Asia Business

Americas Business

World News

Economy

Politics & Policy

Earnings

Media & Marketing

Health Edition

News by Industry

Technology

Markets

Personal Journal

Opinion

Leisure/Weekend

The Print Edition

Today's Edition

Past Editions

Features

Columnists

In-Depth Reports

Discussions

Company Research

Markets Data Center

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Book Review

Mixing Fact and Fiction

By DANIEL AKST

May 14, 1999

Can a book destined for every beach blanket and nightstand in the Hamptons really be any good? Can a novel that refers to Prada, Ferragamo and Manolo Blahnik be admitted (without at least a period of quarantine) into the nation of literature? And can anyone really have the temerity to believe that American culture at the turn of the century isn't beyond parody?

The answer to all these questions appears to be yes, judging by the evidence of Kurt Andersen's elegant and relentless fictional sendup of the way we live now, or at least of the way a few of us live -- the rich, noisy, media-obsessed few for whom Seattle and Silicon Valley have lately supplanted Washington as 1000 the most important places outside of New York and Los Angeles.

Set in the year 2000, "**Turn of the Century**" (Random House, 659 pages, \$24.95) is the story of journalist-turned-TV-producer George Mactier and software entrepreneur Lizzie Zimbalist, a couple of sexy Manhattanites whose marriage is stressed by their sexy careers. The plot defies easy synopsis (there's a reason this novel is 659 pages) but revolves around a delicious conceit: George has managed to sell the upstart MBC network on the idea of a show called "Real Time," in which actors deliver weekly news reports (consisting of more or less genuine news) and are also taped in scripted behind-the-scenes activities purporting to show these "journalists" at work. The "reality" segments, which of course are fake, will air between news broadcasts.

Loony TV Shows

It's a savagely subversive notion, the apotheosis of all those reality TV shows and movies that are "based on a true story," and it's one of many invented TV programs and business concepts in the book that are just loony enough to come true someday. When a talk show called "Al & Monica" comes on, for instance, "George wonders if they cast Al Roker in order to make her look slim by comparison," and we know



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without being told that Monica is you-know-who. MBC meanwhile plans a New Age channel (all colonics, all the time), and George's brother-in-law proposes a chain of franchised, "mall-adjacent" cemeteries with video markers instead of headstones. "What we need is a world-class anchor," he explains, hoping for an introduction to Phil Donahue or Bill Moyers.

Lizzie, meanwhile, is in talks with Microsoft about selling her company, the value of which soars when it's believed to be involved in research to implant "mental modems" in the brains of cats. Liberals, conservatives and animal-rights activists all find reason to attack, but Lizzie's star continues to rise. While George struggles to make "Real Time" a reality, if you'll pardon the expression, the tycoon who runs MBC becomes ever more reliant on George's wife for insights into the high-tech future, which gradually drives her husband nuts. There's also a really great stunt pulled off by a trio of lovable computer hackers, which mainly benefits a stock trader (transparently James Cramer) whose secret passion is to buy up the film rights to great books so they can never be made into movies. "Ben Gould wants to save contemporary literature from Hollywood, the same way conservation groups organize in rural areas to buy up farms to save virginal landscapes from real estate developers."

All of which is to say that "Moby Dick" is a book about a whale. Mere synopsis, in other words, doesn't begin to convey the pleasures of this smart, funny and excruciatingly deft portrait of our age. Writing such a book can't have been easy. The overwhelming wackiness of public life in this country would seem to render satire gratuitous, yet a few novelists remain unintimidated. Tom Wolfe, Martin Amis and Scott Spencer, to name just three, have cut our media-besotted social fabric to ribbons in their fiction, and now Mr. Andersen has stepped up to shred the whole mess into a fine, powdery dust. ("Turn of the Century" invites comparison to "Bonfire of the Vanities," but Mr. Andersen writes with more finesse, although less horsepower, and he doesn't have nearly Mr. Wolfe's socioeconomic range.)

Fact or Fiction?

Mr. Andersen has more in mind than laughs, however. In the world of his novel, electronic media -- television, computers and the Internet -- have become so pervasive that, with no sense of history, people really do seem unable to distinguish truth from fiction. This systemic triumph of verisimilitude over authenticity has infected everyday life. "1000 George marvels at how thoroughly jokes and no-bones-about-it insincerity have sifted into ordinary discourse," Mr. Andersen writes. "Irony is now embedded in the language, ubiquitous and invisible."

Mixing fact and fiction just as slyly as his protagonist does, Mr. Andersen includes all sorts of real people (from Bill Gates to Bill Clinton), as well as all sorts of real

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information (about computer hacking, stock trading, television production and so forth). It seems only right, then, that when things turn sour for George, a series of fictions held out as truth help to seal his professional fate.

Mr. Andersen seems to share his characters' ambivalence about this new world, but despite the plague of falseness, people in his book still love and strive and grope for meaning, just as they do in life. Once you wade past all the designer labels (pretty soon whole chapters go by with no mention of Versace), "Turn of the Century" offers a thoroughly affecting portrait of a marriage, and especially of Lizzie, who is by far the most complex and fully developed character in the book. As a pregnant and unmarried young woman, she made the iconoclastic decision to bear and raise her child alone, and later, as a big success, she voted for Rudy Giuliani twice, "first against a nice black man and then against a nice Jewish woman, and both times she spent Election Day giving out a five-dollar bill to everyone who asked for money, as penance."

Office Politics

For Lizzie, having a business is like being in a club, except she gets to make the rules and decide who belongs. And unlike most clubs, hers has a point. I would be hard-pressed to name a novel that does a better job than this one of conveying what it's like to run a business, particularly a modern-day company in which everyone comes to an office and does things on computers. Besides payrolls and office politics, there are the inevitable lawsuits. A receptionist, denied a promotion, quits after four months, urinating on the floor before she leaves. She later alleges discrimination on the basis of disability: "namely cocaine addiction, that restricted major life activities of plaintiff on an ongoing basis, namely plaintiff's ability to reason and to learn."

The author's way with such episodes is matched by his wickedly keen observations about almost everything else. All the warnings and disclaimers that lawyers write into prospectuses, Mr. Andersen suggests, "are boring intentionally, word analgesics to numb anxious buyers and sellers." A former architecture critic for Time, Mr. Andersen rightly identifies New York's extreme East 30s and low East 40s as "the saddest piece of Manhattan," and not just architecturally: "The streets are peopled by lonely menopausal flight attendants, cut-rate Donald and Ivana Trumps, unusually crabby Korean shopkeepers, single mothers clinging to the first or last rung of respectability, contagiously unhappy people."

Of course, literary fiction isn't supposed to be about this kind of thing -- about money and power, status and lust, computer security and urban design, as well as love and envy. Mr. Andersen knows this. At one point, when Lizzie and George are getting creamed in the newspapers and their marriage is disintegrating, they meet for

a function at their son's school. After tepid greetings, "She gives a minimal one-shouldered shrug, lighting her Marlboro and squinting down the street toward the bright disk of sun behind the clouds. In her twenties, Lizzie gave up reading short stories. Right now she remembers why. They all felt just like this moment."

Mr. Andersen shows that, at the turn of the century or any other time, there is much more to life than that.

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