

'A Reactionary Snob'

Tito Perdue's The Sweet-Scented Manuscript

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The Sweet-Scented Manuscript is **Tito Perdue's** first novel, though not his debut, a status that the vicissitudes of fortune and of the publishing industry dictated would be *Lee*, his most critically acclaimed work. The latter shares the protagonist with the novel at hand, which recounts Leland (Lee) Pefley's first year at Antioch College, in Yellow Springs, Ohio, in 1956-57.

As it happens, that first year is also his last, because, somehow, despite the college turning out a cesspit of permissiveness and scruffy Marxist radicals, of students with—to use Tito's terminology—a 'glandular' conception of romance, Lee manages to get expelled, along with Judy, his stunning sweetheart, and their best friends.

The narrative progresses in linear fashion, and begins with Lee riding a bus *en route* to the college. The boy has left his native Alabama behind and is venturing into 'the North' for the first time. He is introspective, nervous, and absent-minded, surrounded by a bestiary of miserable fellow travellers, his bus driven by a gloomy and glowering driver, while his hand checks constantly that his wallet is still in his pocket. Lee the dreamer is wholly innocent of crowds and urban life. One of this preoccupations is identifying intellectual geniuses—for he imagines these are the type of people who attend university, and somehow expects them to have a particular look about them, which leads him, as he approaches his destination, to scrutinise those in his age group bearing books. These opening scenes dilate for many pages, crammed with detail and clever phrasing, setting a leisurely pace for and the ironic tone of the rest of the novel. This is one to be read slowly, relishing every sentence like a rich dessert wine.



Of course, Lee, who by this time has experienced a whole series of petty indignities, has a moment of panic upon arrival, suddenly eager to hide and run straight back to Alabama. Instead, he puts on his bored expression and ploughs on towards the college campus. (Misanthropic that he is, he will not deny himself an experience.) There he meets Luke, a hyperactive, studious, loquacious, well-dressed Jewish student, who just about armwrings our suspicious hero into becoming his roommate. Lee is so self-absorbed and nervous that he, under his aloof veneer, forgets he is still carrying his suitcase as Luke leads him around the campus.

It is not long before Lee is disabused as to the nature of the college ecology, which pullulates with depressive existentialists, Marxist charlatans, and sex-crazed lazy philistines. Yet it is also not long before he encounters Judy, a short, busty brunette from New York, coveted by all the male students, and also an ice queen. Lee, hit as if by a croquet mallet to the face, recognises his destiny, and he seizes the moment boldly to go where no man has dared before, securing a dance with the belle—much to the outrage and despair of those less gifted in the testicular department than he. Young man that he is, however, and emboldened by his achievement in a single evening, Lee succumbs to hubris, and causes—with an attempted kiss—an abrupt retreat, which sets him up for a protracted game of cat and mouse with the capricious girl.

You will have to read the novel to discover what happens, but suffice it to say that this is a magical love story, cute, visceral, and absorbing, with a caliginous dreamlike atmosphere, a charismatic voice, clever dialogue, and endearing characters so real that they almost feel like personal friends. Indeed, one is almost able to inhale the distinctive air of that time and place, almost a witness to events, rather than a reader from cynical postmodernity, half a century removed.

And yet, this is more than a love story, for as the story migrates into Cleveland's slums and windy Chicago, the novel is riddled with amusing incidents, troubled characters, menacing creeps, and trenchant observations, immortalised in literature in the inimitable bookish fashion of 'a reactionary snob'—of an amiable but misanthropic Southerner like Tito Perdue, who hates young people because 'they are always smiling'. Nostalgia for the romantic aspects of the 1950s in America combines with fascination for the corruption, the squalor, and the misery of the 'adult' world, as discovered by a dreamy 18-year-old boy—a boy who completely rejects and is ill-adapted for the modern system of wage slavery, hypocrisy, iracund mini-despots, and semi-catatonic drudgery. Because for him progress in life is a function of being kicked out of ever larger institutions.



The Sweet-Scented Manuscript is also riddled with all manner of idiosyncratic *leitmotifs*, phrasal and descriptive, deployed by Perdue to deadpan humorous effect, somehow in a manner that fuses Wagner with the dulcifluous 1950s ballads recurring throughout the novel. Bus drivers are always surly and sarcastic; journalists are always fat; and adults are always angry and miserable, or suppressing anger and misery. Suppressed aggression is a subtle thematic undercurrent.

The latter is organically linked to another despite its higher aspirations: Lee is obsessed with books. Books are the first thing he notices in a room, the library one of the first places he visits, and a reading list one of his first gifts for Judy. And yet, in his intellectual preoccupations, he combines the irreverent, agrestial naïvety of a rural upbringing with an uncompromising, cultured superciliousness. In a way he lives in and detached from a world that is not good enough for him, either in its bucolic or metropolitan facets, and which is progressively to get further and further removed from his ideals.

This being Perdue's first novel and largely autobiographical, it is afflicted by some of the expected traits of an incipient literary writer with superior talent and an archaic mind: the narration, for example, is hyper-real, recording every remembered detail, at times more for Perdue's benefit than for the reader. The dialogue can sometimes be confusing, as it is often reproduced without beats. Also there is vague evidence of this having been originally a much longer work—Tito tells me that his initial draft was 1,000 pages long, with double the final wordcount, and that he wrote the novel with a mechanical typewriter, in 1983, knowing nothing about novel writing except for the fact that novels were *long*.

All the same, the story is told in a terrifically amusing manner, and every page is a constellation of little gems. While immersed in this novel, for example, my wife asked me to read her a couple of pages. I ended up reading 27 because she kept laughing at Perdue's descriptions of trivial situations, and at the kind of things that made him, or Lee, indignant. For a modern reader, the America of the 1950s, or at least the parts of it that interested Perdue, is very quaint, particularly as seen through the eyes of someone who both is nostalgic for that era and was horrified by its decadence and lacking authenticity. This is especially true in the interactions between Lee and Judy, the starry-eyed competitive lovers, whose relationship has the charm of innocence associated with those times.

One is sad to reach the end.

As an author, Perdue says he admires Orwell, Faulkner, Hardy, and Dostoevsky, but contemporary readers will probably not fail to notice similarities between my work and Perdue's. In unusual ways, there are some astounding parallels, which neither he nor I failed to note after exchanging novels over the Summer, even though our voices and novels are different. I am also reminded somewhat of Alexander Theroux, another misanthropic, anti-modern, sesquipedalophilic author of literary fiction. However, unlike Theroux, the pitiless satirist, or myself, the scientific artist, Perdue is a disgusted but amused romantic.

If you are interested in Perdue's work, it may be a good strategy to begin with *The Sweet-Scented Manuscript*, and then follow Lee's adventures chronologically: *The New Austerities* (Lee at 42), published in 1994; *Journey to a Location* (Lee at 70), to be published by Arktos; *Materials for all Future Historians* (Lee at 71), not yet published; *Lee* (Lee at 72), published in 1991; and *Fields of Asphodel* (Lee in the post-mortem world), published in 2007. Two other Lee novels exist, *The Smut Book* (Lee at 11) and *Morning Crafts* (Lee at 13). The latter will be published by Arktos, with specially commissioned cover artwork by yours truly.