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## **The Dream Life of Balso Snell** Nathanael West

In this 1931 Dada-inspired work, the first novel of the author of *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*, the eponymous anti-hero stumbles across the Trojan Horse and climbs inside. His journey takes him through a mental jungle, offering an unforgettable look at the dark side of the American dream.

## **The Dream Life of Balso Snell Details**

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# From Reader Review The Dream Life of Balso Snell for online ebook

## Ben Dutton says

That title. From the moment you hear it, you cannot forget it. In a first year university course on contemporary American writing, one of the works we studied was West's last novel, *The Day of the Locust*. The edition I bought of that work came with *Balso Snell*, and though I never got around to reading it then, the title remained lodged in memory. Sorting out my library the other week – most of my books have been stored in boxes since university, some years ago now – I discovered those books from that course, and I picked up West's book, intending to read *The Day of the Locust* again: instead I went to *Balso Snell*, his first novel.

Reading the history of this work, one soon learns that it is indeed possible to forget the title of this work. West began work on *Balso Snell* as early as 1924, worked on it with more fervour during his stay in Paris in 1926 (one can easily imagine the writer in the city), and then completed it over two years in New York City. In 1929 West began trying to sell this short novella under the title *The Journal of Balso Snell*: he was rejected twice, but following a favourable appraisal by William Carlos Williams, *Balso Snell* was published in New York by the French publisher Contact Editions. The book sold less than 500 copies, and fell out of print. *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* remained unread and unpublished until a collected edition of his novels appeared decades after his death, in 1975.

*Balso Snell* is wandering in the grasslands around Troy when he discovers the Trojan Horse. Seeking entry, he tries each orifice, settling for the anus, leading to the first great line in this work: "the mouth was beyond his reach, the navel provided a cul-de-sac, and so, forgetting his dignity, he approached the last. O Anus Mirabilis!" In the horse Snell meets an array of people who tell their stories – and Snell begins to realise that these are all writers in need of an audience. Snell hears their tales and then discards them, nihilist in his approach, before ending in an orgiastic sexual embrace.

The above is a base summary of West's novel, and it is obvious that critics have often interpreted it many ways. Leslie Fiedler sees the whole novel as "a fractured and dissolving parable of the very process by which the emancipated Jew enters into the world of Western Culture." I read it in a similar manner – Snell is a writer trying to find his voice, and if everything that happens in the Trojan Horse is, as the title implies, the dream life of *Balso Snell*, then each encounter is a manifestation in his subconscious of various literary styles – the epistolary novel, the absurdist, the literary, the poetical – and his rejection of them. At the end of the novel Snell has not found his voice, or style, and instead chooses a sexual encounter – indicating that perhaps Snell has accepted living life over practising art. After all, at the very end, in a wonderful monologue, Snell proclaims: "And when dying, will you be able to say, I turn down an empty glass, having drunk to the full, lived to the full? Is it not madness to deny life?"

West said of this novel that it was a "protest against writing books", and its structure, scatological detail and juvenile humour are designed to provoke and irritate as much as they are to entertain. It has produced some wonderful critical responses: some disregard it as merely "a sneer in the bathroom mirror at Art" (Alan Ross), "squalid and dreadful" (Harold Bloom) and "a hysterical, obscure, disgusted shriek against the intellect" (James F. Light). Responses to a work of art never cease amuse, and *Balso Snell* produces some wide ranging disagreement. The nihilism on display here is fascinating, and I have learnt it is more pronounced in his later novels. I responded warmly to Snell and his journey through the intestinal tract of the Trojan Horse – some of its ideas resonated deeply within me – but perhaps that is because I share similar

beliefs.

In that university class all those years ago, I remember thinking *The Day of the Locust* was one of the great American novels of the twentieth century, and I think I subconsciously avoided the others for fear they might not live up to that standard. Now, it is true that *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* is no *Day of the Locust*, it is nevertheless an interesting and provocative piece of work and one that I know I will read again. It reminded me of poetry, a work whose meaning is only truly deduced when every part has been processed: some of Snell will take a while to process. I look forward to reading the other two West novels, and then returning to *The Day of the Locust*.

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### **Alan says**

This is a greatly entertaining, snide, petulant, hilarious and rather tossed off little surrealist jig. It contains some great writing and great depravity: I am thinking specifically of one character's first person account of why it was absolutely imperative to the preservation of his sanity that he murder a certain 'idiot' dishwasher of his acquaintance. The physical descriptions of this idiot's neck do clearly justify murder. But what I love most about the book is its disgust with writing itself. This book is one of the best examples of that most compelling urge of certain writers to shit on and destroy their own writing. The problem is, rather fittingly, that it ends smack in the middle of itself, mid-breath almost, and to little effect.

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### **Travelin says**

Warning: this is a review of a sophomoric book you're unlikely to read. It also contains a hint of insult about some Goodreads readers.

I once kept a stack of recycled printouts at university, for keeping notes on the back. On turning a printout over, I discovered a short, really hilarious paragraph spewed out one night, probably by a bored engineer with nothing better to do, about his old dog, somewhere in a gothic south, and the lump it developed on its back. For some reason I remember that passage better than a lot of passages I've read.

Of some authors it's said that they've written the book we're glad we didn't write in our youths. In total contradiction to that, I wish more youthful works were published or introduced in schools. I think works like *Silas Marner* are inflicted on children who don't need or want a few brutally obvious messages drummed into them again and again, slow as a python's swallow. Nathanael West, in this, his first novel, his only apparent production after living 1920s expat life in Paris, says as much about the middle class novel, if only as an excuse for this scatological mess he's cobbled together instead.

True, almost no details from the story stayed with me a few days later, but in the first reading, my mind was alive with concepts. It's probably because the book is thick with a young man's scattershot insights, probably picked out from any source he found amusing, confusing, and nonthreatening, the most evident source being some Dostoevsky.

It's hard to imagine more insulting biographies than ones dedicated to Nathanael West. He's even blamed for dying young because he was such a bad driver. Some of the biographical details seem to be disturbingly true. In this book, he lists a diagnosis of gonorrhoea as being one of life's worst possible fates. In his book *A Cool*

Million, he spends altogether too much time describing the decor of each room of a brothel in loving detail. He appears to have been sort of Russian (a Jew from Lithuania, possibly like some of my great grandparents, and definitely like The Three Stooges), the rich, prodigal son, who stayed immature quite a lot longer than some of us. His insulting hagiography of a sainted flea on the body of Christ is quite funny. He copies and parodies Dostoevsky quite effectively. Maybe if he'd known how to invent flash fiction, his scattershot approach wouldn't have wreaked such havoc with this reader's memory.

Having just spent time in Greece, I found myself nodding at his mix of half understood Greek myths and, more importantly, his contempt of balanced rhetoric, so fascinating and maddening in parts of modern Greece. A people who see all sides and take the long view, like a well-read, patient reader, don't always make for exciting or responsive human beings at just the right moment.

This is a book that nearly any intelligent young man could write better, so I'll be looking for a better standard bearer of the genre, possibly David Foster Wallace or your suggestion, confused reader of a strange man's review.

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### **Jessica says**

Weird book about him inside of a Trojan horse, few good quips but otherwise just a trip down fantasy lane

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### **Jon(athan) Nakapalau says**

A very strange book...but strange is sometimes good...sometimes...good that is...sometimes.

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### **Jordan Grossman says**

I can say with certainty there is no other book like this one.

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### **Chris says**

Nathanael West is known best for "The Day of the Locust," and then probably "Miss Lonelyhearts." He only wrote four novels before his untimely death by head-on auto accident in 1940, none of them likely to keep your back door open on a gusty day. This one, his debut, is the smallest by far, clocking in at a sub-novella length of 59 pages. Still, it doesn't feel like a short story, just a short...thing.

What makes "Miss Lonelyhearts" and "Day of the Locust" so interesting (especially in light of his years of work as a screenwriter in Hollywood) is that they are, comparatively speaking, his crowd-pleaser works. His other two, "A Cool Million" and this one, are steeped in the language and meandering narrative of the Surrealists. Even the allusion to "Dream Life" in the title gives it away. This is a nocturnal flight of fancy.

Balso, a Greek poet, comes upon a Trojan Horse and climbs in through one of the three openings. Guess which one? I'll give you hint: he calls it the "Anus Mirabilis." And from there, we're off to the races, with a

non-stop flurry of Greek classical allusion, scat jokes, unsettling diary entries, a biographer who is writing a biography of the biographer who wrote the biography of the biographer of Byron, a man who understands all five senses through an ultra-advanced sense of smell, and, to wrap it all up nicely, some hunchback seduction and a villain named Beagle Darwin.

There is a bit of lip service to dream logic -- near the end, a character from the middle of the book returns in a different guise -- but on the whole, the book feels like swinging from vine to vine in a forest that's on fire. Very little looking back, just a hysterical forward momentum in whatever direction keeps us away from the danger at our heels.

While hardly something I'll crack open all that often and marred by both its maddening shortness and a bit of West's usual knockin-the-womens-around hostility, it's an interesting read from a really weird dude, a sort of hypercompressed, all-American version of Lautremont's "Maldoror." Also, the high-low/poo-art see-saws predict Thomas Pynchon three decades hence.

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### **Tanner says**

Totally awesome piece of weird/magical realism fiction. At least those are the genres I think it falls under. Under appreciated novel by West.

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### **Mike says**

At 50 pages, West's early, surreal parody of literary genres is exactly the right length. I laughed, I was impressed, and just as I started to lose patience with it, it was over.

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### **Tiffany says**

Erm... I'm sure there were a ton of allusions in here that I just didn't get. What I was able to get, though, was complete nonsense and absurdity. Some of it was entertaining, and some not. It wasn't Terrible, but I was also glad it was a short story.

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### **Dan says**

intelligent, innovative, surreal, obsessive, short, unsatisfying work of an american in paris in 1920s. tale-within-a-tale theme reminded me of robert irwin, though i like his arab settings better. but you need to be in the right mood for that, which i'm not sure i ever am.

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### **Rick Slane says**

I think you should read Miss Lonelyhearts instead and skip this.

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### **Griff says**

Tedious, highly referential, and distractingly experimental. It felt like reading young Beckett with less sparks. There are enjoyable tidbits but they're consumed and swallowed up by the format and the author's infatuation with proving to the reader that he is well-read. I had just finished *Miss Lonelyhearts* and wanted to read more West; I'd advise similar readers to look elsewhere to whet their whistles.

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### **Heather Fryling says**

The entitled man's *Alice in Wonderland*, the illusions that strips away all pretense and leaves our author with nothing but scat and entitlement. Funny, crazy, offensive. I would never have read it had it not been included with *Miss Lonelyhearts* in a collection I bought. A fascinating little gem.

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### **Gabriel says**

Closer in spirit and structure to the proto-Surrealism of De Chirico (and his brother, Alberto Savinio-- his "Psyche" is a strange half-brother to *Balso Snell*) than to the principled chaos of dAdA (the blurb at the top of this page likens it to dAdA for some reason). Also reminded me a great deal of Luis Bunuel; made me want to watch "The Exterminating Angel" and "The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie" back-to-back.

It's 62 pages, funny, and maybe not a world-beater, but still a pretty good way to pass the time. Like watching "The Night of the Hunter" or "Blue Velvet": American weird, not Continental weird.

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### **Guy Salvidge says**

The only good thing about this is its brevity. The ultimate trying-too-hard undergraduate novel, nothing at all like West's mature work. Hopefully *A Cool Million* is better.

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### **Jamie Grefe says**

West's prose seduces me to the highest degree, but I can't help think about his untimely death and the possibilities of what he could have went on to produce. This short piece, to me, someone who greatly enjoys bizarre forms of music, film, poetry, television and so on, resonates and gives joy to my life. I feel caught in a mind in love with the strangeness of life, the strangeness of creation and love and lust and beauty and comedy. Yes, this is a funny book, but funny in the way that PFFR creates funny television. Well, this is a "dream life," so "dream logic" is at play, but there could be more, more that has escaped me. Nice to meet you again, Mr. West.

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**Daniel Polansky says**

Hysterical, vicious. An elaborate series of very cruel jokes about the pointless futility of writing and of art more generally. There's nothing really by way of story, just a lot of peculiar asides and a pretty fabulous Dostoevsky impression. West is one of the better comic writers I think I ever read, laugh out loud funny. Keep.

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**Chris says**

Bizarre yet engaging. Nihilistic for sure, but: “And when dying, will you be able to say, I turn down an empty glass, having drunk to the full, lived to the full? Is it not madness to deny life?”

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**Josh A says**

Balso Snell takes a journey of weirdness, stories and pain INSIDE of the Trojan Horse. Balso is a Poet, and encounters other writers and storytellers searching for an audience.

Another wild and wacky cynical satire from West!

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