

K A F K A L A N D

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

Dream Science by Thomas Palmer (Ticknor & Fields, 1990 hardcover, 309 pages, \$19.95)

Palmer is the author of the smart and gritty thriller *The Transfer* (Ticknor & Fields, 1983). It was ahead of its time both in its concerns with drug traffic and its beautifully realized Florida setting. After the book died in paperback, Palmer seemed to disappear without a trace.

Until now. The hard-headed realism and paranoia of *The Transfer* was scant preparation for *Dream Science*, a no-brakes roller coaster ride through Kafkaland. It would be completely insensitive of me to reveal even as much of the plot as is given away on the dust jacket. Suffice to say that, like much of Philip K. Dick's work, it is concerned with the fundamental nature of reality, and the ease with which reality's illusion can be smashed to pieces. Unlike a Dick novel, however, no aliens are forthcoming to take responsibility, and no final explanations are given.

This puts *Dream Science* into a tiny subcategory within what Bruce Sterling calls "slipstream," that slippery genre where SF and fantasy themes are treated with mainstream concern for character and micro- (if seldom macro-) plausibility. The novels it most resembles are Jonathan Carroll's *Land of Laughs* and *Voice of Our Shadow*, Ursula Le Guin's *Lathe of Heaven*, Brian Moore's *Cold Heaven*, and, above all, Ken Grimwood's remarkable *Replay*.

All these books are distinguished by wonderfully condensed and labyrinthine plots. We no sooner start to have some grasp as to what's going on than we are knocked senseless by another inexplicable event. Even as it seems we've reached the meat of the novel, the pace suddenly accelerates, years fly by, and once more we sail off the edge of the world.

All of these books succeed because the characters, and the details of their moment-to-moment lives, are portrayed with such conviction. The ordinary is always disconcertingly close at hand. Even as the protagonist of *Dream Science*, the oddly-named Rucker Poole, is narrating the unbelievable events of his recent past to a stranger, her "dog groaned, got up stiffly, and hobbled over to sniff Poole's hands before it limped away; he heard it lapping water in the next room."

Palmer also has remarkable insight into his characters, and he expresses it with simplicity and elegance. Poole and his wife, for instance, "had secrets from each other, they had lies that were recognized and left undisturbed, but there was also a tacit understanding that a question posed in a certain way had to be answered truthfully." Poole's viewpoint is solidified through the smallest sort of revelations, as in this sex scene on a deserted beach: "He was always a bit shocked when it was over. The sun still beat down on him. He was aware

of her weight and thickness again. If the tide was out, it was a long walk out to the water for a swim.” It is on this micro-level, this series of countless tiny confirmations that Poole’s surroundings are completely real to *him*, that the solidity of the book is maintained.

Further, the charm can be spoiled by too little—or too much—clarity on a larger level. For example, when Moore’s *Cold Heaven* makes its final transformation into Catholic allegory, something important is lost. Similarly, when Carroll’s early novels simply collapse under the weight of their own invention, they are ultimately disappointing. What *Dream Science* and *Replay* create is a sense of meaning that is tantalizingly out of reach. In the words of Dr. Waxman, Poole’s psychiatrist, “It was painful, the way this nightmare kept trying to make sense.”

In fact *Dream Science* refuses to resolve itself into any one-to-one correspondence with the world as it is generally agreed upon. The issue of reality vs. subjectivity is clearly important and yet, by the end of the book, there is much that is obviously objective, with consequences that reach well beyond Poole and his immediate family. Waxman touches on one of the most important issues with the concept of boundaries: “As if as soon as I draw a line somewhere, anywhere, it becomes inevitable that I’ll have to cross it.” This is, in fact, what all the characters in the book find themselves doing, drawing lines and then crossing them. It is no coincidence that the windows that separate the various pocket realities in the book are called “lines.”

The most important of these lines is the first one, the one between consensus reality and the Other. To admit that the everyday material world is not the sum total of existence is to draw a line, and in drawing it, to cross it. Before the beginning of *Dream Science* Poole was the ultimate materialist, an investment banker. On one level, then, the novel is an assault on this sort of materialism. You might even say that it is Poole’s ultimate loss of faith in investment banking that unleashes the catastrophic effects of the last third of the book.

Even this explanation is ultimately unsatisfying, however, as perhaps it should be. The few problems the book has—some unsettling, and probably unnecessary viewpoint changes after page 200, an occasional workmanlike sentence, a lack of clarity in the last chapter—are outweighed by its cumulative effect. At the end we find ourselves, like Poole, living “permanently now in the greenish half light before a thunderstorm.” The routine of daily life has been transformed into a series of small miracles, and consensus reality is revealed in all its fragility. We come out of the book refreshed, renewed, but walking very softly, full of wonder and admiration for the smallest details of our lives.