

'Less' is the funniest novel you'll read this year

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Heat we expected, but who knew July would bring such a refreshing rain of comic novels? Not that many years ago, the summer was a wasteland where publishers dumped desiccated titles they didn't think could take root in the verdant soil of spring or fall. But this month we've already got Matthew Klam's "Who Is Rich?" and Joshua Cohen's "Moving Kings," and Tom Perrotta's "Mrs. Fletcher" is just around the corner. But first, consider this thoroughly delightful novel by Andrew Sean Greer called "Less."

Greer is an exceptionally lovely writer, capable of mingling humor with sharp poignancy. His books are frequently constructed around some clever conceit. You may remember his breakout bestseller, "The Confessions of Max Tivoli" (2004), about a man who ages backward. His new novel doesn't share that fantastical element, but it's just as preoccupied with aging. In the opening pages, a midlist novelist named Arthur Less is clinging to 49 like it's the lip of a volcano. He has waited with muted expectation through "his exclusion from any list of best writers under thirty, under forty, under fifty — they make no lists above that." And now he's pretty sure he's "the first homosexual ever to grow old."

That gently mocking tone reflects Less's attitude about all his foibles, which are obvious to him but incurable. His anxiety about aging has been exacerbated by splitting up with his boyfriend who's about to get married to a younger man. Confronted with the prospect of sitting through their wedding wearing a grin of faux happiness, Less decides to send his regrets and flee. "In free fall from the broken bridge of his last hopes," he paws through his old mail and blindly accepts *all* the sundry invitations he's received from around the world: a hodgepodge of teaching assignments, retreats and readings.

Those gigs provide the novel's structure — a different country for each chapter — which is a challenge for Less, but a boon for his creator. (An [excerpt of "Less"](#) recently appeared in the New Yorker.) Greer is brilliantly funny about the awkwardness that awaits a traveling writer of less repute. At a science fiction convention, he's mistaken for a woman. In Mexico, he finds himself on a panel from hell being asked, "What is it like to go on, knowing you are not a genius, knowing you are a mediocrity?" He arrives at an award ceremony in Italy only to discover that the winner will be chosen by high school students. "What god has enough free time to arrange this very special humiliation," he wonders, "to fly a minor novelist across the world so that he can feel, in some seventh sense, the minuscultude of his own worth?"

The most hilarious chapter takes place in Germany, where Less operates under the misimpression that he is a professor and that he speaks fluent German. (Years earlier, as a high schooler, he was tutored by a woman from Yorkville. "She was ostensibly German speaking," Greer explains, "just as seventeen-year-old Less was ostensibly gay. Both had the fantasy;

neither had carried it out.”) Arriving at his classroom on the first day, Less announces to his startled German students, “I am sorry, I must kill most of you.”

No matter. They adore him. As will you.

While Less winds his way around the globe — riding a camel in Morocco, trapped in a Christian retreat in India — we learn more about this tenderhearted man who goes about his life “like a person without skin.” Everyone else seems to have weathered the usual professional and romantic disappointments and developed the leathery hide of adulthood, but not Less. “By his forties,” Greer writes, “all he has managed to grow is a gentle sense of himself, akin to the transparent carapace of a soft-shelled crab.” Unfailingly polite, hypersensitive to the risk of boring anyone, he remains congenial throughout, but “the tragicomic business of being alive is getting to him.”

Greer has written about gay characters before, but “Less” is his first novel to focus on an openly gay writer. Among other things, this hapless antihero gives him a chance to mock himself and the expectations imposed on minority authors. Trapped at a party, for instance, a competing novelist sidles up to Less and tells him, “It’s not that you’re a bad writer, it’s that you’re a bad gay.” Before Less can think of any response to this toxic appraisal, his friend continues: “It is our duty to show something beautiful from our world. The gay world. But in your books, you make the characters suffer without reward.” That may be true of Less’s novels, but it’s not true of this one, which eventually rewards Less’s fragile optimism in the most charming way.

Indeed, you might expect the acid taste of personal satire here, the way certain novelists insist on flaying their alter egos in print, but there’s only contagious affection in this portrayal of Arthur Less. Whether he’s pining after an old lover or creeping along a ledge four flights up, hoping to climb through the window of his locked apartment, this is the comedy of disappointment distilled to a sweet elixir. Greer’s narration, so elegantly laced with wit, cradles the story of a man who loses everything: his lover, his suitcase, his beard, his dignity.

Must poor Less — dismissed by his own editor as “too wistful” — settle for a life of convivial loneliness? “At fifty, Less muses drowsily, you’re as likable as you’re going to get.”

Not a problem. Less is plenty likable — even more.

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