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Reviewed By Ricki Morse



Michael Frayn is that rare writer who commands the whole range of literature, from absurdist comedies like *Noises Off* (1982) to demanding dramatic philosophical inquiries like *Copenhagen* (2000) and *Democracy* (2003). His novels, including *Headlong* and *Spies* and his latest, *Skios*, take on an equally daunting range of subjects, from 16th c Dutch painting to a Greek Island hosting the oligarchs and the obscenely rich of the world at an intellectual retreat—think Monty Python Gets Culture.

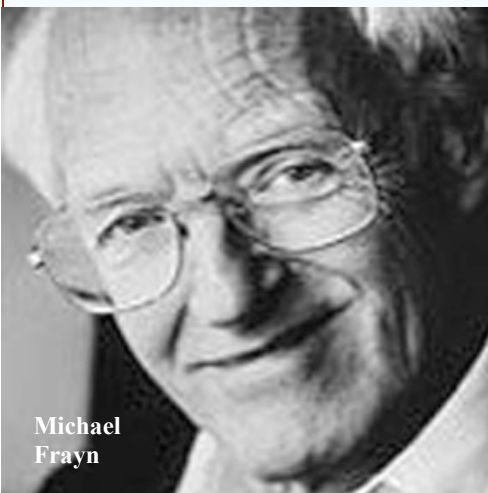
But with Frayn it all holds together. It is all of a piece. He says he was inspired to examine the historical meeting between Niels Bohr and

Werner Heisenberg in 1941, which forms the background for *Copenhagen*, out of his interest in Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle." What happened at that meeting between the key German and American nuclear physicists has been a matter of intense speculation ever since. This is the kind of question Frayn asks in each of his works, be they zany, rude comedies or scientific conundrums. He says the philosophical question which he has been thinking about for a long time is "How do we know why people do what they do, and even how one knows what one does oneself?"

Skios begins with an absurd choice. A touseled-headed charmer steps off a plane on the island of Skios, planning to meet a woman he spoke to briefly in a bar, for a weekend frolic in a house she has borrowed.

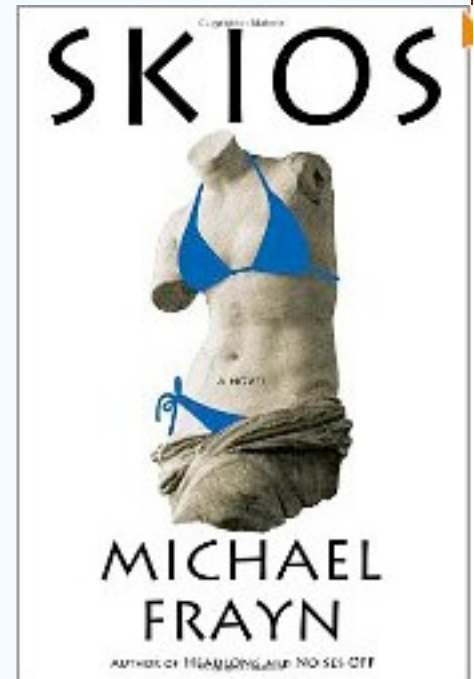
However, scanning the signs held by greeters meeting the new arrivals, he is drawn toward an exceedingly attractive woman holding a sign that

says Dr. Norman Wilfred. As they smile, she assumes he is the keynote lecturer for the foundation retreat she represents. He is delighted with the challenge, thinking he can surely pull it off, and is swept up into the whirl of wealth, ostentation and intrigue of The Fred Toppler Foundation. Fred Toppler himself is no longer with us, but his widow, the former Bahama LeStarr, exotic dancer, has established this retreat to promote culture in his memory. Now the set up is complete for a farce poking fun at intellectualism, academic ambition and competition, and those who feed on and nurture it.



Michael
Frayn

The real Dr. Norman Wilfred, whose luggage is accidentally switched with that of our charmer, Oliver Fox, gets delivered by his confused taxi driver to the rented cottage of the Fox's waiting-to-be girlfriend. He is a very serious man, though increasingly distracted by the sunbathing nude girl who keeps having difficulty keeping her towel in place while she questions him about his keynote address. He explains, "My area of expertise is the funding of research. I write books and articles about it. I advise governments and the UN. Since you ask." He continues to explain the wholly rational nature of science, and, in fact, life. His discipline is called scientometrics. "And on the



basis of scientometrics science can be scientifically managed.” He even considers his specialty to apply to poetry. “Not that I know much about poets, but I’m pretty certain that they’re subject to the same causal laws as all the rest of us. They come up with words that fill a gap in the market, or they go out of business, just like everyone else.”

From this point on the uncertainty principle takes over completely. This is not a book to read in bed with your partner while they are trying to sleep. You will be chortling and tempted to share the merriment. Frayn doesn’t make a single misstep. The absurdity is somehow always believable, always a remote but viable alternative. And everyone’s balloon gets punctured, mostly by their own hands. At the same time, we wonder about the place of certainty in our own lives—how much are we missing?

So what if the greeter’s sign has another name on it. Why not?



An Afternoon at the Pasadena Museum of Art Or How I’m Spending My Summer Vacation

Doug McElwain



Between 1915 and 1940 there was a group of artists here in California that are now called the California Impressionists. Some of the artists had formal training, some didn’t. Some of those who had formal training studied in Europe, some didn’t. But they all used impressionist and post-impressionist techniques to capture the light and natural beauty of the land we love. There were a half dozen art colonies

in California at the time; Santa Barbara being one of them.

The California Impressionists included artists such as Maurice Braun (1877-1941), Colin Campbell Cooper (1856-1937), Euphemia Charlton Fortune (1885-1969), John Gamble (1863-1957), Granville Redmond (1871-1935), Guy Rose (1867-1925) and William Wendt (1865-1946). Some of the California Impressionists had connections to the French Impressionists. For instance, Guy Rose lived (and painted) next door to Claude Monet in Giverny on and off for over eight



Near Sabrina, N.D. Oil on canvas, 20” x 24”
Courtesy of Redfern Gallery



Sunset, Canyon de Chelly, 1916, oil on canvas, 28" x 24"

Pic Blanc (The Great White Peak), received honorable mention. While his paintings can be seen today in many venues, the first exhibition in many years to concentrate solely on his work is currently at the Pasadena Museum of California Art.

(<http://www.pmcaonline.org>).

Eighty-five of Payne's paintings are on display and they are well worth the trip. The exhibition began at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento earlier this year and will remain at the Pasadena Museum of California Art through October 14th. After that, the exhibition moves to the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Two thumbs up!

Britanny Boats, c. 1924,
Oil on canvas, 30" x 40"



years between 1890 and 1912. One of the more talented artists of this group was Edgar Payne (1883-1947). He was born in Missouri and first traveled to California in 1909, moving here in 1917. With the exception of two weeks at the Art Institute of Chicago, Payne was self-taught. He became best known for his paintings of the majestic Sierra Nevada Mountains, but his most sought after paintings are those from the southwest.

In 1922 Payne made the first of two trips to Europe. He traveled and painted throughout France, Switzerland and Italy. In 1923 Payne exhibited at the Paris Salon and one of his paintings, *Le Grand*



The August issue is wide open. Share your museum visits, book reviews, and art-related travels. LM



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