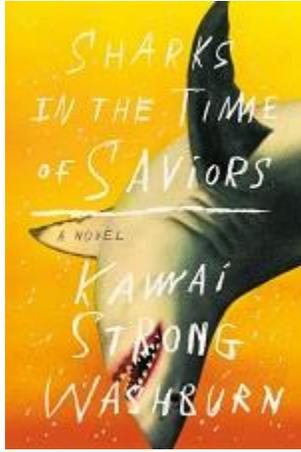


March 3, 2021

Dear Breakfast and Lunch Book Group members,



In retrospect, I'm happy we began the semester with Elena Ferrante's latest, which was my first experience with her work. Although we certainly were not unanimous in our opinions about *The Lying Life of Adults*, my own convictions are stronger after our (as always) insightful discussions: Ferrante is a singularly gifted writer, and what she writes about—relationships between and among women—is both timely and likely to stay with us. If I'm right, does this make her work “classic”? My answer is a qualified yes: I now want to read more so as to have a better sense of her stature. The writer with whom I would most compare her, especially for the intricate depths to which she can descend into her characters' imaginations and emotions, is Virginia Woolf.

*Sharks in the Time of Saviors* is a radically different kind of book: a debut novel that is almost clearly recognizable as such—the caliber of writing that, if you recognize and credit the author's vision in it, prompts you to hope for his artistic maturing. For Washburn's vision turns out to be the key point, at least for me. I used my normal method in choosing his book—selecting the first chapter or two, maybe a trusted couple of reviewers, then reading along with you—and what he's attempting hits me in a powerful way: assuming the reality of mythic and spiritual presences and incarnating them in his story. He reaches for what Dante and others of his age called the “anagogical” or spiritual level of meaning. Not since John Banville's novel *The Infinities* in 2009 have we seen such an ambitious work written almost in defiance of the unavoidable secularism of our culture that is so devoid of wonder.

Does Washburn pull it off? Not completely, I'll be the first to admit. In an unpublished 1930's essay, “The Third Moment,” Southern poet John Crowe Ransom described the creative process as occurring typically in three “moments”: first, the artist—poet, painter, sculptor, etc.—receives a vision from mysterious sources, let's say from the Muses, or let's say more simply that he *imagines* a work. In the second moment, he retreats within himself to ponder the vision, content to dwell with its wholeness for the time, until he of necessity moves to his desk, canvas, or marble, in order to bring the vision into the physical world—and thus to alter reality.

And herein, according to Ransom, lies the challenge of art: how closely is the artist able to match the worldly work of the third moment to the mysterious vision of the first? How large will be the necessary gap between vision and craft? In the work of a Shakespeare, a Raphael, or a Michelangelo, not much. In the likes of Kawai Strong Washburn, the distance between vision and craft is sizeable. In spite of the many deficiencies in his craft, though, which we will no doubt discuss, I never lost interest in his vision.

Thanks again for February. I look forward to seeing you on March 9<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup>,

Larry