

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

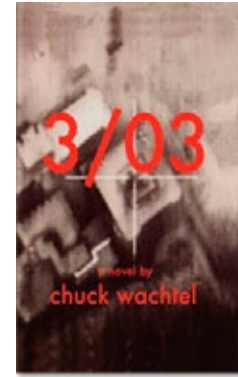
3/03

by Chuck Wachtel

Hanging Loose Press.

231 Wyckoff Street Brooklyn, New York 11217

\$18.



Review by Shannon O'Connor

In Chuck Wachtel's *3/03*, the protagonist, Tom, wanders the streets of New York during the first month of the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003, trying to find meaning in chaos and grasping at the questions he longs to answer. His daughter, Hettie, is the reason he wants to war to end quickly. Everyone on television, the politicians, the newscasters and the generals say the war will be over within six months. The novel feels very New York in its texture: the sights, the smells, and the energy of the city pulse through the story as Tom goes about his life. The New York angle brings to mind Grace Paley's stories, and the humane but tragic aspect of war evokes Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*.

The novel circles around Tom. He and his wife Joan are both creative writing professors. They share the care of their daughter Hettie; when she teaches, he takes Hettie and vice versa. A cast of character comes in and out of the picture: Hannie, a neighbor; Jimi, and old friend of Tom's from high school who Tom realizes immediately that he does not like anymore; Victoria, a vocal lesbian and a mother of a child in the play Tom goes to see; Tom's students Ayo, Clara and Nick. Tom tries to find stories in strangers he sees on the streets. He writes in his notebook what he imagines about their lives. He has not written that much since his daughter was born, because he is distracted by her, "He told people that rather than do anything else, even write, he preferred to spend his time in a rocking chair with his daughter in his lap, staring out the window and smelling her hair." Tom wants nothing more than to protect his daughter. He will do anything for her, and in the end, he will be tested.

The style of *3/03* is very soft and unobtrusive. The reader realizes the horrible things that are about to happen to the world, and since they are based on real events, everyone who reads this knows that seven years later, there has not been an outcome. The foreboding is like a truck stuck in the sand on a beach, with the tide coming, and owners of the truck believe it will get out before the water comes. The reader knows that the end has not come, it keeps getting worse and worse, but in *3/03* the people demonstrating against the war think what they are doing counts. Time only ticks away and the war to civilians in America continues to seem unreal.

It is difficult to write about a political event which does not have an outcome in the present day. Reading this, people can remember that month, in March of 2003, when the war was starting, and everyone believed it would be over soon. People did not understand then, and do not now, what was the purpose. But looking back to the beginning, at the anger, and now apathy of what is still costing lives and money, the reader pleads, "Where did we go wrong?" There is still no answer. But the question must continually be asked.

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