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Books

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Flamboyantly humble

by [Max Watman](#)

A review of *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, by Dave Eggers.

Dave Eggers, flamboyantly humble, ashamed of his success, wallowing in that same success, the biggest dork of all, has second-order vanity, bad. He has had it since he edited the irreverent, sometimes hilarious, and ultimately shallow *Might* magazine. He thinks quite a lot of himself, but he knows that is not good. Consider the author photo for his first book, the mega-block-buster *Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. The photo is blurry; author photos do not matter to him. In the blurry picture, there are two dogs and a bird, as if he were saying: “Don’t look at me, look at these two dogs, and this odd bird on my shoulder.” The bio states that Eggers has no pets. “Think about it: there are three animals in the photo, none of them mine.” One tends to look at the author photo for a very long time to figure out what is going on. Now everyone knows what he looks like. He is shrewd, this Eggers.

His first novel, *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, is out from his own house, McSweeney’s. There is no author photo. There is no dust jacket. There is a natural gray cardboard cover, with the first paragraph of the book printed on it in capital letters. The front-cover endpaper picks up the text. One is tempted to make comparisons to early Surrealist experiments with type, but remembers that actual type was a little trickier. When Sylvia Beach and James Joyce labored over the huge “s” (“Stately, plump”), they were laboring with blocks and lead, not simply increasing the font size in a floating palette in their desktop-publishing software. Eggers’s trick was easy to do, and it does not warrant comparison to anything.

Print at your own press and you print on very thick paper (it took me fifty pages to stop checking that I hadn’t turned two pages instead of one), and no one will stop you from inserting color photographs and many diagrams into the book. It seems copyediting, however, will not go well. There are rumors that Eggers is mean to those who criticize him, and I wonder if he fires editors who point out typos, dropped text, and left-in editorial notations. Someone clearly forgot, for instance, to wrap the text around a picture of a building on page 102, and as a result there is about a third of a page of copy lost. There is a scene early in the book in which the characters see three white Broncos, and they riff on white Broncos post-OJ (“how could they even make them in that color?”). Inserted into the text are three pictures of what appear to be Mercedes M-Class vehicles—decidedly not Broncos.

Perhaps he thinks that clean copy is a vanity, or a tool of the New York literati, at whom he is thumbing his nose by moving back to the West Coast and supporting independent bookstores. His repudiation strikes less charming notes, as well. The literary agent Elyse Cheney had to sue to receive her six-figure commission for the sale of his first book to the movies. Eggers is not against

agents. He has a new agent: Andrew Wylie. One hand is thumb to nose; the other is signing a note thanking *The New Yorker* for publishing an excerpt of his novel.

This is the kind of contradiction of which Eggers is made. It is what makes him frustrating and endearing simultaneously. On top of all that, he tells you, often, that he is full of contradictions and criticizes his own maneuvers on the fly, like a solipsist Cicero in the throes of an endless refutatio.

You Shall Know Our Velocity is a Freudian novel, in which Will (the ego character) narrates the adventures he has with Hand (the id character) after the death of their friend Jack (the superego character). Jack, who obeyed the world's rules (never sped in cars, had a steady job, never understood the mischief of their childhood pranks), was killed in a car accident. Will has money that he doesn't like, which he made by inadvertently posing in silhouette while screwing in a light bulb. A light bulb company used the silhouette, and Will made \$80,000. Now, tortured by the death of his superego, adrift, he wants to give the money away. He and Hand concoct a whirlwind one-week world tour during which they will hand out money.

Will says throughout the book that motion is important, that the whirlwind aspect of the tour is what counts, but whirl they do not. They do an awful lot of waiting and talking to airport clerks. We read itineraries no more artful than our own. They visit places in exotic locales, but it is usually late at night. Will and Hand see little. They end up at strip clubs. We have been, as readers, in many strip clubs, and Eggers's are unexceptional and dull. As they travel, they engage people by asking for directions, or approaching them and starting a conversation. Then they hand the person money. These scenes are cookie-cut throughout the book, repetitious until the last cathartic (though not for us) giveaway.

Eggers has talent, and that at which he is good is superlative. He can write wonderful sentences: "At the reception that night, outdoors under a strong-mooned sky, amid the whitest of tablecloths, amid the white chairs and so many lilies, we ate and bought cigars from the waiters on the sly and then everyone moved to the dancefloor and I didn't know if I could dance too but my pregnant friend pulled me out and, sober, I jumped around with her, as she laughed and laughed." He can sling strong similes. A powerboat slaps the surface of the water like "you slap a shoe on a summit table." He writes good athletic action. Jumping and running are excellent materials for Eggers.

But Eggers lacks scope. He cannot write women. They are all feline, wise, smooth moving things, or bitches; all but mom are on the angel-or-whore axis. He cannot move action. Two speeding cars seem to have trapped the rental, Will and Hand are convinced they are hurling towards ambush, and even this scene is boring. He has no sense of pace. He is inconsistent. Will in one scene says he has never been far from Chicago, and in another describes the light in Los Angeles. Will leaves a prostitute's apartment (they just cuddled, of course) at 4:30 and walks to his hotel. He arrives at midnight.

Much was expected from the follow up to *AHWOOG*. All of the tricks and foils that Eggers put to such excellent use in the memoir worked precisely because it was a memoir of personal tragedy. Here, they are less effective. Eggers's memoir was touching, intelligent, and wild. His sophomore effort is clumsy and uneven. Maybe vanity presses are just vain.

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