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Ye same olde story

by [Stefan Beck](#)

On *All Shall Be Well; and All Shall Be Well; and All Manner of Things Shall Be Well* by Tod Wodicka.

Tod Wodicka

All Shall Be Well; and All Shall Be Well; and All Manner of Things Shall Be Well.
Pantheon, 272 pages, \$21.95.

One winter, years ago, I quaffed too much of a certain potation and woke up the next morning, like Twain's Connecticut Yankee, back in days of old. The elixir was nothing magical, of course, and the mechanism of my "time travel" was simple enough: I slept through a college housing deadline and had to settle for a room in the "stronghold" or "keep"—or "physical plant," as the insurance men joylessly insisted on calling it—of the campus medievalist group.

This was my first brush with the faire folk, the mead-drinkers and doublet-stitchers, the ones who spent high school daydreaming about how a trebuchet full of burning pitch might liven up the next pep rally. I had hoped it would be my last, but then came Burt Hecker, the tunic-clad Quixote of Tod Wodicka's debut novel *All Shall Be Well; and All Shall Be Well; and All Manner of Things Shall Be Well*.

Burt owns a quaint bed-and-breakfast in upstate New York, but his true love is his medieval reenactment society, the Confraternity of Times Lost Regained. "History, when you devote your life to it," he tells us, "can be either a weight into a premature old age or a release from the troublesome, promiscuous present ... immaturity as an occupational boon." It isn't always a boon, however; shortly after we first meet Burt he is arrested for "attempting to transport [himself] home in a borrowed Saab" while under the influence of mead. He introduces himself to the policeman as "Eckbert Attquiet," and his "pouch" contains a "laminated reproduction of ... Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Portrait of an Elderly Man with His Son*."

The painting, as art history buffs are probably aware, is in fact *An Old Man and His Grandson* (c. 1490), but Burt, who can't stand anything OOP (out of period), uses it as a substitute for a photograph of himself and his estranged son Tristan. Like the man in the painting, he has a malformed nose and has more or less let himself go to seed. The presence of the painting is our first clue that *All Shall Be Well* is not the comic novel its premise promises. Burt lives in the past because there is much in his present family life, or lack thereof, with which he can't come to grips.

The upshot of Burt's midnight ride in a car belonging to his friend and lawyer, Lonna Katsav, is that he must enroll in "medieval music therapy," an alternative to the Anger Management and Self-Betterment Workshops typically available to convicted drunk drivers. Burt's therapy involves

the chants of Hildegard von Bingen, “that medieval anchoress, theologian, visionary, naturalist, and composer so adored by today’s more esoterically disposed females.” In short order it leads to a “pilgrimage” to Germany for the nine-hundredth anniversary of Hildegard’s birth.

At this point, we expect a picaresque novel, one with a fair degree of absurdity and local color. All the ingredients are there: Burt decides to strike out in search of his son, whom he believes to be in Prague, with the aid of a Brazilian dermatologist, Max Werfel, who is going there to meet his half-sister. What couldn’t go wrong?

There are certainly moments of comedy: “Werfel had finally veered from the road and run down at least half a dozen chickens. The feathers make it look worse than it probably is.” Later, at a strip club: “I watch three Germans order beer. Before the bartender serves these beverages he pretends to do something else just long enough so that the Germans believe he’s forgotten them and just short enough so that he can become irate at their pushiness when they remind him.” Moments like these lighten what soon becomes a ponderous reminder that while every happy family is alike, every unhappy family in today’s fiction is likely to be unhappy in its own tiresome, unenlightening way.

Here is Wodicka’s great revelation, which is withheld just long enough to give it a little power: Burt’s wife, Kitty, died of cancer; he didn’t take it well; he alienated his children, Tristan and June, with his pathetic, emotionally retarded mishandling of this tragedy. He makes reference several times to not remembering the funeral. Adding insult to tedium, Wodicka uses as a foil Burt’s mother-in-law’s tragic history as a survivor of a Soviet-enforced Polish massacre of the Lemko people.

There’s no denying that Wodicka’s treatment of these circumstances is poignant, or that Wodicka himself is a terrifically talented writer and, to judge by one BBC interview, very likeable, humane, and sincere. He said:

Back when I was first thinking about the book, I saw myself as a satirist, and I thought a novel looking at the modern world through the eyes of a medieval re-enactor would be a great chance for a satire. It was to be a more angry and more absurd, goofy book: the modern world ripped apart while showing this poor loony guy and his friends in tunics. Of course, this changed greatly.

So it did. Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* wrote that “Mr. Wodicka might have delivered little more than an extended cheap shot if he merely lampooned the desperation with which his main character ... craves the escapism of the Middle Ages.” Is that so? To my knowledge no one has mentioned the tremendous debt Wodicka owes to another, superior book, John Kennedy Toole’s *Confederacy of Dunces*, which lampooned—but not “merely”—its main character’s escapism, his spectacular recoil from the present.

Walker Percy, who was given the late Toole’s manuscript by Toole’s mother in 1976, called its protagonist, Ignatius J. Reilly, a “slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one ... in violent revolt against the entire modern age.” In Ignatius’s view, “possession of anything new or expensive only reflected a person’s lack of theology and geometry.” Ignatius’s Bible is the sixth-century philosopher Boethius’s *Consolatio Philosophiae*. He rages against “gamblers, prostitutes, exhibitionists, anti-Christ, alcoholics, sodomites, drug addicts, fetishists, onanists, pornographers, frauds, jades, litterbugs, and lesbians, all of whom are only too well protected by graft.”

But Ignatius is a gentle giant, whose theology (medieval but merciful) and geometry (oblate spheroid) preclude his ever doing anything destructive. An uncharitable critic might call Burt Hecker a rip-off of Ignatius. Ignatius shares Burt’s fondness for medieval times. Burt and his son Tristan made medieval instruments (“shawns, crumhorns, lutes”) as well as mead and candles. We

first encounter Ignatius purchasing “a new string for his lute.” Ignatius, asked by a policeman for identification, protests, “I don’t drive. Will you kindly go away?” If only Burt Hecker had stayed away from the steering wheel.

When Burt, a high school history teacher, tries unsuccessfully to get his students excited about the Magna Carta, we think of Ignatius’s traumatic trip to Baton Rouge on a Scenicruiser bus. Both men have been left behind by modernity.

A Confederacy of Dunces won a posthumous Pulitzer Prize without ever digging into the curiously mannered misery one finds in books like *All Shall Be Well*. It’s hilarious, and how often does a novel manage *that*? Comedy lost out to tragedy a long time ago, which is why countless high-school students have suffered through *Oedipus Rex* but have no idea who Aristophanes is. The impact on literature—an unshakeable belief that posterity will ignore anyone who makes us laugh—is incalculable. Wodicka knows full well how to be funny, but he can’t resist throwing in a grisly pogrom, a terminal illness, and an all-too-predictable unhappy family because like all of us he’s been trained to think that these are the things that count.

Yet modernity needs satirists. We’ll never run out of sad tales—indeed, we have them in such abundance that they rarely manage to sadden. Harder to come by are writers who can show us how ridiculous we look, with our lack not only of theology and geometry but also of taste, wisdom, and the ability to laugh at ourselves. Wodicka does show us this from time to time—for instance, in Burt’s account of a “performance” by his son’s avant-garde music group: “Saint Bonaventure taught contemplation of atrocious death as a means of attaining spiritual purity. My guess is that the four men of the Sound Defenestration Collective ... have taken a lesson like this to heart.” Wodicka simply doesn’t trust himself to make great subjects of disbelief and alienation.

The result is a book whose most emotional moment—a flashback in which Burt storms his dying wife’s bedroom using a prop siege engine—seems at best dutiful and at worst manipulative. It lacks the effortlessness and plausibility of the scenes in which Wodicka is enjoying himself. So *All Shall Be Well* is forgettable, but the talent that created it is clearly capable of producing work that is anything but.

If only he could learn to see the beauty and artistry in an “extended cheap shot.”

Stefan Beck is a writer living in Palo Alto, California.

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