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kasia says

This is one of those books that you appreciate on an abstract, formal level more than anything else - which isn't to say only analytically, because really, the ultimate enjoyment is in just kind of immersing yourself and letting it wash over you. But it's not a plot driven story. Though there IS a kind of plot, in that various phrases or fragments recur with various modifications and start to form some kind of story - we learn that the narrator is a translator, that she was born in France but sent to live in Germany, that she has some vague romantic entanglements, etc - that's not really the point. It's more of an experiment in multilingual mood, I guess. Which you may find interesting (as I did) or horribly pretentious and frustrating.

So here's my plug for why it's not just self-indulgent - unlike Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands*, which also shifts languages, but out of a more self-serving desire to express in the most self-authentically possible way, reader be damned, this seems like more of an attempt to consider what the differences between languages really do. Often, the same word will be recited in 5 different languages, as if to see if it really is the same. There are moments that, to me, evoked the experience of being in a foreign country and encountering things in a different language, where even if you know what it means, it's still just different somehow. Being a person who has travelled a lot and had the somewhat alienating experience of not knowing the language at all, or of knowing it but still feeling rather alien, there was something really familiar to me about this book, and I kind of loved it. But it's definitely not for everyone.

(from <http://kasiapontificates.blogspot.com...>)

MJ Nicholls says

This is a non-review. The real action is here. *Between* is lightyears beyond my intellectual level, but it seemed less prosily pleasurable than its predecessors. From Susan Birch's indispensable *Christine Brooke-Rose and Contemporary Fiction*:

"In contrast to the main characters of *Out* and *Such*, the anonymous protagonist of *Between* appears to be relatively well adapted to the world in which she lives and travels. This is the world of airplanes, hotels, multinational conferences, and multilingual small-talk, a spinning jumble of infinite variations on the same models. She uses reversible metaphor to perform an integrative operation on this material, bringing it together in a mobile yet highly structured whole that turns around a small number of common patterns. *Between* achieves a balance between the mobility and indeterminacy inherent in the postulates of our post-Einsteinian age and the rigid conventions toward which mass culture tends. It does not provide a resolution of the conflict in either psychological or social terms, but because of the aesthetic coherence of the novel, the problem itself is stated more forcefully than it is in either of the two previous works." (p69)

"The storyline of *Between* is far from straightforward, but it is logically relatively unambiguous. As in *Out* and *Such*, free direct speech interspersed with actual remembered dialogue is the primary mode of the novel, but unlike the two previous works, *Between* renders the observations and fantasies of a sane mind in a familiar world. The protagonist has a French mother and a German father. She was brought up in France just before the Second World War, but as an adolescent she was sent to spend a year with relatives in Germany where she was forced to remain when fighting broke out. During the war she worked as a translator, and at

the time of the action of the novel she has taken up this trade again recently.” (p70)

“The metaphoric networks that bind together thematic sequences are organized by two underlying figures: enclosure and penetration. Enclosure is manifest in many forms; it is at once the womb-like interior of an airplane, the surface of the body, the frame of a window, the border between countries, and the boundary between discourses. In short, enclosure comes to signify insularity and the maintenance of the distinct divisions between things. It is associated with the Catholic Church, the institution of marriage, loyalty to the fatherland, and belief in general. The protagonist also feels the need to insulate herself emotionally, a form of protectionism which bears a problematic resemblance to the cultural chauvinism and xenophobia she witnesses during the war. The tendency toward enclosure and fixed meanings is thus political and personal, as well as discursive.” (p71)

Nate D says

More genius-grade textual-conceptual-emotional pyrotechnics from one of the finest unsung experimentalists of the post-war landscape. Form and function coincide, language is a diamond-edged and kaleidoscopically versatile set of tools, and constraint precisely informs theme. And like all the truly great novels, this is one that teaches the reader to read it, by forcing out underutilized linguistic-pattern-recognition apparatus that we probably all possess. Granted, I'm working from the a position of slight advantage -- decent French comprehension, at least -- which makes this rather more manageable than it might be otherwise, two languages covered, entries into a few more via common expressions. (In any event, it's much more enjoyably readable than my initial fears upon first hearing about Brooke-Rose's methods, which is becoming an obvious trend through her fiction).

This is the story of a simultaneous translator, a woman living out her life in suspension: between languages, between countries, between lives, amid the endless wash of ideas of others, ideas that, trapped in themselves and their hermetically sealed circuits of conferences and think tanks, refer to everything and lead absolutely nowhere. Life as conduit, life in the air or amid the combinatorics of features of impersonal hotels and meeting centers, life as erasure by stages. In a world where everywhere has become a reflection of everywhere else, any sense of history or national character confined to the airless aquaria of tourism, even languages bleeding into a reconfigurable slew of bits and pieces.

Despite the essentially recognizable realistic context, this rapidly becomes a chilling and almost dystopian assessment of a decentralized, globalized, depersonalized modern era only just beginning when this was written. It's tied up elegantly in the single experience of the vanishing narrator -- an even more finely erased version of that in CBR's own *Out* -- but also digests much more pervasive and continuing concerns, which will only creep further and further into our lives. As such, this could actually be Brooke-Rose at her very best and most pertinent, if also at her most aggressively demanding of reader commitment at times. Either way, it's highly doubtful that a book like this has ever been written by anyone else. Either way, it's an essential.

Robert Wechsler says

This is a brilliant, multilingual British nouveau roman with humor and a satirical view of the world of travel, conferences, and diplomacy. It is a pianist's jazz solo.

Its only problem is that it goes on too long. Forty pages was enough solo for me, for the time being. I'll certainly go back, next time probably for 30 pages or so. The experience won't be quite as rich, because there is, as in any nouveau roman, a great deal of repetition that might lose something.

It does appear that some sort of plot, with some sort of characters, are beginning to take form, so maybe the solo will be joined by bass and drums and I'll be pulled through the remaining pages.

I look forward to reading Brooke-Rose's other approaches to the novel in her other works in the *Omnibus* of four novels that I purchased.

Stiene Thillmann says

"Between" is a multilingual masterpiece. It's difficult but runs smoothly; it's a pain but isn't pain beautiful sometimes; it travels far and wide, but stays behind in your mind for months after finishing it.

This was a truly special experience, extremely challenging and daunting at times, but unique. If you're not ready to interrupt your reading every two seconds to find the translation of the French, German, Dutch, Greek, Italian text, don't read this book, you'll be lost after two pages. But if you are, and I truly hope you are, read this, like, right now. You won't regret it.

"Ideas? We merely translate other people's ideas, not to mention platitudes, si-mul-ta-né-ment. No one requires us to have any of our own. We live between ideas, nicht wahr, Siegfried?"

Nick says

4.5/5 - really really terrific. Just short of 5.

Edit: had a couple days to think about it. Bringing it up to a 5

Whitaker says

As a reviewer, as a reader, one comes to Christine Brooke-Rose with trepidation. No other writer is quite so unsparing in her demands. In *Between*, it helps to know at least one European tongue, and ideally both German and French. It has been argued that no such facility is needed, but then one must be prepared to be left utterly in the dark as to certain plot points.

To read *Between* in this manner might certainly be (frustratingly) possible, but it would even more certainly lose its force as a meditation on language and identity. After all, to deal with her riff on Europe and its Babel of languages, you should at least be able to pick up that the following passage contains French, German, Spanish, and Dutch, in addition to English:

— Mesdames messieurs. Aujourd'hui nous allons discuter le problème de la communication, du point de vue which reveals een bewusteloos person blowing hot air into the mouthpiece all enclosed in a glass booth going down, after having pulled red toggle (1) pushed the red button

(5)(4)(3)(2)(1)(R)(0). But R turns out to mean Restaurant in studded black plastic cushioned walls not Rez-de-chaussée at all.

Kein Eintritt. Privat. Que cherchez-vous madame? Ah, au fond à gauche, in fondo a sinistra geradeaus dann links according to the theme the time the place with a flared-skirted figurine on the door.

If all you thought was, "Some kind of foreign language," then the passage pretty much loses its point. As would the many others where she does the same thing.

The same problem arises with her multitude of references to European history, religion, literature, and myths. If you miss them—and while I got some, I'm just as sure that many others slipped past me—then it's all going to just be a confusing mishmash, rojak, ????????? ???? ????.

All this makes *Between* sound formidably forbidding. However, if you are prepared to meet the challenge, it's well worth the effort. This confusion of cultures and languages, the challenge of constructing your own identity was something that I could identify with. Growing up as a gay Chinese boy in the tropics voraciously reading English books about boarding schools, winters, and boys falling in love with girls, studying Mandarin via stories of filial children and Chinese emperors, and confronted with Malay and Tamil languages and cultures on a daily basis, I had to forge my own sense of the world and who I am in it, separating out what was constructed for me and what I really felt. It took a long time and a lot of confusion, and that process (not at all over) resonated with what is set out in this novel.

Christine Brooke-Rose seamlessly interweaves around her story of the life and loves of a French-German simultaneous translator the sensation of what it is like to live as a polyglot, with your blurred identities coming under constant challenge, a road warrior more familiar with airport lounges and hotel rooms than with a fixed home, a woman dealing with men and being defined by them and by her own received ideas of what it means to be a woman, all the while challenging the ways culture shapes and oppresses us. And she does all of this without ever falling into description. You are instead immersed in that sea of images, languages, and episodes. Sure, you can either sink or swim, but come in anyway, the water's inviting.
