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Mary Gaitskill

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The extraordinary new novel from the acclaimed author of *Bad Behavior* and *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*, *Veronica* is about flesh and spirit, vanity, mortality, and mortal affection. Set mostly in Paris and Manhattan in the desperately glittering 1980s, it has the timeless depth and moral power of a fairy tale.

As a teenager on the streets of San Francisco, Alison is discovered by a photographer and swept into the world of fashion-modeling in Paris and Rome. When her career crashes and a love affair ends disastrously, she moves to New York City to build a new life. There she meets Veronica—an older wisecracking eccentric with her own ideas about style, a proofreader who comes to work with a personal “office kit” and a plaque that reads “Still Anal After All These Years.” Improbably, the two women become friends. Their friendship will survive not only Alison’s reentry into the seductive nocturnal realm of fashion, but also Veronica’s terrible descent into the then-uncharted realm of AIDS. The memory of their friendship will continue to haunt Alison years later, when she, too, is aging and ill and is questioning the meaning of what she experienced and who she became during that time.

Masterfully layering time and space, thought and sensation, Mary Gaitskill dazzles the reader with psychological insight and a mystical sense of the soul’s hurtling passage through the world. A novel unlike any other, *Veronica* is a tour de force about the fragility and mystery of human relationships, the failure of love, and love’s abiding power. It shines on every page with depth of feeling and formal beauty.

Veronica Details

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From Reader Review Veronica for online ebook

Eveline Chao says

Really interesting book narrated by an aging former model. Love the author's ideas about dynamics between men and women, what people need and take from each other, and beauty vs. ugliness and how the two are intertwined and heighten each other. Find myself still thinking a lot about the book a week later.

I've been going my whole adult life thinking I've read Mary Gaitskill before because I hear her mentioned so much, but when I started reading this I realized I hadn't, because her language is so distinctive that I would have remembered it. Really visceral and somehow both spare and ornate at the same time. I guess because there is a ton of sensory description but the sentence construction is really simple and direct. The sensory description is so intense that at times I even thought it was nearing on maudlin and over-the-top, but somehow the narrator's sort of stark outlook undercuts the rococo-ness and the balance works in the end.

I will note that the narration jumps around in time and place a lot (between the narrator's childhood, youth spent modeling in Paris then New York, her friendship with a theatrical "cat lady" type named Veronica, and the present day) and I found it confusing to follow for the first 1/3 to 1/2. But eventually I got really sucked into the world and the voice and was on board for anything. And even with the confusion, I don't actually think that as an editor I would have even changed any of it.

Last thought is that the 5 stars is based on how much I enjoyed it and got out of it, but if I were rating based on how much I would recommend it to other people, I might actually go 3 stars because it was a very particular voice and reading experience that I think is probably not for everyone. But for me, am now excited to read pretty much every and anything else Gaitskill writes!

Tony says

VERONICA. (2005). Mary Gaitskill. **.

This was the first novel I've read by this author. She apparently has a large following, and there are two or three books already under her belt. If this one was typical of her style and content, I think I have just finished my only book by her. Ms. Gaitskill – according to information on the end flaps – teaches a course on creative writing at Syracuse University. Based on this reading, I think she should also teach a parallel course on procreative writing in the adjoining classroom. The delivery of this novel was not a sample thing. The author uses a variety of styles and techniques to get her story across, along with juggling time around as she sees fit. The story – such as it is – is hidden among the multiple writer's ploys to snare the reader. When you get down to it, there really isn't much of a story. What does manage to peek through every now and then simply adds to the confusion of the book. What finally comes across is a cut-and-paste version of the author's latest delivery.

Wesley says

There are few novels where the reader could describe the work as airless and still be paying it a compliment.

The dank, stale atmosphere of Veronica, however, is one of its greatest strengths. Focusing on the claustrophobic relationship between a ruined fashion model and the tacky, aggressively lonely woman she meets temping, it is definitely a work most interested in the darker corners into which loneliness can lead us but not without a certain amount of humor, redemption and grace.

Maia says

I'm a true, dedicated, devoted fan of Mary Gaitskill--I will scout the 'Net for anything with her byline on it. Her words thrill me, her descriptions astound me, her observations leave me breathless. I've read every one of her stories several times. And even though I knew from the set-go that her first novel, *Fat and Thin*, isn't very good in terms of novel-writing (I actually think it fails), I still wanted to really, really like this book.

Unlike *Fat and Thin* (which nearly everyone agrees did not work), *Veronica* has received rave reviews (at least in the US--have not read the Brit ones yet), so I was hopeful and expectant though, to be honest, I wasn't thrilled by the storyline or the concept.

And i was right, because in the end, this novel that-isn't-a-novel (there you go, typical problems of so-called post modernism!) didn't grip me, left me cold, at times bored me, very often irritated me, and left me wondering just where had gone the awesome Mary Gaitskill voice I'd been following for years.

I've come to the conclusion that she's really a short-story writer, not a novelist.

Jack says

I mean, I fight my middle age at every turn. But some days you're just cranky about things - younger writers, younger people. Younger subjects. Mary Gaitskill can bring out the crank in anyone. Or maybe just anyone my age. She is a terrific writer, and an adept wordsmith. And I sorta hated this book, and knew I should like it more.

Our heroine, Alison, is a terminally jaded young woman - her mother left her father, she's been a model and lived in Europe and failed at everything and seen it all. Already she's a bit of a pill. Her modeling career, which was good but not brilliant, brought her into a number of sexual situations, which Gaitskill outlines with glacial sophistication, but not much heat. Eventually Alison falls out of favor, either because her look is over or because her married lover tires of her. Either way, she ends up back in New Jersey, in community college and living with her tiresome family.

Upon moving to New York, she takes up temping while contemplating resuming her modeling career. While temping, she meets Veronica, a larger-than-life figure who is sadly familiar from literature - seize the day, love whom you will, laugh til it hurts. She's not quite as shallow as Maude from *Harold & Maude*, but almost as annoying. She Veronica loved a gay man who gave her HIV, which will eventually kill her. (This isn't really a spoiler; Alison tells us this early on, as the book travels freely back and forth in time.)

Oh, I don't know; I just found the whole thing annoying. It was also a finalist for the National Book Prize, clearly I am a grumpy growing-older-man with no patience for this stylish claptrap. Maybe it was a bad idea to read this during Thanksgiving weekend.

Harrumph.

Peter Landau says

VERONICA is many things, but what struck me first was its rebuttal to the trite truism that we have only the moment we live in, that all else is illusionary and the present is where life is found. The past, even the future but less so, inhabit every page of this wonderful novel by Mary Gaitskill, like Al Jaffee's fold-up back cover of Mad magazine creating the full image only from parts. That's the picture, everything at once, forever churning through our consciousness. If time is the fourth dimension then there's no ruler for it, unmeasurable in its omnipresence. The characters lives are lived fragmented and sprinkled throughout the narrative, collecting like snow on a windowsill, visible only in volume that ironically doesn't obscure the view but clears it. All this is just window dressing, the frame for the story, which is sensory and beautiful and finally redemptive.

Matthew Gallaway says

Beautifully written story of a middle-aged woman looking back on her life/career as a fashion model and her unlikely friendship with a quirky office temp named Veronica who dies of AIDS. (Not a spoiler.) Captures the pain and intensity of remembering a once-vibrant life (at least superficially) without nostalgia. Amazing.

Holly says

In Veronica, Alison, an aging model, whose body is wracked with pain and disease, looks back on her life in snapshots, as if she is flipping through a portfolio of memories. In her prime, Alison was beautiful and flawed. She related to the world with vanity, but also with a vague sadness and misunderstanding. She tells her stories as if her life is over in her 40s, which I guess for Alison, it is. The most telling of the flashbacks involve the title character, Veronica. Alison dislikes her and begrudgingly befriends her, but after Veronica finds out she has AIDS, Alison, out of both pity and self-aggrandizement, becomes one of the few friends to help her through the disease. The friendship has a shiny, photographic quality, even as it deals with the fleshy horrors of AIDS. And Veronica, though the title character, is quite one-dimensional, reflecting the shallowness of Alison's view of her. Gaitskill's prose is beautiful and haunting. The reader is forced to look at the ugly side of physical beauty and the end-of-life sadness of a life lived, literally, in vain. This is not an uplifting book, but one that sheds light on our cultural obsession with youth and beauty like nothing else I've read. I highly recommend it.

sofía says

I didn't have the ambition to be an important person or a star. My ambition was to live like music. I didn't think of it that way, but that's what I wanted; it seemed like that's what

everybody wanted. I remember people walking around like they were wrapped in an invisible gauze of songs, one running into the next—songs about sex, pain, injustice, love, triumph, each song bursting with ideal characters popped out and fell back as the person walked down the street or rode the bus.

+ Nan Goldin, *Phillipe H and Suzanne Kissing at Euthanasia*

Come, said the music, to joy and speed and secret endlessness, where everything tumbles together and attachments are not made of sad flesh.

I walked down a hallway crowded with gorgeous people. Lush arms, gold skin, fantastic flashing eyes, lips made up so big and full, they seemed mute—made not to talk but only to sense and receive. So much beauty, like bursts of violent colour hitting your eye together and mixing until they were mud.

+ Marilyn Minter, *Cheshire*

Again, the TV announced, “Now we’re this instead of that! Now we walk like this, not like that!” Like people were all runny and liquid, running over this surface and that, looking for a container to hold everything in place, trying one thing, then the next, incessantly looking for the right one.

+ Barbara Kruger, *I shop therefore I am*

Alisa Ridout says

Poetry prose is Veronica. Mary Gaitskill doesn’t write. She transcends. Raw, real, severe, cerebral, Gaitskill’s style haunts my world long after I’m done reading it for the morning. I’m running ahead of my reading schedule, which is good. I’m exactly halfway through the 257 page novel. These last few days I have stopped moving ahead in the story to revisit noteworthy passages. Upon dissection, it became evident to me how perplexing and magnificent the poetic quality of Mary Gaitskill’s words truly are. Since discovering this visceral style, I’m opening to experiment in my own writing projects. It’s difficult—if not impossible—to mimic Gaitskill’s methods of unconscious abstraction. For example, on page 42, Gregory Carson, modelling agent,

seduces Alison, he's done shooting Alison's initial go-see Polaroid's and proceeds to seduce Alison, leaving no room for discussion. "Here it was. Ossifier. Miss Field floated in a bright, distant oval. The chocolate milk was delicious. ...we got sucked into the electrical buzzer together." That is sex to Alison. Ossifier, Miss Fields, chocolate milk, electrical sucking buzzers is Alison's thoughts on screwing her agent for a modelling career fix. Brilliant on some levels, debasing on others.

Alison is eighteen, beautiful, a run-a-way-by choice, not because her family hates her, in fact she comes from a healthy, loving family- nonetheless she leaves home to experience the world on her own as a high school dropout. She is shallow and like so many young girls, her world revolves around her own vanity. She's open to whatever the world has to offer: sex, drugs, glamour, travel, every man eating from her hands for sex. It's a romping good time for everyone, except Veronica, surfacing throughout the narrative by Alison's referencing her AIDS infliction and dying-via flashbacks. The entire first half is middle-aged Alison flashing back to the glory of her youth spent modelling, doing drugs, sexual encounters with many strange partners, tragedy in sue's, leaving Alison addicted to codeine, dying of Hepatitis, working odd jobs doing menial labour.

I thoroughly enjoy the roller-coaster like energy of Veronica. The characters resemble people I have known throughout my life. I have family with Hepatitis and it is scary to think of the liver failing without another option to live. Alison is a fascinating woman, she proves to be strong, more so than the other girls at the French modelling agency in Paris where she loses fifty million dollars of salary to a disgruntled boss and lover. He squandered her earnings away into a Swiss bank account, being she was only a child, at eighteen. She didn't know any better, she trusted him when he said she reminded him of his daughter, slept with her, cheated on her, supported her drug habit, took her to sadistic-masochistic sex clubs, only to lock her out of her apartment, penniless, jobless, worthless, she returns home to New Jersey and starts to attend GED courses, finally going to community college to study poetry. It is time to heal as a family but she finds herself resenting everyone she used to love. Her cruelty to them all makes her hard, mean, ugly, is it any reason she grows into a bitter drug addict cleaning strip malls for minimum wage?

Krok Zero says

I bet I'd be really inspired by this novel if I were a fiction writer. Mary Gaitskill sees the world through no eyes but her own, and she communicates that worldview with an unyielding series of remarkably inventive metaphors and physical descriptions, interspersed with prose-poem reveries in which Gaitskill abandons standard literary psychology to focus entirely on texture. Heady stuff, and my inner creative-writing student is all fired up by it, galvanized. But alas, I am not a writer of fiction, merely a reader, with all the reader's selfish, automatic appetite for narrative conveyance. Gaitskill is less interested in moving from A to B than she is in wringing all the physical and emotional meaning out of A before collapsing, exhausted, onto B. Thus the book frustrated me as often as it thrilled me.

Semi-coincidentally, this is the second novel I've read this summer about a fashion model. While the protagonists of both *Look at Me* and *Veronica* are changed by the fashion world, I can't say that either book is really *about* modeling. Egan uses it as a vehicle to explore themes of identity and culture; Gaitskill seems interested in it more abstractly, as one source of the memories that protagonist-narrator Alison dips in and out of throughout the book. *Veronica* is most interesting in the last 50-70 pages, when the relationship between Alison and the titular character—a brassy old dame, sure to be played by Patricia Clarkson in a theoretical movie version, who's dying of AIDS—comes to the forefront. In this section, Gaitskill eases up on the prose-poem digressions and the non-linearity, as if to reward the reader's hard work by finishing up

with a relatively conventional two-hander character piece. And it is devastating.

The reality of the '80s AIDS crisis is difficult to comprehend for those of us who are too young to have consciously lived through it. I'd never really given any serious thought to the matter until I saw HBO's great miniseries adaptation of Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America*, and I thought about it again when I saw André Téchiné's great film *The Witnesses*. The genocidal cruelty of it, the fact that it was basically a holocaust wrought by nature to wipe out an already-persecuted group...one day you're a healthy young person living your life, and the next day you're dying of a mysterious disease and watching your friends die from it too, and meanwhile a big chunk of mainstream society is clucking its tongue and judging you for bringing it on yourself with your deviant behavior. It takes nuanced, sensitive art to help us understand the enormity of such a calamity, and I'd add *Veronica* to this shortlist of works that made AIDS real for me—all the more impressive since Gaitskill spends virtually no time dwelling on the physical nature of Veronica's illness. But the character herself, as seen through the memories of Alison, is vivid, and the act of watching Alison watch her die, rather than create distance, somehow makes the sadness of it more acute.

But again, all this stuff happens toward the end of the book, and the preceding pages are an uphill battle. Sometimes the book even verges on self-parody, and I rolled my eyes at more than a few of Gaitskill's overripe abstractions. So to evaluate the gestalt of the book I can't bring myself to give it more than three stars. Maybe I'm too tough a grader. (Or maybe I just gravitate toward the three-star rating too often out of equivocation; just as I don't have the guts to give this book four stars, I didn't have the guts to give Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* the two-star rating I really felt it deserved.) But I do think the work it demands the reader put it in is, largely, worthwhile; as an example of the book at its singular best, I reproduce this fantastic sentence: "He moves like he's being yelled at by invisible people whom he hates but whom he basically agrees with."

Pamela says

I found this book so powerful that I couldn't write about it right away. I've had an ambivalent relationship to other work by Gaitskill (I'd only read her stories, not her other novel). I'm fascinated by it but sometimes repelled. The people and the situations often seemed ugly to the point that I wondered if an unconscious sadism wasn't at work. Then I'd wonder if that was only my squeamishness speaking. I also sometimes had trouble picturing her characters, who can be so contradictory that they don't even seem to cohere. Yet the writer's willingness to take on difficult subjects and difficult characters, and her strong prose, kept me interested in her work.

Now comes *Veronica*. While I was reading the novel, I felt really down. Perhaps it was the mood I was already in, or perhaps it was the book itself--some of both, probably. Yet I couldn't stop reading. I had to know what was going to happen to everyone, and how it was going to happen. I had to get more of those sentences. The poetry was relentless, beautiful, almost painful. Every page just bursting with unbelievable images. It was like a fever dream--which I guess was appropriate, since the main character suffers from fevers. And I felt more clearly than in Gaitskill's stories that there really is a compassion at work. I admire the hell out of this novel, and think Gaitskill has done something new here.

Janet says

I never read a better description about what music meant in a period than *Veronica*. Found myself writing

whole passages in my notebook. Deserved the National book award.

Caitlin Constantine says

As far as the story itself, I thought it was lackluster and a bit pretentious. I appreciated what Gaitskill was trying to do, that she was trying to explore notions of superficiality and depth when it comes to personal interactions. I also liked that she gave her two main characters, these women who are by turns pitiful and infuriatingly self-destructive, a sense of dignity even though they were behaving in ways I found really sad and upsetting. But for the most part, I thought she was striving too much to be deep and thoughtful and literary. I don't really care for that in college-level creative writing classes, and I don't think I particularly care for it with National Book Award Winners. I mean, be deep and thoughtful and literary, but don't let me see you strain to attain those qualities. I don't want to see your effort. (BTW, this isn't the first Gaitskill I've read, but I don't recall the earlier stuff I've read of hers being quite so strained.)

Where this book really shines, though, is in the writing. One of Gaitskill's conceits was to describe some sort of sensory experience using an adjective that appeals to a different sense, like the phrase "sequined music," for instance. It's a visual descriptor coupled with an auditory noun, yet it worked. I could just imagine the kind of glammed-out pop-rock her character was listening to. Perhaps it might have generated a different genre for you, but that's okay - the point is, it instantly brought something to mind, and it did so using unconventional word choices. As someone who has seriously taken up writing in the past few months - I'm talking several hours a day - my appreciation for a writer who can come up with ways to convey ideas and emotions without resorting to facile cliches is infinite.

So I was really torn with this book. I enjoyed reading it, but again, primarily for the craftsmanship of the language. As far as the story itself, though, I felt it left a lot to be desired.

Chelsea Cain says

I could read this book again and again, just to bask in the language. The writer/psychiatrist Oliver Sacks talks about a patient he had, an artist who could look at the world and see red. Not the way that you and I can. For her, red would separate from the landscape and all the other colors would drop away. She could glance at a field and instantly see a single red flower in a meadow of green. The rest of us could see that flower too, if we looked for it, if it was pointed out, but most of our brains would process that image entirely differently. We would see thousands of other things before we drilled down to that flower. By the time we got to it, it would be withered and brown. Mary Gaitskill finds words the way that woman found red. Like the best lyrical writers and poets she reinvents language and finds ways to express moments that are thrillingly unexpected. Reading this book made my heart beat faster. It's not for everyone. Readers who thrive on plot will tear their hair out. And those with delicate sensibilities should probably avoid Gaitskill altogether. But if you can find magic in the way a sentence is put together, this should be on your shelf.

Steven Godin says

"What stood out, most loudly and violently were images of beauty so intense they were almost warped; some of these images were human. The fashion model seemed suddenly at the centre of the cultural world,

inextricably wound in with art, music and cinema. These human images snagged my imagination, which twisted and turned reactively, picking and chewing over them, foolishly trying to get nourishment from them - for I wanted to be part of this vibrant and powerful world".

Mary Gaitskill's 'Veronica' is the intense and stylistic study of a friendship. Of love, pain, illness, and rejection set mostly in 1980's New York, it's a richly metaphorical tale, set against the nocturnal glamorous tyranny of the fashion modelling industry, and unfortunately for some, during an eruption of AIDS cases. There are moments when the world is at your feet, a dream come true. But also times when it's nothing more than a sleazy, degrading nightmare. One thing is certain, it pays well, even if it means having to spend days in the company of complete arrogant sexist assholes. For Allison and Veronica, both would experience the highs and lows of this hectic ruthless, and narcissistic lifestyle, both would find ways to grow stronger, but also succumb to weaknesses beyond their control.

The novel could be looked at as a kind of exercise in tainted nostalgia. The narrator, Allison is in her 40's, cleaning offices for a living, as we go back through her thoughts to a time when she made it as a model. It all started in Paris, strutting her stuff on the catwalk and becoming the mistress of one of the city's most successful modelling agents, she is still pretty young, and not exactly wise in all her decisions, losing a lot of money, falling in and out with acquaintances (some were never even worth knowing), before ending up back in the States, after her illicit relationship crashed and burned in the city of love. After a stint back with her parents and sisters, she heads off to The Big Apple looking for work. And it's here she meets Veronica whilst proofreading as a temp, a brash, head-strong former model, twenty years her senior, who shows unpredictable oddball behaviour, and dates a bisexual (Duncan) who she adores. Both seem mismatched, and Allison finds her at times deplorable, being appalled and fixated by Veronica in equal measures. So to call the novel an out and out buddy story is misleading. You never get the impression they are true friends, but each still leaves an impression on the other. In a strange way they seem the right fit, but you also feel a coldheartedness between them, like they wouldn't be bothered if they were never to meet again. After Veronica is diagnosed with HIV, she loses all those closest to her, Allison is drawn to her more than ever, but with a strong sense of pity, as she rapidly loses her health.

On the whole the novel carries a sombre feeling throughout, portraying a brittle, echoing emptiness for its two leading ladies, even though it's set in a booming New York, bursting at the seems with life and partying. The two main characters I eventually came to like, with all their issues and hiccups along the way, they were just two people trying to make their way in life, Gaitskill speaks an emotion that is easy to relate to. I was partially impressed with her richly drawn world, bringing to life the downtown art scene of the decade, for its beauty and glamour but also its fair share of grime and filth. She sees the whole picture with a larger canvas of almost viscerally aching melancholy, with depictions of some the most unsavoury elements of human interaction, big themes being nihilism, pity and rejection. The plot is somewhat beside the point (there isn't really one anyway) as its structure relies on a frenetic assemblage of vignettes flashing between the 80's and the present, and my biggest praise for Gaitskill, is its humane and unsentimental approach, mixing a cocktail of brutal loneliness with moments of raw tenderness, and she gets down and dirty when the story needs to be, Mary is not afraid to articulate the anguished thoughts and feelings from which we prefer to turn away.

But that's just life, and the pains and joys, beauty and ugliness that go with it. I found it an engaging and penetrating work, as soulful as it was sordid, with characters who were realistic carrying flaws and problems like the rest of us. There were a few moments that I found too uncomfortable and below the belt, and it might have helped being a tad longer to give more of a backstory to Veronica, who still felt like a bit of an enigma to me, but some of Gaitskill's sentences were just like, wow. Sincere, and oh so true.

Pondered on giving three stars, but have upped it to four on deeper reflection.

Cornelia says

I read *Veronica* over the course of roughly 1.5 days (sleep, work, play also took up some time). It was addictive and mesmerizing and delirious and stunning and beautiful and expansive and breathless and depressing and hard and devastating and wonderful. Not everyone will love it and I've no trouble seeing why. Still, it really hit the spot for me.

The structure is linear but with lots of flashbacks and sometimes the transition from present to past is so smooth that you don't realize you were in the present day at the start of a paragraph, only to find yourself 2 decades in the past at the end of it. This isn't hard to follow if you can get into the flow of the writing and let it carry you.

The best thing about this novel is that it's very much alive. Even when it deals with death and decay, it manages to hum and pulsate with aliveness. It's not nihilistic, it's not ironic, it's not flippant. It's guttural and sometimes it guts you. But, sometimes it caresses and warms you with the loveliness of fleeting moments, deep love and small joys. This is largely due to the sharp and precise beauty of Gaitskill's prose. It's in your face when it needs to be and allows you to take a step back (without ever keeping you at arm's length) when that's necessary. It knocks the wind out of you, but lets you get it back before socking you again.

Daisy says

After I finished *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*, I immediately went to the library to check this one out. Like in the previous novel, the story focuses on the friendship between two women. One is a model. The other is a middle-aged woman diagnosed with AIDS in the epidemic of the 80s.

It's hard not to see how Gaitskill is trying to highlight the similarities in the female experience. The ideas of beauty, youth, ugliness and love are not only totally upended, but sometimes exposed as something not even real.

Great book, worth reading. I will note that people who don't go in for "modern fiction" will be wildly frustrated by the lack of linear plot. I warned you!

Kalisa Hyman says

Veronica by Mary Gaitskill came very highly recommended. It was on a lot of "best of" lists and I'd actually had it on my list of "To Read" for a while. This was a book that I couldn't finish and that is a real dilemma for me. When I'm not enjoying a book at all, I never know whether to quit or keep going. If I don't like it early on, I feel like I owe it to at least give it a chance, and keep reading. Eventually I'm half-way through and even if I still don't like it, I'm like, "Well, I'm half-way through now...." But this one I finally just put down.

It's the story of a women who had been a model in Europe, fell from grace, contracted Hepatitis, and met an older, slightly crazier woman named Veronica in NYC, who died from AIDS. The story wasn't really about

Veronica, though, it was about the infected former-model. I think eventually, further toward the end, we would have learned more about how Veronica influenced the other girl's life, or something. Reviews praise the writing as "poetic" but I thought it was flowery and weird and hard to follow. I found myself skipping over whole paragraphs, which is why I eventually decided, "What's the point?"

Emily says

I picked up Mary Gaitskill's 2006 novel *Veronica* as part of my ongoing disgust project, and indeed it is a rich depository of fascinating uses of disgust. Yet I find I can't bear to write simply about the disgust in the book, without addressing its greater appeal. I consciously avoid pronouncements about the Canon, which books are Great and which merely Good, or anything of the kind—and yet, I am beset by a strong desire that *Veronica* be studied, written about, appreciated, revisited. It is not a book for everyone, and not an easy read, but it is a book that will be important to some. And although I haven't written fiction or even songs in years, *Veronica* is the kind of book I wish I could write: utterly unsentimental, yet deeply thoughtful and thought-provoking, harsh and even crass at times but finely crafted and never cynical to the point of hopelessness.

So this will be a discussion of those non-repulsive aspects of *Veronica*, to be followed in a few days by a discussion of Gaitskill's many and intriguing uses of disgust. This novel contains a cesspool, but I don't want to leave you with the impression that that's *all* it contains.

No indeed, there's so much more. The surface plot elements revolve around the narrator Alison, a former model and pretty-girl who has lost her looks and her health, and has washed up, sick and in pain, on the outskirts of Los Angeles. Now that she is ill and unattractive herself, she finds herself remembering a pivotal friendship—or at least, a friendship that has since become pivotal in her memory—from twenty years before, with a frumpy, provocative, and often obnoxious copy-editor named Veronica, who died in the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

But stop right there, because here are some things this novel is not "about." It is not "about" modeling, or the fashion industry, either to romanticize that world or to vilify it. The modeling world as Gaitskill portrays it is sleazy and destructive, sure, but not any more sleazy and destructive than Veronica's relationship with her boyfriend Duncan—and neither set of relationships is lacking in humanity, even faint appeal. Neither is the novel "about" HIV/AIDS, although it certainly evokes some of the terror and bigotry in the air as the first and second waves of infection were breaking. *Veronica*'s setting, although in a sense specific—Gaitskill paints millennial Los Angeles and 1980s New York in visceral detail—doesn't come off as illustrating an exception, but instead as presenting a more universal picture. In other words, Alison is a sick and selfish person, not because she fell down the rabbit-hole of modeling and drug use, but because human beings are generally infirm and selfish, and despite this they go from day to day doing the best they can, occasionally making genuine yet flawed contact with other human beings.

As opposed to so many meteoric-rise-and-fall stories which deal in "if only"s (if only she hadn't gotten hooked, if only he hadn't been drinking before getting in the car, if only their families had realized in time), Gaitskill presents struggle, compromise, and disintegration as inevitable, while at the same time according her characters total free will. There is nothing pre-ordained about Alison's choices to move to Paris or New York, to quit modeling or start up again, to ask Veronica to the movies. She suffers (and occasionally triumphs, and often slogs) because of her choices, but based on the evidence of the characters around her, she would have faced a similar ratio of suffering and triumph if she had made the opposite choices, as well.

Take Alison's sister Sara, who is locked in an uncommunicative battle with her suburban setting and probable mental illness. Or Alison's father, who attempts to communicate his regrets via music to which nobody listens anymore. Or Veronica, who decides that her semi-abusive relationship is so much a part of herself that she doesn't stop sleeping with her partner even when she knows he has AIDS. All these characters, however glamorous they may or may not look from the outside, struggle with similar levels of alienation and distress, similar levels of discomfort with the world around them, and a similarly inevitable downward trajectory. *Veronica* is one of the least moralistic novels I've ever read. Only you can decide your own trajectory, it seems to say; but whatever trajectory you choose, it will be difficult; and whatever trajectory you choose, you will stumble and fall. This is the problem with Alison's father's refusal to feel compassion for the early AIDS sufferers based on the argument that "they had choices." Everyone makes choices, and everyone suffers for them; and since suffering implies no sin or judgment but only the inevitable process of living a life, our imperfect treatment of each other is all we have.

And indeed that treatment will be imperfect, even if we are doing our best. Alison's relationship with Veronica is hardly a feel-good, *Sex and the City* version of female friendship. Alison is often self-congratulatory, often resentful; she often spews platitudes at Veronica and tells her what to do rather than listening to her. Her attempts at communication and communion often fall flat. Veronica, in turn, is often extremely grating, and only gets more so as she becomes ill. Gaitskill has much to say here about privilege—in this case, the privilege of the beautiful and the healthy person, to whom the experiences of the ill or unattractive are invisible until she too is sick or ugly. Looking back, Alison can see her own contempt and dismissiveness, her belief that she was in some way fundamentally different from Veronica—all things which were invisible to her at the time.

I said it with disdain—like I didn't have to be embarrassed or make up something nice, because Veronica was nobody—like why should I care if an ant could see up my dress? Except I didn't notice my disdain; it was habitual by then. She noticed it, though.

In one way, of course, all this is a huge downer. In another way, it's oddly reassuring. Because Gaitskill doesn't conclude, based on the suspect motives and often-unsuccessful results of attempts at human connection, that they are not worth making. Rather, despite Alison's recognition of her own bad behavior, of her own suspect agenda and Veronica's own obnoxiousness, her relationship with Veronica becomes a pivotal, and legitimately redemptive, experience. Even though most of the time she does a poor job at being Veronica's friend (and at general person-hood), her efforts to connect with Veronica still end up making a huge difference to both women—especially Alison herself.

One of the concepts that struck me most forcibly in *Veronica* was this combination of the invisibility of the habitual or privileged, and the rapidity with which the outward forms of privilege (and who possesses privilege) can change. These two themes are addressed frequently in fiction, but I'm not sure how often I've seen them together. So often we see the entrenched privilege of race or sex that perpetuates itself from generation to generation, and there is certainly some of that here, in the form of homophobia and sexual exploitation of women. Yet there is also an acknowledgment of how slippery privilege can be; how it can be founded on trivialities and superficialities that we nonetheless mistake for core realities. Early on in the novel, Alison introduces the concept of a "style suit," while looking at a series of photographs taken by her friend John:

Most of them don't have good bodies, but they are looking at the camera like they are happy to

be naked, either just standing there or posing in the combination of relaxation and sexual nastiness that people had then. They all look like people whose time had given them a perfect style suit to wear: a set of postures and expressions that gave the right shape to what they had inside them, so that even naked, they felt clothed.

[...]

There is always a style suit, or suits. When I was young, I used to think these suits were just what people were. When styles changed dramatically—people going barefoot, men with long hair, women without bras—I thought the world had changed, that from then on everything would be different. It's understandable that I thought that; TV and newsmagazines acted like the world had changed, too. I was happy with it, but then five years later it changed again.

This is more than just an observation about the fickleness of fashion. It's an examination of the ease with which people who have lucked into a well-fitting style suit assume that the privilege and ease they enjoy inheres naturally in their person-hood, and that as a result there must be something fundamentally wrong with those who don't fit into the dominant suit. And as Alison remarks above, it's similarly easy to believe that the suit reflects the way things substantively *are*—and that when those superficial elements change, it means a sea-change in peoples' inner beings as well. Yet even when the style suit favors looseness and naturalness, that preference itself can be very strict, and if any one suit actually *does* happen to fit someone's innate personality, the next, equally-strong suit is almost guaranteed to squeeze and discomfit them, transforming them into an outsider and even an object of pity or repulsion in the eyes of those who subconsciously believe the world to have progressed in a meaningful way. Together with the idea of invisibility, the style suit and the effects of seeing difference play into Gaitskill's many uses of disgust.

More on *Veronica* in a few days; I'm far from done thinking and writing about this book.
