

Mr. Neutron

By Joe Ponepinto

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Review by Ann S. Epstein

A Poli-Sci-Fi Whiff of Skullduggery

Can the sleep-disrupting terror engendered by our nation's current state of affairs be overcome by snappy humor? I would have answered "No way" before reading Joe Ponepinto's political satire, *Mr. Neutron*. Now, having perused its guffaw-inducing pages, while I am still too traumatized to utter "Yes, indeed," I can attest that Ponepinto's wit takes a significant step toward relieving the unremitting pain. Delight, especially when evoked by good writing, is a potent palliative. So pop this sugar-coated pill by Ponepinto, founding editor of *Tahoma Literary Review* and widely published short story author, and settle back while it infiltrates your nervous system.

The setting: *Mr. Neutron* detonates in Grand River, a West Coast detritus-strewn, down-on-its-luck city, located midway between its star-studded and wealthier California neighbors.

The situation: The engrossing (and depressing) action is a hard-fought primary race among three candidates for mayor of this unfair (as in ugly and corrupt) city. No justification is given for why someone would want the title of Mayor of Grand River, let alone its attendant responsibilities, but aspiring candidates go to punishable extremes to secure positions of lesser glory (rustler catcher; crossing guard captain; sewer supervisor). From such small successes are national threats launched. Remember that the next time you're tempted to skip a local election.

The characters: Ponepinto has a Dickensian deftness for naming characters. Glad-hand these:

Gray Davenport, a protagonist as colorless and squishy as a flattened couch cushion, is the *Mr. Neutron* of the title. Gray is an assistant political consultant who, seven years ago, quit his job as a newspaper reporter to sign onto a series of losing campaigns. He didn't undertake the role for reasons of rabid ideology, or to pursue fame or fortune. Gray is instead a civic-minded citizen who strives, in his meandering, mild-mannered way, for the good of all. A self-aware nebbish, Gray bolsters his nerves by giving his alter ego the appellation "Monterey Jack," in hopes he will become as piquant as the cheese that inspired the sobriquet. The fanciful name is as convincing as Velveeta. The singular noteworthy trait that Gray possessed is his olfactory sensitivity; the man has an uncanny sense of smell that he can't help but follow, regardless of the slimy environs into which the scent leads him. The dictionary definition of a neutron, inside the nucleus of every atom save hydrogen, is an elementary particle having no charge, and a mass slightly greater than that of a proton. Here is Gray's initial self-assessment: "In a world that pulsed with electricity, he was neither positively nor negatively charged. A neutron, if you will, a fraction of an atom, taking up an area of space so insignificant that it was no surprise

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to be regularly ignored." But, as Gray later remind readers, "the neutron was [also] the catalyst, the igniter ... striking an atom [that] in turn, blasted other atoms."

Bob Boren, the perennial candidate who Gray works for, bobs on the still waters of his stagnant and boring campaign. An unprepossessing man, in possession of not a single idea, is more attracted to the catered noshes (especially the cheese) at political events than to the proposals served up by his opponents or the constituents he elbows out of his way to reach the snack table.

Patsy Flately, who is determined not to be a patsy and too rotund to be called flat, is the head consultant of Bob's campaign. A control freak, who sits on a rubber ball for stability, Patsy delights in disparaging Gray's ideas. Her mantra, "crime and taxes," is as old as she is.

Reason Wilder, an upstart rival candidate, is a creepy eight-foot "golem of his own tipping," with size 23 clompers for feet. Reason is a creature of indeterminate origin, possibly resurrected or reconstructed from the dead. He looks like Frankenstein's monster (he even runs his campaign from a haunted house) and smells like a vat of chemicals stewed with decaying organic matter. Yet, defying all reason (at least, the kind possessed by satirists and those who read them), the unlikely candidate has mesmerized the citizens of Grand River into a frenzy of support. After all, who doesn't want "reason" as the chief attribute of an officeholder, especially when undefined reason promises to do "great things" for the city?

Elvis Vega is the decidedly unglitzy, establishment-backed front runner, with no apparent justification for his favored status, other than being controllable by the town's ruling class.

Laura (a.k.a. L'aura) Davenport, Gray's wife, is a would-be artist who "Pollocks" the walls of their house, and the newly hired campaign manager for Reason. L'aura, who has heretofore allocated Gray only a quarterly sexual liaison, has now opted to kicked Gray out entirely on the pretense that, since they are working for competing campaigns, they must separate as a matter of ethical integrity. [Note: Ponepinto's coinage of "Pollack" as a verb drips with spot-on irony.]

Breeze Wellington, a marketing mogul new to Grand River, volunteers to arouse Bob's failing campaign after Bob inadvertently utters one of Gray's socially minded crime proposals at a candidate debate. She is a wealthy femme fatale for whom Mr. Neutron has the hots; his fantasies of "working" closely with Breeze ease the pain of Gray's peremptory ejection by his wife. Given the quarterly rendezvous allotted by L'aura, Gray might be excused for looking elsewhere were his desires not so sexist. Cheers to Ponepinto for not making Gray too sympathetic a character.

Reverend Inchoate Hand, white of hair and pale of face, is the apparent power-lusting medical and/or mechanical mastermind behind Reason's invention. Gray smells a laboratory rat. To eliminate the towering rival to his own candidate, Gray must bring down Reason's handler.

Randy Knight (or is it Randy Fingers?) manages the flea bag Bates-like Star Motel where Gray alights after he hits bottom. Randy is also a licensed masseur, wine connoisseur, videographer, and all-around nice guy,

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who volunteers to be Gray's accomplice in the search for truth.

Ponepinto populates Grand River with other aptly appellationed players: power brokers Mr. Fox and Mr. Zinger; Homer Hunter, art critic and wide-ranging fifth-class journalist; Homer's cat-fancying father Zen; and Tristan of The Tryst art gallery where L'aura works and engages in extra-curricular activities. Characters become their names, and their names become them.

The Plot: The instigating question is whether Gray will expose the nefarious Dr. Hand and his monstrous creation, thereby saving the citizens of Grand River from doom. Secondly, as Gray is preoccupied with racking up a victory with Breeze, one wonders whether he will score. The uber-question is whether Gray will cease thinking of himself as a neutron and transform into a charged particle. When the votes are cast and counted, will he be a do-nothing particle or an exploder who sets off a chain reaction? (Technically speaking, the question is what will "they" be, but use of the third person plural pronoun requires an explanation preceded by a spoiler alert.)

The plot thickens (congeals) when Gray is hired by Grand River's senescent power brokers to infiltrate Reason's campaign and dig up dirt to prevent the election of this disastrous interloper. Given that Gray has yet to be paid by Boren, he is no position to turn down the job. After failing to deliver, being fired, and figuring he has nothing to lose, Gray takes it on himself to expose the truth. Thence follows a series of escapades as dark and twisting as the halls of Reason's haunted mansion, as tempting and inflated as Breeze's breasts, and as absurd as the real political climate we live in today.

As often happens in undecided races, loyalties shift, in unanticipated ways, which as a responsible news outlet, this reviewer will not reveal until after the polls close. Suffice it to say that Ponepinto likely used a spreadsheet with elastic columns to plot his tale. Although the events take place in the spring, three months before a June primary, Ponepinto drops multiple October surprises.

The writing: In addition to his talent for assigning names, Ponepinto has a gift for producing metaphor, keen observation, and forgivable puns. As an example of the first, savor this: "Breeze eased, like an estrogen thermal, past Gray and into the room." For social commentary, readers learn that Gray, in a blonde wig as part of a missionary disguise, is prepared to explain his coif as "Bleaching for Jesus." And of an ill-smelling pseudo-church, Ponepinto allows that "this place did have a pew." Ponepinto's satire puckers the mouth in distaste, but is never so bitter or biting as to incite a reader to spit it out. The book is as tasty as junk food, yet lingers in the belly and satisfies the mind for much longer.

One might have a couple of disagreements with Ponepinto's writerly positions. For one, he is sometimes so amused by his own verbal flights of description (admittedly a guilty pleasure for the reader too) that he loses the narrative's momentum, much as a politician caught up in the brilliance of his own ideas fails to stay on message. For another, since at one level (a low one), the book is a sexual as well as political farce, Gray's obsessive fantasies about bedding the bedazzling Breeze wear thin. Perchance, being

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a woman, this reviewer yawned whereas a man, the same as Gray, would never tire of such doomed ruminations. The problem was not a dearth of imagination, but their unvarying predictability. (Confession: Despite being a huge Philip Roth fan, Sabbath's Theater bored this reviewer to page-flipping annoyance. You, dear reader, know your own taste so follow the scent accordingly.)

These quibbles are not enough to mar the fun of this literal and figurative romp through the slime of electoral politics. Mr. Neutron will charge you to run to, or from, seeking office. It will replace acid reflux with reflexive laughter. You might even share the insight "they" have about why reasonable people end up as colliding particles in our civic desire to do "great things."