

A review of John Jeremiah Sullivan's *Pulphead*

Collections of nonfiction always make for a tough sell—to publishers and, presumably, to readers as well. So if you're skeptical about John Jeremiah Sullivan's *Pulphead*—if you want to sample its methods without spoiling any of its 14 essays—Google “A Rough Guide to Disney World.” The first real result, after a couple of Disney-sponsored ads, will be a travelogue Sullivan wrote on taking his daughter to the Magic Kingdom.

Actually, it ends up being more of a parental-ogue—and showcases everything that makes Sullivan perhaps the best literary journalist writing today. There's his humor (after his wife hoodwinks him into the trip, he writes, “A useful principle for all couples: don't try to *change* each other. Study and subvert each other”); his encyclopedic research (he includes a brief history of how Walt Disney weaseled a favorable deal from Florida's landowners and officials); his resilient empathy (a riff on fat tourists gives way to a sweet scene where the portly family of a disabled child makes the most of its vacation); and his alertness to how pop culture permeates our “real” lives (*Disney*, he notes, now works as a verb: “As in, ‘Do you Disney?’”).

If anything holds *Pulphead* together—and Sullivan's dissection of Disneying would fit right in had it not appeared so recently—it's this sense of porousness between culture and reality, between the entertaining and the everyday. In the book's last essay, Sullivan describes how, in exchange for enough cash to cover their mortgage, he and his wife let the soapy TV show *One Tree Hill* film in their North Carolina home. “We formed memories of our house that weren't memories,” he writes. “We'd experienced them solely through television.”

We might not all encounter it in so neat a fashion (just like we might not all get our mortgages paid for), but this is the world we live in. It's also the world Sullivan reports on. In a memoir of his brother's near-death by electrocution, Sullivan notes that the event became an episode on William Shatner's *Reality 911*. In a dispatch from post-Katrina New Orleans, he interviews a man who's just seen a relative's submerged house on CNN. In a report on the speaking circuit for ex-reality stars, he flips on Richard Branson's *The Rebel Billionaire* and sees a childhood friend as a contestant.

But Sullivan pays attention to this kind of ephemera—a lot of attention, in fact. Through tender scrutiny, he finds something fresh to say about over-profiled subjects like Michael Jackson and Axl Rose. He also makes startling, revealing comparisons—beginning an essay on the Tea Party, for example, with an account of the 1609 shipwreck that inspired Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (and thus became its own form of pop culture).

Most of all, he consistently mines deeper meanings from his topics. The easiest way to show this is to take one of them in-depth. In “Upon This Rock,” Sullivan's dispatch from a Christian music festival that came closer to David Foster Wallace's cruise ship essay than anything else written in the 2000s, he finds the kind of weirdness you'd expect from thousands of camped-out Evangelicals. Sullivan manages to be hilarious without being cruel or cheap. (On the loosely

regulated camping industry: “Show up at any RV joint with your thigh stumps lashed to a skateboard, crazily waiving your hooks-for-hands, screaming you want that twenty-nine-footer out back for a trip to you ain’t sayin’ where, and all they want to know is: Credit or debit, tiny sir?”) In fact, he eventually stumbles down memory lane to write about his own “high school ‘Jesus phase.’” It all adds up to one of the most honest and humane reflections on faith and doubt you’d ever care to read.

And “Pulphead” adds up to a terrifyingly versatile book. There’s a lot on the blues, but there’s also a lot on the nineteenth century. The other thing holding it together, in addition to its pop-cultural awareness, is Sullivan’s persona—a highly adaptable, highly rhetorical construct that changes depending on the task. In the Christian rock essay (and to great effect), Sullivan struggles to recruit tweens online; in the Disney essay (also to great effect), he scans pothead forums on a smartphone to find a safe place to light up.

There’s nothing wrong with this flexibility. In fact, it’s just good essay-ing. *Pulphead*’s back cover promises “a unifying narrative,” but that’s a publicist’s wishful thinking. Sullivan doesn’t even bother with a short introduction to this book. Instead, he simply pairs his careful, deliberate observations with a sincere desire to understand. It’s literary nonfiction practiced at the highest level. If that sounds remotely like something you’d enjoy, buy a copy of this book. *Credit or debit, tiny sir?*