

Book Review for *Involuntary Bliss* by Devon Code

Involuntary Bliss is the debut novel of Ontario writer Devon Code in which he tells the story of two young men one August weekend, the novel focuses primarily on the events experienced by one of the men after the death of their mutual friend.

Taking place in Montréal the unnamed narrator has arrived for a weekend visit to his friend and former classmate James who he has been out of contact with after the unexpected, and the never explained death of their friend Warren several months earlier. James, who now resides in Montréal takes his friend not so much on a tour of the city, but rather of his thoughts, including those about Warren, such as a special memory of their time volunteering together at a children's ward with infants but mostly his encounters over the last several months with various interesting individuals and their thoughts and stories.

The three young men became friends in their Cyclopean Studies seminar where they bonded over an assigned reading of an unnamed book only referred to as the Peruvian novella, a book whose contents are mentioned as both perverted and unfathomable. The book coinciding with the death of his friend has a profound effect on James, he is unable to finish his paper on the novella, he leaves school, brings the book with him when forbidden to during a silent retreat, on his trip to Peru, he even names his cat after the book author's pseudonymous name.

James is grieving but he is also stubborn, self-absorbed and commits selfish acts, the first is when he steals Warren's mandola from his funeral, he later carries it throughout the novel, having taught himself how to play it, and along with the Peruvian novella takes it with him to Peru. He loses his job over his refusal to wear polyester pants. And he has a brief but very sexually intense relationship with an artist and abruptly leaves her, but not before she shares who own story of how she came to where she is today. Later on, he meets up with her former lover who shares his theory on breasts (preferably those of strippers) acting as a sort of one-way telepathic transmitting device, complete with diagram.

The book has no chapters and flows back in forth from the present and the past consisting primarily of James' memories, save for three from our narrator, such as his thoughts on receiving the letter from James inviting him to Montréal, and the accompanying poem he had written. James' most interesting story he shares with his friend is his experience in Peru. It is there he meets with a curandero or a Latin American healer who tells his own story to James of his time in the army and why he chose to become a curandero. He is dissatisfied when the curandero states he has never heard of the Peruvian novella that has become so important to him. It is with this healer that he drinks a special tea and has a disturbing but important hallucination.

Involuntary Bliss is an interesting novel, whose plot could be simplified as two friends spend the day together, however it is much more complex than that with its many subplot stories told by James. On the other hand, the novel can be frustrating as the many subplots do muddy the story, there is no real conclusion or resolution for James and you are left wondering what is next for him. It is a fast read at only 169 pages, but pace yourself in order to take in and reflect on each individual story James shares with his friend and the novel feels much longer. Overall *Involuntary Bliss* is a unique novel and certainly worth taking a look at.