

A commentary on adult folly in relationships

Reviewed by
Richard Elman

In a large though unnamed Southern city, a wise and funny adolescent is on hand to comment on adult adulteries, the faithfulness of children and contingencies of the boudoir, breakfast nook and barbecue pit. Frederick Barthelme's first published novel is called *Second Marriage* in the same uncomplaisant way that it endeavors throughout to be literal, gentle and candid, with carefully delineated emotional peaks and valleys, and humor at surprising moments.

Barthelme's stories appear fairly regularly in the *New Yorker* magazine, and they have the ability to make commonplace events seem *seen*, witnessed, for the first time. His novel extends his range through a charming and gritty set of relationships that involve not so much real people as modern absurdities who believe themselves to be quite real, and act, with effect, accordingly.

At the center of this novel, a depressed and discouraged one, there's a marriage failing. Even as I strayed with the disappointed partners among other partners and was made aware of a fairly exotic range of sexual partners and experiences, I kept on wishing that Henry and Thea, the couple at hand, would manage to get it together once more. We feel there has been love between them, both by its sudden absence and the living testimony of

SECOND MARRIAGE
Frederick Barthelme
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Rachel, the 13-year-old they've raised together, for whom Henry has been "stepfather" and primary validator.

Second Marriage is fairly close-textured, its incidents quotidian, incremental: breakfast, coffee, work in the garden, supper out, etc. The first-person narrative belongs exclusively to Henry, and it makes possible an attitude of tight-lipped acceptance of scenes of intolerable rudeness and craziness that might diminish any character if an author had presented them

to us in the third person. When his first wife, for example, with whom he never got along, quarrels with her boyfriend and moves in with Henry's nuclear "step" family, he manages to seem agreeable to the arrangement by saying very little.

When the two women commence a love affair and ask Henry to find quarters elsewhere, his protests are those of a man who suddenly lacks a vocation. Rachel is growing up too fast. Thea's new independence bewilders him because she is not having that much fun. Henry will be well-behaved but not a patsy, which is why he finds his own apartment at last.

Here is Thea explaining her liking for Clare to Henry: "I don't mean *that* way. And even if I did, what's wrong with it?"

Commenting on so much adult folly is Rachel, who is precocious and concerned; she's possibly one of the most touching comic creations of fiction in recent memory. Rachel has irony for almost everything; she knows the discretion of the once-heartbroken-never-again. Her dialogue is the poetry of the absurd — part perception, part reproach.

In Henry's new flat, Rachel and her 18-year-old girlfriend Kelsey visit to take him out for hamburgers. "'You did a great job, Dad,' Rachel said. She got more French fries and crammed them into her mouth. 'So how do you like being single? You get to go around with us

a lot if you're single.'"

Clearer than anybody else, Rachel sees the essential rightness of the relationship that's under attack, and her reproaches to her parents are reminders of other shared loving moments, daily transcendences. Cut adrift, in the meantime, Henry responds to aimless but friendly women, suicidal women, a woman with an arrangement with her husband (who is his landlord), and a woman he meets for a brief moment at a barbecue.

Second Marriage sometimes verges close to sentimentality but is saved by Barthelme's ear for American speech and his eye for the American scene. He's particularly good on fast foods, pie emporiums, apartment complexes with toads in the pool, and campy murals. The city he depicts at night has the eerie illumination of an oil refinery. Giant bugs crawl out of bathroom drawers. Fifty-year-old men wait for their mothers to die so they can come out gay.

When a work touches by being so correct, detail after detail, to the words said and those not said, I'm certainly willing to let my hopes be guided to the final scene outside the house that Thea and Henry bought, where both adults hold a rendezvous — among other things — to acknowledge Rachel's essential rightness.

Richard Elman's many novels include *"The Menu Cypher."*