



Lightning Field

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The Los Angeles Dana Spiotta evokes in her bold and strangely lyrical first novel is a land of Spirit Gyms and Miracle Miles, a great centerless place where chains of reference get lost, or finally don't matter.

Mina lives with her screenwriter husband and works at her best friend Lorene's highly successful concept restaurants, which exploit the often unconscious desires and idiosyncrasies of a rich, chic clientele. Almost inadvertently, Mina has acquired two lovers. And then there are the other men in her life: her father, a washed-up Hollywood director living in a yurt and hiding from his debtors, and her disturbed brother, Michael, whose attempts to connect with her force Mina to consider that she might still have a heart -- if only she could remember where she had left it.

Between her Spiritual Exfoliation and Detoxification therapies and her elaborate devotion to style, Lorene is interested only in charting her own perfection and impending decay. Although supremely confident in a million shallow ways, she, too, starts to fray at the edges.

And there is Lisa, a loving mother who cleans houses, scrapes by, and dreams of food terrorists and child abductors, until even the most innocent events seem to hint at dark possibilities.

Lightning Field explores the language tics of our culture -- the consumerist fetishes, the self-obsession and the Peeing possibility that you just might have gotten it all badly wrong. In funny, cutting, unsentimental prose, Spiotta exposes the contradictions of contemporary lives in which "identity is a collection of references." She writes about overcoming not just despair but ambivalence.

Playful and dire, raw and poetic, *Lightning Field* introduces a startling new voice in American fiction.

Lightning Field Details

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Author : Dana Spiotta

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From Reader Review *Lightning Field* for online ebook

Robert says

If a shotgun wielding redhead jammed a double barrel between my lips, told me to reach my hands toward the stars, spit a glob of chewing tobacco six inches from my left foot, and then asked me this dreaded question: What is the theme of *LIGHTNING FIELD*? I'd tell her I have no idea, shut my eyes tight, and hope her nicotine-induced haze didn't include a trigger pull, as she offered up a bit of mercy on my soul.

What I can tell you, though, is infidelity and the fragility of the human spirit run rampant through this tale, faster than a mouse running through a maze with a shotgun three inches from his bum. And there's a certain lack of cohesiveness many folks might find intriguing. I found it interesting but not overly so.

But emotional damage thundered through me of the constant variety with the blackened hearts of the blackened souls of these blackened and damaged characters, many of whom paid witness to the bleakness of human suffering. And I found myself rushing toward the end, in the hope that some of my sanity might return in full force, or I'd even settle for half-mast, as the fragility of the human spirit rested rather resolutely on the pending outcome.

Cross-posted at Robert's Reads

Julie says

Mina walks in LA, including to work where she manages one of Lorene's high-end, high concept restaurants. Mina's brother Michael is Lorene's brilliant, self-abusive ex-lover. Mina's and Michael's father has escaped to a yurt in the Ojai Valley. Mina escapes into generic hotel rooms with one lover and is videotaped by another. Her husband is immersed in old movies and endless revisions of his screenplay. Lorene is not only devoted to her restaurants, but to a high concept gym, where she receives Spirit Exfoliation Therapy. Lisa, Lorene's housekeeper, is flailing and escapes into Lorene's pristine Hollywood Hills home. In this world, surfaces are just as important as interiors. Clothing is a character, another beautiful layer of estrangement. Nudity is a type of clothing. In her first novel, Dana Spiotta creates a dreamy, slightly nauseous simulacrum that exposes the the in-between, the prohibited and exclusive spaces of a quintessential American city.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

How Superb is Thy Blurb!

Don DeLillo blurbed Dana Spiotta's debut:

"Los Angeles is the air we all breathe in this wonderfully funny, accomplished, and far-reaching first novel about our consumer colossus and the human products it makes and shapes."

And here's Bret Easton Ellis (whom Spiotta has in turn described as a *"fascinating and sly writer"*):

"A truly convincing L.A. novel: the scraped nerves, the free-floating dissatisfaction, the lingering scenes in chic, empty restaurants and hotel bars, the conversations with the tense inflections that don't reveal anything, the nowhere sex with wandering, absent lovers, a place where everything's a reference to a movie and the pull of wanting to be someone you're not is inescapable – and finally the half-hearted escape and the inevitable return. Dana Spiotta's focus and control and insight are remarkable; this raw, skillful book, revelatory."

Finally here's how Spiotta spruiks her own book, albeit a little alliteratively, in an interview:

"Lightning Field is about the language of consumerism. It is about Los Angeles and alienation. Adultery and loneliness. It is a very funny book."

White Lightning, White Heat, White Noise

Spiotta writes deftly, but it's hard to tell whether she empathises with her *"human products"*, these victims of rampant Los Angelenation, and whether we're supposed to, too.

Are they characters to admire or objects of satire? Should we empathise with their predicament or let them slip past into literary oblivion in a *"controlled moment of self-regard"*?

Which begs the question whether, like one of her characters giving money to vagrants, Spiotta grants them a leading role *"not out of sympathy for their suffering, not even out of pity, but as a talisman against them [i.e., against their suffering and pity]."*

My plight resembles the way that some readers find it hard to tell whether DeLillo was writing badly or taking the piss in *"White Noise"*.

Whole slabs of description and dialogue sound like they derive from a textbook on Phenomenological Post-Modernism. Did (non-academic) people really talk like this in 2001? Do they still? Is Spiotta immersed in this culture or averse to it?

What are we to think of a novel that can only be regarded as funny, if and when you reach the conclusion that it's ironic (after which you can laugh retroactively)?

The novel's Post-Post-Modern Realism seems to work against drawing this conclusion too readily. Hence, it forces you to suspend judgment, possibly for too long, before laughing. Or, having laughed, a sense of guilt persists.

A blurb for her second novel seems to define the horns of the dilemma:

"Spiotta has a wonderful ironic sensibility, juxtaposing '70s fervor with '90s expediency."

It's hard to work out whether Spiotta's fervor prevails over her expediency. I want to believe in her, but I'm still equivocating. If I could have got my head around these issues, I would have rated the novel four stars.

In terms of analogy, think of the full-bodied, intense and vigorous whine of a more up-market but self-consciously hipster version of Jonathan Franzen's *"The Corrections"* (published the same year), rounded off

by the stylish lingering aftertaste of J.G. Ballard and *"White Noise"* itself.

Regardless of concerns about authorial intention, the bobo characters are clinically well-drawn, the narrative is neatly dissembled and re-assembled. There is clearly a substantive and substantial talent at work here. Besides, if DeLillo likes it, she gets to have her cake and eat it too.

Maybe this assemblage of Spiotta's writing will give you a taste of and for the cake.

"I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit."

[Ecclesiastes 1:14]

MICHAEL

When she was without money, before she had the restaurant, Lorene had only her beauty, her taste, and her style to recommend her.

MINA

She had a laser accuracy for reading other people's desires and vanities...

MICHAEL

...and she could help them actualise those desires as styles and traits and purchasable objects in the world...

MINA

It's a pity Lorene had to quit consulting, end her career as a life-stylist...

MICHAEL

It was inevitable though. She'd finally become so stark and minimalist, so desperate for simplicity and purity, that if she continued she'd need a stylist herself...

MINA

She was obsessed but detached at the same time...

MICHAEL

She was abstracting herself...to a kind of philosophical autism. It's like falling off a cliff, and then you're stuck in a labyrinth of solipsism.

MINA

Still, she drew on six decades of fashion mistakes all juxtaposed, recontextualised, 'deconstructed' by people who really believed fashion was the heart of subversion.

MICHAEL

Fashion is a form of daydreaming.

MINA

I prefer movies.

MICHAEL

You look more like a person in a movie than any person I've ever met.

MINA

I have so many reference points in my head, as many as the memories of my own life.

MICHAEL

Movies?

MINA

Yes... they've become nearly equally weighted, the memories of my actual life and the memories of the movies I've seen...

MICHAEL

Is there finally that much difference?

MINA

I sometimes think that if someone saw all the movies I've seen, the number of times I've seen them and in the order I've seen them, that person might know exactly who I am...

MICHAEL

That couldn't really be true...

MINA

...but if it was half true, it'd be like my identity was like a collection of references.

MICHAEL

So what occupies you, if not some performance of yourself?

MINA

I've just begun to locate my need to be filmed - is it perhaps a particularly female perception...that women are in a way programmed to be animated by the attention of others?...It's as if I am actually being watched...

MICHAEL

Wouldn't being filmed unhinge your desire, the alchemy of what you are?

MINA

It makes me feel as if I'm somewhere else, some world of bodies and touch, of thought-effacing pleasure.

MICHAEL

It actually has to be pleasurable as well as high-concept. Not just abstract pontificating about the nature of the camera's gaze!

MINA

I desire to be extraordinary in some way.

MICHAEL

You think you can achieve it through sex?

MINA

The cold reality of sex, the way it makes you bodied and exposed to someone not you, my God, the reveling in the body, the hushed words that fly, the desperate feelings...

MICHAEL

...the whispered affections for different body parts...

MINA

There are so many alternative fictions at work in my life right now...secrets, lies, fictions...

MICHAEL

Everyone has secrets.

MINA

The discretion of female sexuality, its secret demureness, its endless interiority - yes, it is secret - solitary and contained at all times.

MICHAEL

It's not necessarily something I want to be cured of - desire.

MINA

I saw this boy today. No more than 18. His gaze travelled right past me. He was completely indifferent to me.

MICHAEL

No look back?

MINA

He gave me no look back!

MICHAEL

I can't believe it.

MINA

I am only thirty-two, and I am invisible to this guy.

MICHAEL

I can't bear to think of you in the throes of ennui...

MINA

...and then I saw the rest of my life stretched out before me. In a flash. The slow, excruciating dismantling of me as an object of desire.

MICHAEL

No!

MINA

I would no longer command desire. And I felt so upset by this future...

MICHAEL

Maybe it was just the quality of the difference between you, beyond age or gender or geography, but a categorical difference, an absolute, italic difference all the same.

MINA

I want somebody to touch me with reverent slowness.

MICHAEL

A massage...a California come-on...

MINA

For just one time, I want to feel electric and possible.

MICHAEL

Yes!

MINA

Why can't I get what I desire?

MICHAEL

Don't look at me, sister!

MINA

Well, I'm from fucking California and I want a goddamn answer!

SOUNDTRACK:

The Cure - "Hot Hot Hot!!!"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p0E9u...>

Graham Parker- "The Kid With The Butterfly Net"
[From the album "Struck by Lightning"]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1A5kD...>

Brinda says

Dana Spiotta is a fabulous writer -- totally unsentimental in her delivery, is a master at nonlinear narrative, and astute in her character's observations.

This book however -- just couldn't get into it. Spiotta seems fascinated with our generation's apathy and obsession with pop culture. She plays in to the hyper self-awareness of her two leads, Mina and Lorene: long wordy internal monologues about outward appearance, the cinematic nature of everything in LA, the secrets everyone inevitably must have in order to keep the story dynamic - very smartly written, almost too

smart (totally implausible dialogue involving genius phrases that just didn't seem like real conversations) -- I didn't really like any of the characters in the book, and felt like I should have just because they were making some ostensibly brilliant observations about themselves and the world around them. I grew tired of reading this story about halfway in. Many interesting details going in to a premise that was not that interesting to me.

Nate says

Stolen from the very vocal chords of Don DeLillo. That's the strongest impression I get, and it shouldn't surprise that DeLillo glowingly praised this debut novel. The vocal calque isn't a negative--entirely. But it's interesting reading this compared to Spiotta's most recent work "Stone Arabia" where the voice and narrative feels and sounds so wholly uninfluenced. It's unique to the characters, and, well more honest.

But that's what this book is really about. Dishonesty and deception and appearances and vapidness. It's what LA is about, or at least what we're led to believe LA is and has always been about. Each main character: Lisa, Mina and Lorene are in varying degrees faced with the idea of LA. The dishonesty and facade. I think of LA as this greasy, runny face behind the Greek persona mask of the American Dream. There is nothing good and pure. There is only what the characters are.

Lisa cleans houses. She has two kids and a pathetically desperate husband

Lorene is in restaurants: high-end, super-exclusive, PoMo (or in the immortal words of Moe Szyslak "all right weird for the sake of weird") restaurants.

Mina helps with the restaurants. She also has a lot of sex that's not with her husband.

The two characters in relationships are in failed ones and Lorene despite her perfect c-cup implants is single and quietly desperate because of it. Also likely she never got past Michael--Mina's crazy paranoid brother.

The characters manage to cobble together a climax, make the whole story appear as though its been perfectly plotted, that they've had agency and purpose this whole time but who are we kidding? They're pushed around more than they move, even though they don't want to think of it that way. You'll like it if you want to read about the very art of being a Los Angelesian...Los Angelesite...LAer? There's an attitude evinced under the layers and language of DeLilloese that is actually evocative of the characters and their place. A kind of honesty that I felt got touched on in Stone Arabia (also placed in LA) a little better. But it very much feels like a first novel.

Adam says

Spiotta gets constant comparisons to DeLillo and Didion and these aren't imprecise, she offers the almost clinical dissection of the objects and anxieties that define our modern condition of the former and spare and stark style of the latter. Her first book features her at her murkiest, operating in a Bergmanesque fog of confused identity and enigmatic scenes, very detached and opaque most of the times and then almost humorous at others. It is cold book that offers up plenty of satire and surrealism but little cohesion or warmth, with the three main characters interchanged in my mind in way that was either purposely or accidentally confusing. It has great moments but I recommend it a little less readily than her other two

available books. Many of her traits are present first here, the brother suffering from mental illness, the extensive grasp of pop culture, old Hollywood movies (and the watching of an actor's complete filmography, esp. James Mason), and people on film, these and many other elements pop up in her later work but it suffers more in comparison to those books than on its own, an author though is present with a distinct vision and style and almost painfully sad things to say about our present state. Her odd and condensed style is welcome in an era of door-stoppers and overreaching please all narratives, more reminiscent of the opaque and fierce movies of Michelangelo Antonioni, Godard, Fellini, and Bergman than any recent fiction.

Justin Evans says

For some reason I thought this was going to be dystopian. Instead, it's just kind of bad, in a 'bad first novel that shows promise' kind of way. And indeed 'Eat the Document,' while far from great, was substantially better than LF. Hopefully Stone Arabia is another big step up.

Do you like bad Don Delillo? Because I'm ambivalent even about moderately good Don Delillo, but Spiotta here has reproduced everything that's unpleasant about his worst books--the stylized but also fakely-naturalized dialogue about ideas that aren't interesting; the random fragmentation of text with no real payoff; the slickness. It's icky. It's not very interesting. It contains what felt like an infinite number of sentences starting "She [verb]", followed by another short sentence starting the same way, followed by another short sentence starting the same way. I assume this choice was meant to do something for me, but it did not.

LF is interesting, though, as a kind of half-way house between the hoary old pomo Delillo stuff (po-faced satire of late capitalism, symbols that are meant to be deeply meaningful but are too often just kind of silly) and the post-9/11 'we should all be very unironic now because irony caused 9/11 but my characters don't seem to know this' stuff. The heroes of LF, if I can simplify wildly, are a housefrau dedicated only to her children, and a possibly schizophrenic academic. They each feel things deeply. They're each set apart from the upper-middle class fads and obsession with surfaces. The academic reads Wittgenstein, and not that easy late stuff, no, he reads the Tractatus, though this and his obsession with the Lightning Field show that he's also deeply flawed because he wants things to be perfectly ordered. The housefrau has a chance to help the academic, but doesn't, because she wants to care for her children.

Meanwhile, the two main characters drive to New York, then go back to LA very soon afterward.

So at some point someone can write a dissertation about the shift from postmodernism to whatever we're all reading now (a friend of mine calls one side of it the 'novel of detachment' in a recent Nation piece. Go Jon!), and as well as DFW, they can point to LF as a missing link. Sadly, I don't want to read these books, and I will not be re-reading this.

Matt Walker says

I thought to myself: this is like a mix between Didion and DeLillo. Then I saw the blurb inside the front cover from People magazine that said it was like a mix between Didion and DeLillo. Conclusion: I could write for People magazine.

Elise says

I stumbled across Dana Spiotta's "Eat The Document" a month or so ago at a used bookstore on the \$2 table and decided to give it a try. I enjoyed that book so much, I picked up her first book, "Lightning Field" at the library quickly after. I read it briskly, but not without feeling a bit empty. I would summarize this book as a book of "space" -- the need for space from our self, our work, our surroundings, our significant others, etc...really boiling down to the articulation (or not) of our unconscious space. With the California connection, I would liken this a bit to some of Joan Didion's work about the often eccentric characters and lifestyles often found in California.

Sean says

Like all of Dana Spiotta's books, this novel has a tart, dry tone, which I quite like. The ending wasn't as strong a resolution as the characters deserved, but I think that's a common failing of first novels. The characters are really great, especially Mina; she really seems like a person when in a lesser writer's hands I think she would just be a collection of quirks. Spiotta is sensitive here to the disturbing lack of privacy and autonomy inherent to a more interconnected and relentlessly examined online world (you don't necessarily control your image or where it ends up and what uses it is put toward); in fact, these things have gotten much worse in the decade or so since this book was written, so in a way she seems almost prophetic. I think this book is very much worth reading, although *Eat the Document*, Spiotta's second novel, is better in every way.

Garlan 🍷 says

A very slick, polished book for a debut novel. The characters are all aloof and distant to me, but they were well developed. I like Spiotta's writing a lot, but I always feel like I'm on the outside of the scenes looking in through a window; I just don't ever develop any closeness to any of her characters.

This story takes place in Hollywood, and definitely feels L.A.-ish, from Spiotta's use of film as a metaphor and all the references to movies and actors. It follows the lives of three women, and really delves into their psyches, from quirks to neuroses in their relationships with one other and with other characters in the book. The author really has a gift for capturing the lifestyles and the mindset of contemporary society.

Interestingly, I think this book was better than "Stone Arabia", her third novel that gained a lot of acclaim. Not as good as her sophomore effort, "Eat the Document".

This was closer to a 3 1/2 star for me, but I'm only giving it a 3* rating.

Mythili says

There's something very sad and grubby about this smartly observed, funny and dark novel. Mina, the novel's main character, and her old friend Lorene present 2 kinds of Los Angeles disaffection. Plain-looking Mina has too many men and too many secrets. For now, gorgeous Lorene has no man at all, but is instead in the thrall of an array of aesthetic obsessions. This might be the first novel I've read where one of the main characters has breast implants. It's also one of the only books I've read that chronicles what a very close female friendship really looks like. I'd have enjoyed this book even more if not for the women's suffocating sexual desperation, and the flatness of Michael, (Mina's brother and Lorene's ex-), who hovers through the

story with annoying tragedy, more of a disembodied spirit than a sympathy-evoking character. I also wished Lorene's theme-restaurants were treated a little more like real establishments rather than flip devices -- even though they are brilliant devices. This seems like the book Spiotta had to get out of her system in order to write *Eat the Document*.

Janine says

This disturbing debut novel is set in one of the bleakest and most depressing versions of Los Angeles I've encountered in some time. It's not as focused as the later Dana Spiotta novels I've read — *Stone Arabia* & *Innocents and Others* — but I liked reading *Lightning Field*, Spiotta's initial foray into the style and themes that make up her later, brilliant work.

Scribd says

It's hard to talk about *Lightning Field* and not compare it to other LA books — it feels like a younger, updated version of *Play It As It Lays*, a woman's *Less Than Zero*. Like Didion's protagonist, Spiotta's is a woman who has disconnected from her soul, and who vacillates between looking for it in all the wrong places and just not giving a shit. And like both Ellis and Didion, Spiotta does what LA writers do best: she gloriously, shamelessly celebrates everything that anyone who has ever lived in LA loves, hates, loves to hate, and hates to love about the City of Angels.

That moment when you first realize that the film industry *had* to take up residence in LA not because it's a perfectly temperate walled-in basin at the edge of the world but because of the *light*.

The ironic distaste for what's "cool" (obscure peaty scotches, perfectly curated record collections, and, of course, vintage clothes).

How using your own feet as a mode of transportation is an act of transgression.

Bizarre evangelist religions.

The ubiquity of sex tapes.

Being obscenely late.

Dietary restrictions.

Freeways.

Yurts.

Ojai.

Will this book feel like one big inside joke to anyone who hasn't lived in LA? Maybe, but beneath the blanket of Angeleno details, *Lightning Field* is a coming-of-age story—even though the protagonist is already married, has a career, and multiple lovers—in the way that LA itself is one big coming-of-age story. Reading it is like putting the parts of ourselves that are undeniably tied to this generation under a microscope together and realizing that they're not that different from what our parents and brothers and sisters may have felt in the 60s and 70s and 80s. After all, Joan Didion's LA and Brett Easton Ellis's LA and Dana Spiotta's LA aren't that different, cell phones aside.

Nbarnhart says

The NYT Magazine did a compelling profile on Dana Spiotta recently, and pleasantly I rediscovered that I already owned one of her novels, *Lightning Field*, picked up at a summer book sale and momentarily forgotten in the back of my closet. The comparisons to Joan Didion and Don Delillo were promising, and so was the book - it was promising of Spiotta's talent as a writer and a wordsmith, but the book itself felt incomplete. I understand that malaise and ambiguity were core elements of the book, but I didn't feel a strong enough connection to any of the characters. There were some absolutely beautiful passages though, it wasn't an unpleasant read, just a lacking one, but I look forward to reading Spiotta's newest novel.
