



Carnival

Rawi Hage

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There are two types of taxi driver in the Carnival city - the spiders and the flies. The spiders sit and stew in their cars, waiting for the calls to come to them. But the flies are wanderers - they roam the streets, looking for the raised flags of hands.

Fly is a wanderer and from the seat of his taxi we see the world in all of its carnivalesque beauty and ugliness. We meet criminals, prostitutes, madmen, magicians and clowns of many kinds. We meet ordinary people going to extraordinary places, and revolutionaries just trying to find something to eat. With all of the beauty, truth, rage, and peripatetic storytelling that have made his first two novels international publishing sensations, Carnival gives us Rawi Hage at his searing best.

By turns outrageous, hilarious, sorrowful, and stirring, Carnival is a tour de force that will make all of life's passengers squirm in their comfortable, complacent backseats.

Carnival Details

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Author : Rawi Hage

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From Reader Review Carnival for online ebook

Anamarija says

"So I drive a taxi, and the traffic distracts me
From the strangers in my backseat, they remind me of you"
(Cleopatra, The Lumineers)

This novel reminded me of these lyrics from The Lumineers's song Cleopatra where Cleopatra, after a life spent being late for everything truly important for her, spends her days driving a taxi. A woman who seems worn out, finds her peace in roaming the streets and talking to strangers in whom she notices those small details which remind her of something long lost.

The image of a taxi driver, always on the move, not constrained by anything or anyone, with his or her car as a faithful sidekick.

Fly, the protagonist of this novel, is a lonely character who, despite having a handful of important people in his life, has spent his entire life feeling like the other. Besides being an immigrant, he was born in a circus and that only reinforced the feeling of not fitting in the "normal" society.

Fly does something similar to Cleopatra: he "flies" around an unknown city. The only thing we know about it is the fact that a famous carnival takes place there. People whose faces and intentions appear to be hidden underneath masks and costumes. Not only masks and costumes characteristic of a carnival, but also those masks mundane people wear in order to hide themselves and to fit better in the masquerade we call life. Life seen and lived as a carnival where people perform their roles, sometimes to entertain, sometimes to induct fear, sometimes to provoke destiny, just to be remembered:

"People live their lives thinking that they are forgotten, and that is why we do the most outrageous things, so as not to go unnoticed"

Fly's intentions seem to be the complete opposite: he goes through life behaving in a rather neutral manner, as if he were an observer, a witness and sarcastically intelligent commentator of the events, people and beliefs. Apparently, he believes in nothing than in the law of nature which corresponds perfectly to the nickname he has appointed to himself. A fly - an insect usually despised by people which nevertheless finds its way through life, and is often found near garbage. Similarly, Fly has a lot to do with people from the lower pores of the society, the others: drug dealers, prostitutes, people rejected by the society and people who reject society and its imposed norms. Basically, he is in contact with this human carnival every day.

"Is there anything on earth or in heaven more potent than a good dose of mockery and laughter?"

Written in 5 acts, as if it were a modern day tragedy, this collection of experiences, a kaleidoscope of important episodes from Fly's life, retells the tragic comedy of our existence. Those who follow their ideals seem to finish crushed under a heavy boot of a society which lack the ability to understand and accept them and their ideas. In that sense, Otto really becomes a clown, assuming completely the role he performs when wearing a clown mask during his missions as a vigilante; a clown mocked by the society - similar to Shakespearean Fool - who decides that he will have the final word.

"“Violence and resistance are the only answer. Empire has to feel pain or it will never stop devouring you. It is only when a gun is put in a person’s face that anything changes. All empires are hungry cannibals...”

The novel finishes in the same tone it follows the adventures of our protagonist taxi driver: he flies into his future on another one of his magic carpets into a battle he is yet to discover. There is something magic-realism-like in the final mythical scene: Fly evolves into something higher, he is definitely far from being a fly, he is more of a phoenix buring up and being born for a new life.

Nathaniel Popkin says

This review appeared originally in Cleaver Magazine:

Fly, the narrator of Rawi Hage’s fabulist novel *Carnival*, released in the US on June 17, is a literature-obsessed taxi driver—and child of circus performers—who imagines himself a super-hero, avenging wrongs perpetrated on the vulnerable and the poor. Books—particularly the subversive kind—are his sword. One night, he picks up an arguing couple. The woman, Mary, is crying. Her husband berates her for her introverted, bookish ways. He wants some action. “I am tired of this, do you understand?” he says.

Fly flies into a rage, forces the husband out of the car, leaves him by the side of the road, and brings “sweet Mary” back to his book-stuffed apartment. “And she laughed and walked among the garden of books,” he says, “and then we took off our fig leaves and made love in the corner, where verses from heaven touched our bare, cracked asses that hopped and bounced like invading horses in the holy lands.”

He goes on,

We flew out of the city and we landed on the page where Moses split the sea and the Jews marched between those suspended mountains of water, hovering, humming on both sides, and the poor expelled merchants wondered if Moses knew what the fuck he was doing. What if his hand got tired and he accidentally dropped his magic cane, or got distracted by a wet desert ass, or lost his sandals, or what if that lush single malt of a God changed his mind again and the fucking Red Sea closed in on them with its menstrual red liquid?

It’s unusual for Fly to have a partner in these imagined sexual-literary journeys. On most days, he lies down on the magic carpet he inherited from his father and masturbates while traveling to far off lands, fighting in epic wars, crossing rivers, and visiting bathhouses. Hage wants to say, naturally, that reading and writing are acts of both inward self-absorption and outward imagination. “I once contemplated becoming [a novelist] myself,” says Fly, “but instead I stopped typing and picked up another creative habit that has kept my fingers busy ever since.”

Flying solo on his magic carpet, Fly is free, unleashed from the demands and expectations of others. It’s an enticing possibility, certainly. Fly’s visceral need to escape and yet hover nearby is reminiscent of Cosimo, Italo Calvino’s twelve year old protagonist of *The Baron in the Trees*, who escapes his insecure father and pedantic, overbearing mother by going to live in the oaks and walnut and olive trees of the family’s estate.

The problem with masturbation as escape (perhaps not unlike living in the trees!) is that it’s ultimately

unsatisfactory; the act may evoke powerful sensations, even feelings of the eternal, but emotionally it's limiting. And that's the problem with this book. Hage is a truthteller (Fly as a child in the circus was employed as a discerner of secrets). But for all of his ability to clarify, break down, and isolate the undercurrents and deficiencies of society, *Carnival* lacks emotional depth and nuance. Indeed, Hage's love of literature gets in the way: he's too busy making clever references to other writers and books and he puts too much faith in the conceit of the liberal, wise, compassionate, open-minded, and yet non-believing writer as a foil to small-mindedness, greed, and stupidity. But the great force of literature is its ability to explore the short-sighted and parochial nature of man—and not condemn it.

This is not to say *Carnival's* characters lack depth. The plot centers on Otto, an empathetic, but highly dogmatic political activist, who is Fly's accomplice righting wrongs against amoral CEOs of multi-national corporations, vapid rich kids, and pathological psychiatrists. But Otto, a victim of society, breaks down and commits a horrible act. Hage portrays Otto's descent with evenhanded care and love. "We are capable of harm," concludes Fly.

Hage has written *Carnival*, his third novel, entirely in monologue, a difficult form. Fly's voice alone has to sustain the reader, who also must feel terrific empathy for Fly the author doesn't deliver. Hage seems to admire the Hungarian novelist Bohumil Hrabal, one of the many authors he refers to in the text. But Hrabal was a capable of delivering monologue that was outrageous but also hilarious and very, very sad.

One problem is that Otto's earnest moralism invades Fly's own language; this has the effect of distancing the reader. Moreover, the monologue is filled with predictable, and therefore uninteresting, condemnation—of miscreants, polluters, suburbanites, Catholic priests, and even lawns. When Fly brings a pair of "typical beer-bingeing sports fans" to his prostitute friend Linda and the encounter falters (for the poor behavior of the Johns), Fly beats them up.

There was nothing in the news about tourists getting robbed, fucked, or punished. Idiots like that are usually too proud to admit defeat. They just go and get drunk and numb their wounds and the next day go to the gym and pump iron and check their muscles in the mirror...There is no mirror that they pass and do not greet with a flex of biceps or the slow landing of a leg. Inflated balloons with broken cords, always walking as if they are taking their first step on the moon.

Contrast this withering assessment with the nuanced tone of the take-out of a similar scene from Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees*. Here, Cosimo's brother, the narrator, describes the outcome of an episode in which Cosimo's love interest Viola, known as the Sinforesa, has duped the band of urchin boys who also live in the trees.

What happened afterward was more difficult to understand; the Sinforesa's "betrayal" seemed to have been twofold: partly her having invited them into her own garden to eat fruit and then getting them beaten up by her servants; and then her having made a favorite of one of them, a certain Bel-Loré—who was still jeered at it for it—and another, a certain Ugasso, at the same time, and set them against each other...One of these episodes or some episode like these or all these episodes together had caused a break between the Sinforesa and the band, and now they talked of her with a bitterness mingled with regret.

Hage, who was born in Lebanon and lives in Montreal, is profoundly interested in the global forces that bear down on society; his book attempts to take account of the impact on people of migration, racism, and global capitalism. It consistently sides with the losers, even when they commit horrendous crimes. But Hage makes a mistake, it seems to me, in devising an escapist narrative to confront the dysfunction that's only grounded in an imaginary city (if it's Montreal, I don't quite recognize it) during the bloated week of carnival. This disconnection became apparent to me toward the end of the book, when over the course of a few days a number of taxi drivers are murdered. Each killing is described in detail, somewhat in the fashion of Roberto Bolaño's clinical description of murdered factory girls in the masterpiece *2666*. Hage's account of the taxi murders made me think of Bolaño—that was Hage's point, I imagine, in this novel about books and reading—but also long for Bolaño's emotional precision and his simultaneous attention to the sad, hollowed-out cry of anyone attempting to live.

Rihab Sebaaly says

Carnival! what a mess and how happy I am to turn your last page and finally feel peace. I've been tortured for days by this book but I don't know why I enjoyed it.

Going up and down, jumping from a story to another without a real plot and without a real purpose. That's how I could describe this book.

The main Character is Fly a man who lives his days without a purpose, he enjoyed his Taxi rides without thinking “what I'm going to do next”, he is so lonely, so ironic and obsessed with masturbation. Even the writer criticize himself for the excessive mentioning of masturbation.

*After getting into the cab, Sally spots a copy of Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* sitting on Fly's dashboard. “A reader,” she says, and smiles, before offering some very unstripper-like literary criticism: “Listen, I have nothing against masturbation, but don't you think the act is a bit overdone in this novel?”*

The book was so enjoyable in so many parts but it sucks in so many others, there is not a real link between the different acts, it was so confusing and uncomfortable. The smart narrative style and the rich text kept me attached and gave me a reason to read one more page every time I decided to “give up”.

I'm so sure that I missed so many things in this book so please I would like to discuss it with anyone who read it, it will be great to have an answer to all these questions that keep echoing in my head. There was a lot of symbolism and I'm afraid I didn't get all of it.

John Hanson says

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this story. Fly was born in a circus and his hard life landed him in a city we presume is Montreal, though he never names it, as a loner, a bibliophile, a solo-sex addict, and a taxi driver who cannot say no to a fare as long as he gets paid. The story runs into a carnival held in the city and things go astray.

Rawi Hage's writing is dreamy, anarchist and historically rooted, irreverent, and lingers into magical realism -- his carnival existence, his flying carpet, his almost dreamlike plunging into difficult situations with a palpable forbearance that his fate is not yet due to end. Each chapter is short and contained. These read like snippets of the life of a taxi driver, almost a short-story collection. Yet as the climax approaches, the threads begin to weave together. And just when you expect the shards to become a thread, it is pulled from your grasp.

I made my own conclusions about the ending, and I'll just say it differs from the public reviewers' I've read. I read it slowly, and maybe that matters. *hint*

I heard Rawi read from in 2014. He read from two of the chapters and when he finished, nobody raised their hand to ask a question. It was an uncomfortable silence, but he put us there with his prose. His words knocked 200 people out of the real world and into his. It took us time to return -- he was taken aback and ready to walk out -- and when we did, we went overtime with questions. He was a WOW reader and I wasn't disappointed by the full text. I highly recommend this to anybody but especially those who write stories.

Brian says

poetic / powerful / political / poignant / PERFECT book!

Krista says

True open seriousness fears neither parody, nor irony, nor any other form of reduced laughter, for it is aware of being part of an uncompleted whole.

— Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*

I had forgotten this epigram by the time I finished reading *Carnival*. I was musing about this book and trying to think what it reminded me of and it seemed liked it owed a debt to both *Infinite Jest* and *A Confederacy of Dunces*, not in a derivative way, but in an overall feeling. I looked up some reviews of *A Confederacy of Dunces* and see that it is considered Rabelaisian, and so I suppose that epigram was chosen carefully and the form of this book is a nod to works I do know and also those I don't. Perhaps that's why it didn't quite work for me: *Carnival* reads to me like a typical sophomore effort in which the author has the confidence to expand on his earlier works, putting on the page the full extent of his ideas that he hesitated to include before; an experiment that's partially lost on me because I don't know the foundational material.

Rawi Hage is a Lebanese-born Canadian and I loved his earlier works, *De Niro's Game* and *Cockroach*, for the immigrant-as-outsider POV, and though the main character in *Carnival*, Fly, is also an immigrant outsider, he reads as angry and off-putting. While I don't need for main characters to be nice or sympathetic, in this case, I was simply put off; Fly consorts with the underbelly of society -- the prostitutes and drug dealers, anarchists and perverts -- having only disdain for the law abiders and tax payers. He rages against the racism experienced by his fellow immigrant taxi drivers, which is understandable, but also indulges in his own racism. Fly is anti-religion and anti-capitalism and anti-medicine and anti-society and anti-social.

On Catholics:

Well, Father, I think the only evil is you and your lot of delusional believers who make women suffer, who tell Africans to abstain from sex and not protect themselves. I believe you are a hater of misfits, a suppressor of clowns' laughs, scissors to the ropes of mountain climbers, chains to the wanderer, and a blindfold to the knower: a hater of men. But you are also a lover of yourself, a lover of power and buffoon dictators, a protector of arms dealers and thieves, pardoner of hypocrites with pious tongues and dirty hands...

This contempt is not reserved just for Catholics, however, as Hage also discusses and lampoons Muslims (and especially his neighbour Zainab). Here he is with what I assume to be a mockery of all religious people:

I took the wheel and my car flew through the marketplace and the Carnival, and I fancied myself a bird, then a tightrope walker in a clown's attire, singing and testing the rope with my empirical feet. Now the clown becomes a Joker, then a prophet chanting to the festive masses: I shall chase the clouds and stop the rain and save your lives from this endless charade of puppets and strings! Ladies and gentlemen, the Temple of Wonder is yours to enter, watch your head as you enter the tent, and kindly take off your shoes, a new life is waiting for you just inside. Here is your chance, ladies, to come back as a tiger, a lion, or a mockingbird, here is your chance, gentlemen, to see the eternal light and be saved from the burden of your daily life. Just sit tight in your seat, clap when you're told to, and leave when you hear the buzz of the Joker, or when the light above the door goes long and horizontal. Hurry, the show is about to start! Step inside and all your troubles will be forgotten. But do not eat from any of the forbidden foods, the big cat might get excited. And kids, do not sneeze when the man reaches with his bare hands for the lion's throat. Do as the others do and you will see miracles and illusions of flying horses, the revival of the old and the greatness of the divine! Come into the temple of bliss and joy and you will be given a new mask, a new life for eternity ever after.

Quite a lot of Fly's speech comes out as long and listing monologues, and from the passages I tend to select from the books I read, I have a fondness for long and listing monologues. Here's another bit I liked, even if I'm not sure I fully understand it:

Hospitals are a carnival of death. A masquerade of haggard eyes gazing at the white, purgatorial walls, a faint chaos of hunchbacked mothers chasing orderlies, of doctors disguised in aprons, pointing magic wands at nurses in angelic uniforms and muffled tap shoes, waving bandages mistaken for egg rolls. Hospitals are asylums with flying ambulances, bed bells to summon the physician's spirits, sponge baths above white linen, janitors swinging mops over hazy floors, evening moans at the last sunset, and fridges full of ice for arrested hearts.

If it's fair to compare books, I much preferred *A Confederacy of Dunces*, for although Ignatius J. Reilly is an unlikable misanthrope like Fly, he's also funny and ironic. And while Reilly has a fixation on his own body and its functions, he's not the historical-fantasy-induced onanist that Fly is (and while that might sound tantalising, it's a constant and rather dull quirk). I probably can't stop thinking of the comparison to ACoD since it's set in New Orleans, a Carnival city, and if *Carnival* is meant to be set in Hage's home city of Montreal (as assumed but not stated), I don't think of it as carnivalesque beyond the Cirque du Soleil. This book has led me to put in an order for Rabelais' *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, and so perhaps with more foundational knowledge, I will be able to better appreciate *Carnival* itself.

Petr says

Na druhý a t?etí ?tení po?ád úchylárna, ale dobrá. Po spíš pomalým a imaginativním za?átku se to rozjede a Karneval za?íná.

Moucha je taxiká? a milovník knih. Obklopuje se jimi, a když je v té správné nálad?, lehne si ke knihovn? na koberec po otci a s nap?ázeným (metaforickým) kopím se vrhá do víru historických událostí a mezi postavy, které ze stránek vystupují. Po nocích projíždí m?stem a v jeho aut? se vyst?ídá spousta postav mnohem skute?n?jších, ale o to fantasti?t?jších a bizarn?jších.

Svým zp?sobem fascinující mozaika složená z podivných setkání, historických a náboženských úvah a šílených událostí.

Samo says

V lacných knihách majú dva typy kníh, fakt zlé knihy, ktoré sú lacné, lebo ich nikto ne?íta a fakt dobré knihy, ktoré sú lacné, lebo ich nikto ne?íta.

Toto je tá druhá varianta.

Cathi Shaw says

I loved this book. It was raw and graphic and the main character was tough to like but I could not put it down. Great piece of literature! See my website for a full review.

Diane S ? says

3.5 Fly, is a taxi driver and in the perfect position to see all the misfits and unfits the city has to offer. He has keen powers of observations and some of his commentary is just downright funny. The book is told in short vignettes that chronicle his transactions with the people he picks up in his cab, as well as his personal life and his inner personal life. He loves books, he has them everywhere and the girl he meets, Mary loves books as well. He is a very interesting character as are the drug dealers, cheerleaders, pimps and prostitutes that use his services.

At times this tended to get a bit repetitive and a bit too much. Still so many of his observations I just found downright amusing I was glad I read the book if only for those. Unique, creative and a carnival of words. A keen look at the underside of a city seen through the eyes of an immigrant.

Trish says

“Everything ends with a flight, I thought...”

O strange and wondrous story of an ordinary man “conceived on the circus trail by a traveler who owned a camel and a mother who swung from the ropes.” This story of a circus performer-turned-taxi driver is perhaps not as strange as Hage’s last novel which featured a cockroach. Suffice it to say, Hage wants to take us out of our comfort zone so that we really *look* at what his characters are experiencing, thinking, and

saying.

The sympathetic and unnamed narrator, friend of society's underclasses, both invokes and evokes Bohumil Hrabal's *Too Loud a Solitude*, as he was gifted a large library which fills his small apartment to overflowing. He spends his free time reorganizing the volumes according to a personal and impressionistic system.

"Dead protagonists take priority over triumphant, happy-ending characters but are surpassed by books with open-endings books that don't have moral conclusions. Novels with open endings I consider to be of a higher rank; hence they are located before novels with happy endings, which I often call religious or "resurrection" endings...As for historical novels, they are organized based on the name of the winner of the first battle that appears in the book. For instance, *War and Peace* will be filed in the N section, N in reference to Napolean, of course...and here, if you look above the toilet...all libraries must submit to a certain order..."

Our narrator is called "Fly." When asked if it refers to the insect or the action, he answers "I'm not sure." But I think I might know. Once his mother, in a state of mental distress, came in from the circus outside and saw her son shivering and naked, cold and wet from a storm.

"She called me some other name. And she laughed when she saw me naked and stared at me. Flying man, she kept on saying, flying man, let me please you. And she drew me close to her bosom and kissed my neck and her hand swept across my skin and touched me and held my erection and stroked me until I came. There you go she said now you can leave and march towards your desert and your stone."

Fly is a taxi driver in a city that sounds like New Orleans to me; there is a week-long annual Carnival that involves much of the city. He alternately calls his taxi his boat, his plane, his ride, his car. He "flies" to pick up fares or to get home. Or to escape.

"There are two kinds of taxi drivers: the Spiders and the Flies. Spiders are those drivers who wait at taxi stands for the dispatcher's call or for customers to walk off the streets and into their hungry cars....Flies are wanderers, operators who drive alone and around to pick up the wavers and the whistlers on the edges of sidewalks and streets...I am a wanderer."

Fly masturbates on a carpet that his true father had left him. One suspects it is a prayer rug, but it suits Fly to lie on it and fantasize endlessly, his mind filled with dreams of "gladiators, sailors, or women in need of rescue." Fly does occasionally share his seed with women, but he prefers to be alone, perhaps to concentrate on his imaginary world rather than working to please another.

(view spoiler)

Every review I have looked at picks out different authors or works of literature of which this book is reminiscent: Calvino, Kafka, Wallace, O'Toole are a few, but I suspect there are many more. Hage is aligning his story of a neglected underclass of misfits with the vast body of literature, and placing his group in that hallowed hall. Why shouldn't it be there? he seems to be asking. Their lives are as interesting and telling as any other. Their lives are our responsibility.

In a remarkably difficult but revealing interview with CBC Radio 1's Q host Jian Ghomeshi, we learn a little about the Lebanese Canadian author Rawi Hage. Hage, born in Lebanon, lived in the United States for a few years before moving to Montreal. He thinks of himself as integrated but he has that “outsider” vision allows him to zero in on cultural touchstones and problems.

“There is a war out there, and believe me, Fly, it was never really between Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Crusaders, and Confucius. The final battle is between those who love, respect, and liberate the body and those who hate it, Fly...”

Thus the masturbation, and the library--feeding the body and the brain. But *real* food is another story.

“Communists and Muslims are not the enemies to fear in this land, Fly. It is the food consumption that will eventually blow up in everyone’s face.”

Hage is a very interesting man and author. I think he could have helped us out by making his story more user-friendly; I had to work hard to get somewhere with this and I’m still I’m not sure I got all that he meant. I do think Hage is doing something unique...he has his own style and his own subjects. I hope I have the opportunity to see his earlier work.

Tom says

True open seriousness fears neither parody, nor irony, nor any other form of reduced laughter, for it is aware of being part of an uncompleted whole.

— Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*

So, I'll come back to this review when I have studied it in detail for my bachelor paper. Of course, most of you will limit yourself to a single lecture, and for those people who are simply interested in reading a wonderful book, I'll just list a few thoughts right now.

Rawi Hage has his roots in Lebanon, but is in fact a Canadian writer. 'Carnival' follows in the footsteps of François Rabelais and the 'carnivalesque' writing, in a sense that it presents a story that focuses on excess, decadence, and escapism through the use of masks, stories and whatnot. I'll just be blunt - it's a glorious novel, packed with lively stories and ideas. The real star of this book is the writing; fresh, rambling, often hilarious, Rawi Hage takes the reader on a sparkling taxi-ride through the lower and higher layers of society. To give you an idea, this is a passage about Catholics;

Well, Father, I think the only evil is you and your lot of delusional believers who make women suffer, who tell Africans to abstain from sex and not protect themselves. I believe you are a hater of misfits, a suppressor of clowns' laughs, scissors to the ropes of mountain climbers, chains to the wanderer, and a blindfold to the knower: a hater of men. But you are also a lover of yourself, a lover of power and buffoon dictators, a protector of arms dealers and thieves, pardoner of hypocrites with pious tongues and dirty hands...

It's a wild ride, slinging from one side of the spectrum to another. Main character is a taxi driver that we get to know as Fly, a vaguely delusional character, marked by his high interest in literature and his escapist episodes. 'Carnival' is not a realistic book, but it delivers what it promises - a Carnival of different lives,

characters and styles that come together in a book that doesn't really have a plot, but is all the more unpredictable and enticing because of it. Not to mention the humour in this book, which was raw but enthusiastic.

It's not all comedy though. There's a whole lot of tragedy going on in this book which, even if veiled by the carnivalesque exuberance of the decorum, should leave the reader with some vital questions. A lot of the critique in 'Carnival', exaggerated as it may be, is actually valid and interesting food for thought.

In such, I'm looking forward to dig in to this novel for a more in-depth research. For those who are interested, I'll leave a more detailed analysis of this book below my review, later on. But in any case, 'Carnival' should find it's place on your nightstand some day. It's fresh, it's adventurous and does what fiction should do - entice, entertain and inspire.

Wael Koubeissy says

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???? Selma Mohaimeed says

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Shane says

Hage revisits the world he revealed to us in Cockroach, the underbelly of human society. In the earlier novel there was no mistaking Canada and Montreal as the setting but this novel is set during a carnival period in an anonymous city that has a mountain within it. Montreal again? The protagonist, Fly, (a relative of cockroach?) is a taxi driver who roams the city picking up and dropping off undesirables, lost souls, and clowns.

The novel is episodic although some elements tie together in the end. Fly is an intellectual, orphaned and raised in a circus in Europe before immigrating to North America. He lives alone in an apartment

overflowing with books, and masturbates frequently to visions of the most elaborate fantasy lands and situations, described in the most lyrical prose. He is interested in a Muslim woman, Zainab, who lives in his building but she is a lesbian, unknown to him. He cares for people, despite their squalor, and is a kind of a messiah to the lonely. His mentor is Otto, a radical hippie, who is out to avenge himself on the “1%.”

Fly's taxi rides paint a picture of society in the most technicolored yet unflattering prose. A description of the regular destination of the city's taxi drivers, the Club Balayou, runs like this: "the women dancing on the tables are middle-aged, nicely round and voluptuous, from the country, and the men who are scooping up the nectar that falls from above are African jackals, desert Arabs, stomping gypsies and seasoned Latinos." Philosophic thoughts are also casually tossed off as in, "Muslims and Communists are not the enemy - food consumption is." In addition, we meet sadomasochistic writers, transgendered singers, drug smugglers, damaged teenagers, perverts and serial killers. And the endless carnival of the city is a metaphor for the masks that everyone wears, the false veneer that hides our desperation.

As in the previous novel, this book too ends as a crime thriller when a series of murders take place: taxi drivers are being bumped off at random, and corporate leaders are also being popped off with no rational connection. Not all the murders are solved but we are shown the grievous danger we open ourselves to when the marginalized are pushed beyond their limits, and when they strike back.

As for Fly, he is left to grieve, bury the dead, and carry on. Fortunately, our masturbatory hero has the power of imagination that he can escape into, something that lesser mortals are not blessed with and who end up succumbing to the neuroses that these marginalized conditions create. Perhaps a subtle hint to the fact that people of the imagination, aka writers, are able to withstand the squalor of life and convert it to art.

Kafka reborn, I thought, as recollections of Metamorphosis and The Trial surged through me. Hage has emerged as a great satirist of our times, of the darkest kind.

Andrei says

Stephen P says

Soaring. The air exploding past. Venturing high over the drum of human misfortune. Fueled faster by the rush of adrenaline, the meth-amphetamine calamity speeding toward your brain. No sear. No pain. Unless you touch down. Your only relationship, physically, emotionally, is with yourself. Your name is Fly. This is what you do.

You are not there to be motioned forth by a uniformed doorman, to be directed by a dispatcher. An independent driver you fly the cab through the city streets. The pulsing arteries, veins, alleyways, sewed into your heart. In your yellow taxi you search out the hungered flag of a hand where no other driver might think. If you do it all day and night, sleep little, save the tokens palmed into your hand, you will fly, Fly. Despite, in this hapless country sold as the land of hopes, dreams, it is not possible for an newly born immigrant to rise above this smoldering menace of an embittered pocket embedded in a darkened corner of this city. Trapped flying is the only way. Flying solo. If you don't slow down you won't think and if you don't think you won't feel any pain. The equation is printed out on the blackboard of your mind.

The others choose to remain land-bound. Also driving cabs they wait in line with each other to be summoned, or to heed the shrill stacked call of the dispatching service rendering control over their destiny. Safe but offering no possibilities. Possibilities are buried without ceremony but their absence caressed by the in-joking, back slapping in the same bar to wash off any shards of optimism. Even so, they remain strangers calling each other by the number of their cab, not names. That closeness, trust, when letters are rearranged in formulations well known, spelled danger. The country-less must also remain friendless to survive. Isolation was the cost of...of...of.

Halfway through the flight the altitude drops, a slight modification. Still you choose to phone into the tower. You are told that it is time for the bridge. What, you manage to say, incredulous.

“A bridge? I’m supposed to land on it?”

“Very funny. No, the story has reached the bridge to the next section. A gradual bridge hopefully. Here let me bring it up on the screen. Not exactly what we hoped but you will do well.”

“I’m...part of a story?”

“What did you think you were? You are the story. The major part of it.”

“I thought I was leading a life of struggle and worked out a system where soon or someday I would be able to rise above that horrible part of the city. Maybe lead a life that is more than survival. Be one of the people who comes in town for the carnival and hires cabs. Could you imagine that. Me a passenger in a taxi. Me dressing up in a costume and for a couple of days not having to be myself.”

“Sir, we are trying to coordinate your altitude with the remaining part of the story. This is serious. You are, though you will probably not want to fully hear this but a character.”

“A fun, interesting, kind of guy?”

“Sorry Sir. What the screen is showing and I am trying to explain is that you are a character in something called a narrative. So far the numbers and graphics all show that your arc is arcing well and we don’t want to take any chances of anything going wrong. Therefore this bridge.”

“Well, how is it looking on the other side?”

“My supervisor here thinks the weather report might indicate some slight problems but nothing we are concerned about at this point. Well, not nothing but a minuscule concern which needn’t worry you. Remember you are named Fly for a reason. You are in excellent hands with Mr. Hage.”

“I think I’m having trouble breathing.”

“If you think that Sir you probably aren’t.”

“I have a tendency to develop nose bleeds when I’m under stress.”

“Sir, you are just hyper-ventilating. Wait. Mr. Hage has joined us in the tower. He assures us and you, you will be just fine. What’s that?”

“What’s... What’s what Sir? Are you hyperventilating now? No? All that noise.”

“Someone has gotten into the tower.”

“Someone?”

“Some guy. Some guy named Stephen.”

“Is he supposed to be there?”

“Not as far as we know.”

“Well. call security.”

“He says he is security.”

“Listen, I just drive an independent cab which has no security backup. I would like if you don’t mind to get on with my life. Such as it is.”

“Give me back...This is a flight control center...Hello. Fly?”

“Who is this I hate to ask?”

“My name is Stephen. I am your Reader.”

“My what? What are you talking about?”

“I am the Reader of the story you are a character in.”

“Oh good. That makes me feel much better. Any chance there is someone there sane that I could talk to.”

“Listen. It’s important for you to know that Mr. Hage is having some difficulty. What faces you is bleak. Not you or anybody else can fly above life, no matter what Mr. Hage has named you, without being touched by it. At some point your fuel will run low. You will be in danger. Amidst all the chaos here in the Tower Mr. Hage understands this will be happening to you, this crisis. However he is not totally sure how to bring you into the darker part of the novel. If it needs a gradual change in the language he is using. We here don’t feel his language is coinciding with the content, the gradually declining content. In other words he is flattening out the story and possible you. Do you understand?”

“Oh yes. Completely. I understand that I need a drink and possibly a sedative though my doctor tells me not

to mix the two. By the way, by any chance, are you people crazy over there?"

"Well, yes. Of course we are. We wouldn't be writers and readers otherwise and wouldn't care about what happens to you."

"So, what are you going to do?"

"This Mr. Hage is a tough customer. The kind who makes up his mind and won't budge. Meanwhile the story continues to flatten and is beginning to drag. Believe me, we won't give up. You notice Fly it is beginning to darken. There was the light winged part of the story and now the story arcs into the more difficult. Mr. Hage believes that the rhythm of the language, its crispness, needs to slow and flatten to express, show, the darkening. Fly?"

"Yes."

"You didn't expect that everything would continue on the way it was. What I mean Fly is, did you believe that through continued effort you would rise above? No longer have to live under the phony brochure broadcast in the minds of hundreds of immigrants that the notion of the american dream will be available? That there would be a way to not spend your life buried like the rest in the ghetto, living amongst the filth, living to survive?"

"No. What was your name again?"

"Stephen."

"Stephen, I believed that if I kept moving fast enough I would never have to feel pain again. Is Mr. Hage going to take that away from me?"

"Fly, are you okay?"

"Yeah. Just allergies."

"I don't know Fly. What is apparent from the first part where you were winging around the city streets is, this man can write. I mean he can really write. He can write like you can drive your cab. He is a writer and I am a reader. The two should never be confused. I really have no right to comment. He...by the way he's gone out to the restroom...may very well have used the change of rhythm, the flattening, as a literary scheme to take this ride to somewhere more profound in the end. It could be."

"The end. Do you know what happens to me?"

"Fly, there are no ends. At least not in the really good stories. I just want you to be alright Fly."

"Are you okay."

"It's just these damn allergies."

Cora ? Tea Party Princess says

Vague, rambling, beautiful, shocking, disturbing, intelligent, fantastical...

Pick a word, any word. It will probably go towards describing this book in some way.

This is a very grown-up book. It's one of those books that you have no chance of understanding while still growing-up and probably won't understand even when you're grown. I'm still not sure what I read. This book is confusing and disturbing, but I finished it pretty quickly. I carried on reading. Even when I felt like I was going to be sick I still turned the page. And I don't know why. Something about Fly hooked me.

Fly is the main character, the narrator. And he's pretty crazy and messed up. A taxi-driving circus orphan raised by and living-with a series of misfits and freaks for the majority of his life, I was never sure if Fly honestly saw the world as described or if he was just as high as a kite. His high-or-bat-shit narrative was quite difficult to follow and I found myself reading most pages more than once.

I'd say read this book once so you know just how sane you are. And be wary of taxi drivers. And circus-folk.

This wasn't quite my cup of tea.

I received a copy of this for free via Goodreads First Reads.

Alex Fallis says

Beautiful writing- I love the flights of description and the flow of the words. I think that it will haunt me for a while (and there are certain sections I will return to often).

Kendra says

Take the ingredients of Rawi Hage's second novel, *Cockroach*: a disenfranchised outsider character observing the humanity from a liminal position and an expert writer with a keen eye to the details of life's sorrows and joys. Mix up those ingredients a second time, and you get *Carnival*, a slightly more hopeful novel that still manages to show life's sadness.

Fly is a taxi driver, driving the streets of an unidentified city, picking up whoever solicits his services. Fly observes other taxi drivers (flies or spiders - who wait for passengers at hotels or take dispatch calls) and intersperses in his travels we learn of his unconventional living arrangements (surrounded wall-to-wall by books) and his roots in the circus.

Rawi Hage is such an expert storyteller, and is successful once again in eliciting sympathy for an unlikely protagonist.

