



Eat the Document

Dana Spiotta

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An ambitious and powerful story about idealism, passion, and sacrifice, *Eat the Document* shifts between the underground movement of the 1970s and the echoes and consequences of that movement in the 1990s. A National Book Award finalist, *Eat the Document* is a riveting portrait of two eras and one of the most provocative and compelling novels of recent years.

Eat the Document Details

Date : Published November 28th 2006 by Scribner (first published 2006)

ISBN : 9780743273008

Author : Dana Spiotta

Format : Paperback 290 pages

Genre : Fiction, Novels, Literary Fiction, Politics

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From Reader Review Eat the Document for online ebook

David says

"Eat the Document" has an interesting premise -- Mary and Bobby, two sixties radicals, are forced to separate and go underground when their scheme to blow up the summer home of an executive whose company produces napalm (and/or Agent Orange) goes awry, killing an innocent victim. Thirty years later, both are living (unbeknownst to one another) in the Seattle area. Mary, who now goes by the name Louise, is raising a 16-year old son, Jason. Bobby, now known as Nash, runs an alternative book store for his friend Henry, who is dying of cancer. Mary has always intended to tell Jason the truth, and turn herself in, "as soon as he is ready". But Jason is a smart kid. What if he figures things out for himself first?

Spiotta develops the story beautifully, essentially using it as a vehicle to explore questions of identity, as well as providing a fairly astute analysis of the 60s and 90s counter-culture. The novel is not as tightly constructed as it could have been -- a couple of story arcs (Henry's deteriorating health and the glib explanation offered for it, the May-December attraction between Miranda and Nash) added little. And while the main characters were believable and interesting, some of the minor characters (Miranda's boyfriend Josh, Jason's loser geek neighbor Gage, Mary/Caroline's travel companion Berry) were just cartoons. But these are occasional lapses - for the most part, Spiotta tells the story with subtlety and skill. Intentionally or not, it's the story of Mary and Jason that forms the emotional heart of the book; Nash is not unsympathetic, but he's not very interesting either.

The book raises some very interesting questions, and Spiotta is an engaging and skillful writer. For those who enjoy that kind of thing, there are regular doses of "High Fidelity"-style geekishness, mainly centering on Jason's obsessive interest in -- The Beach Boys. Spiotta delivers these with such brilliance that it's hard not to be beguiled - the choice of the Beach Boys as the focus of Jason's obsession is inspired. It also allows the hilarious scene in which, to Jason's mounting horror, a slightly buzzed Mary reminisces about the time she danced with Dennis Wilson in a grungy surfer bar in Venice Beach.

Despite its minor flaws, I really liked "Eat the Document", for the skill with which Spiotta unfolds the story, for the pitch-perfect portrayal of the relationship between Mary and Jason, for the acuteness of her examination of the counter-culture of both generations, and for the interesting questions it raises about the construction of personal identity in the U.S. Predictably enough, I wasn't particularly keen on the whole demonization* of the big pharmaceutical company story arc, but I can't necessarily criticize it as coming out of left field.

* When I was typing up this review in the horrible Microsoft Works word processor, it refused to allow me to type this word, changing it each time to "deionization". Is this some kind of new sinister automatic bowdlerization feature that is being included with Microsoft programs? It was really creepy.

Edan says

This book is worth it for the word "unstoppingly"--God, that adverb made me cry it was so beautiful, its placement so perfect.

Malacorda says

Tre stelle e mezza: non è riuscito a coinvolgermi emotivamente. La descrizione migliore di questo romanzo si può fare usando le parole della stessa protagonista: "E' il modo in cui ti senti, o meglio la sensazione che ti dà. Di un'America rancida, capisci, un po' stantia."

Terribile la traduzione del titolo, proprio non gli rende giustizia. Buoni il ritmo, la scansione temporale, l'intreccio e il modo in cui alla fine alcuni tasselli tornano al loro posto. Ottimo il linguaggio: ho idea che questo libro più di tanti altri necessiti di una lettura in lingua originale per meglio coglierne le sfumature e i giochi di parole e di significati. Ottimo anche nel soffermarsi ad analizzare la Storia e la società contemporanee, il modo in cui la modernità e le tecnologie arrivano a compenetrarsi con quello che può apparire *vintage*.

Quanto allo stile, concordo con @lorin sul fatto che la mano sia un po' troppo femminile anche laddove la voce narrante dovrebbe calarsi in panni prettamente maschili. L'ispirazione che ha fatto nascere questo romanzo ha evidentemente una forte affinità con quella che ha dato vita a "Le ragazze" della Cline. A partire da quella magica e/o maledetta estate del '69, attraverso gli anni settanta e ottanta e fino ai giorni nostri, si inanellano gli episodi che sono tutti flash-back e flash-forward, zigzagando tra i decenni.

Tantissimi gli ingredienti presenti nel romanzo, forse è questo il suo punto debole, una moltitudine di temi ed elementi che finiscono gioco-forza per galleggiare in superficie senza il dovuto approfondimento: l'uso di agenti chimici in Vietnam, le sindromi da stress post-traumatico, la dipendenza da psicofarmaci, l'identità ovvero l'annullamento dell'identità in nome di un ideale o un'ideologia, la ribellione e l'anticonformismo, attivismo e para-attivismo, la provincia e i sobborghi americani con relative architettura e urbanistica, hackers figli di papà (*sabato in barca a vela e lunedì al leonkavallo*), c'è un gruppo femminile di autocoscienza, c'è finanche una comune che è una sorta di *albergo per le donne tristi*, c'è la globalizzazione e le multinazionali con le loro scorribande nell'ambito del sociale, il capitalismo e il consumismo e la manipolazione psicologica del consumatore. Troppa carne al fuoco per sole trecento pagine: la veduta d'insieme è brillante, e mi viene il sospetto che con un più corposo lavoro di approfondimento di questi temi, sarebbe stato un romanzone-capolavoro di tutta la letteratura (e della storia contemporanea) americana. Anche le storie personali e psicologiche dei due protagonisti mi sono piaciute, (view spoiler): e anche questo aspetto meritava un po' di sviluppo in più. Lettura soddisfacente anche se con una punta di amarezza per le vette che poteva arrivare a toccare ma che invece non raggiunge.

lorinbocol says

a pag 158 ho capito cos'è che mi lasciava un po' perplessa in questo romanzo. non che non mi stesse piacendo (3 stelle e 1/2 meritate le porta a casa, alla faccia del titolo italiano da sceneggiato tivù di cinzia TH torrini), ma si fermava a un intrattenimento gradevole e intelligente. di certo senza raggiungere le 5 stelle di amici anobiani in alta considerazione.

poi un paio di passaggi invero banalotti sul fascino della donna dall'aria incasinata mi han messo sul chivalà, e una frase di questo tenore: «e adesso, il giorno del suo cinquantesimo compleanno, eccolo lì, stordito dalla cotta per lei, sdraiato a letto con una pigra erezione a struggersi di desiderio. era un piacere di per sé starsene

a letto a desiderare qualcuno. si sentiva ridicolo, felice, sciocco» ha finalmente acceso la lampadina. questo libro è troppo palesemente scritto da una donna. c'è troppa mano femminile e, odio pensarlo, non in senso buono.

so di muovermi su un terreno minato, ma quel che intendo dire è che non c'entra qui la sensibilità ma la capacità di scrivere un romanzo su un argomento ampio e a rischio banalizzazione - nello specifico l'attivismo politico, la contestazione antimilitare, l'attentato in cui ci scappa il morto e la conseguente latitanza - senza che leggendolo si riconoscano dei tratti stilistici troppo marcatamente di genere. diciamo che facendo un parallelo col cinema penserei forse come esempio in positivo ai film di kathryn bigelow, *the hurt locker* e dintorni.

e invece qui si affiancano alcuni aspetti sicuramente interessanti - per dirne uno, il tratteggio degli agit prop versione 2.0: non più quelli che mettevano le bombe contro la guerra in vietnam, ma i loro figli nerd e smanettoni col notebook in titanio - ad altre semplificazioni e commistioni con un certo sguardo virante al rosa. tanto nella trama quanto nello stile.

e proprio restando al vietnam, il fatto che dana spiotta scelga come link per quella guerra il tema dell'agente arancio, àncora la vicenda a un livello discretamente basso di originalità. in altro contesto ho sentito una volta fare un parallelo che mi pare riassume bene la mia perplessità attuale. diciamo che usare l'agente arancio per parlare di vietnam è come voler inserire le trame italiane in un romanzo, e metterci ustica. va benissimo per carità, ma si può fare di meglio.

Christy says

I must be officially done with school because I am reading again! Well, not quite, but I did read this surprising novel today.

Although I was interested in reading Eat the Document, my expectations for it were not very high at the outset. I suppose I was expecting mainly a character study of an ex-radical and her teenage son. Instead, I was surprised to find that this book grapples with the pervasive moral ambivalence of American culture. Spiotta questions whether it is possible to oppose the system while existing within it. If not, what is the alternative? Her depictions of off-the-grid extremism (the women's commune, the Black House squat) are in the end unacceptable to the characters in the novel and to the reader. Within the novel, even the notion of off-the-grid revolution is commodified and made kitschy (which, of course, is just a heightened version of real-life Che posters). Also, the novel makes us question to what degree our objections to the current world order are merely aesthetic. The brilliance of Nash's unperformed actions is that they allow those who participate in thinking about them to feel subversive without actually subverting anything, and this is the exact point at which a counterculture becomes simply a subculture. Reading about Nash's ideas feels rewarding in a way that acting them out never would. Creating Nash's installations would force you to confront the fact that maybe the best you can ever do is to *feel* subversive. That suggestion relates back to Mary's assertion that intentions do matter because if you intend to revolutionize the world, maybe it doesn't matter that the revolution never happens.

Spiotta's other major theme is identity. I found a lot here to relate to my recent readings of Shakespeare because a lot of Shakespeare concerns identity as a mask that one wears, and the character of Mary/Freya/Caroline/Louise is just mask upon mask. The identity changes are synonymous with external changes, yet they seem to precipitate changes in the character's personality as well. Spiotta's exploration of the degree to which the internal shifts to match the external for all the characters is fascinating. Nash seems to be the sole character whose inner life remains the same and forces his exterior existence to conform to that through what he refers to as "luck."

I'm making this book sound like a novel of ideas, which it is, but it also has the virtue of being eminently readable. Spiotta masterfully weaves the various narrators and plotlines, giving each section a unique voice. I especially enjoyed young Jason's essayistic journal entries, in which he sounds like a DFW-lite. They also made me want to listen to Pet Sounds, even I've never really gotten the whole Beach Boys as cult figure phenomenon. I also kept admiring the seemingly endless correlations between the different stories, whether it was the recurrence of Bobby's rug in Nash's apartment or the similarities between Mary and Miranda.

Brad says

Finally had the chance to read this older novel by Spiotta. It is fantastic. I don't see much point regurgitating plot for you, that's everywhere. I'll just say she hits on things that interest me like 60s/70s radicals, great music, bookstores, well drawn characters. It's very difficult for me to express what it is that I find so compelling about Dana Spiotta's writing, but here's a try. I love her characters' internal dialogues, contemplative without being pretentious, or if pretentious, then intentionally and for literary effect. The places (L.A., Seattle, etc.) and ideas (philosophical and questioning) in which her characters find themselves immersed are always of interest to me. As a person who has played music, or at least someone who has strong feelings about what trying to create music is like, I find her writing completely spot on and genuine. She writes about artists/musicians/etc. and lovers of/serious consumers of art, music, etc. impeccably. I wish I could tell you more articulately why I like Dana Spiotta, all I can say is check her out.

Justin Evans says

This is a perfectly mediocre book, reasonably entertaining, but absolutely wonderful for understanding today's literature. Its successes and its flaws are all so widespread, it's as if I'd found the Platonic form of the Contemporary Novel. Which means this review got a little out of hand.

**

I periodically fall victim to an odd complex of ideas when choosing a book to read:

- * that because a novel is supposed to be about important themes, it will treat them as if they were important.
- * that a novel ostensibly about history will be about history.
- * that a novel about radicalism will take some risks.
- * that a novel ostensibly about ideas will be more intelligent than the average novel.

EtheD seems to be well loved, but I can't at all work out why.* Like Jennifer Egan's 'Look at Me,' it's a philosophical novel with all the philosophy taken out; it raises very important questions (here: the history/decline of political radicalism on the one hand, and the morality of revolution on the other), but can't stay in one place for long enough to tease out that idea in any interesting way.

The book's structure makes real thought impossible: the main reveal (there are others) is just what our main characters did back in the 70s. They blew up a house with a housemaid in it. Was it worth doing? Since we don't know what they did until the last twenty pages, there's not much time to think about it. I suspect we're meant to be instinctively disgusted by this act. The characters keep insisting that "intentions matter", but

ultimately they accept their guilt and go to prison. Meanwhile, we're told that we have to see the complexities of the owners of the homes they blew up, i.e., sometimes you just have to make chemicals that cause cancer and sell them to people. Sometimes you just have to make weapons and sell them and it's not up to you if others use them. They're just so complex!

"That's the truth. I showed the truth. The truth is complicated. More complicated than we would like," Bobby said.

The novel's form also makes it hard to really think with. As with *so many* contemporary books, we have a rotating point of view, one character per chapter, with only very, very occasional dips into a more distant third person perspective. In other words, the narrator does all s/he can to efface itself. The only perspectives we get are the characters'.

But at heart the book doesn't want us to think about the morality of radicalism, because that question has already been answered. Instead it wants us to think about the changes between the sixties and seventies and the 2000s. Then, we had radicals who would fight for a cause and set out on their own adventures and try to live free. Now, we have cynics who'll sell out as soon as is humanly possible. Then, we had the Beach Boys. Now, we fetishize the Beach Boys (and the rest of 60s and 70s pop music), because instead of being good consumers, we're really bad consumers (????)

There is a lot to like about the book, too. The sheer breadth of the themes destroy the limits of contemporary literature; you just can't write a book about this stuff that is also just a love story--so the love story is overwhelmed by the story about a chemical company and an adbuster. There is a good depiction of the slide from Flower Power Hope and Smiling to internet cynicism and merely symbolic protest of the "being sad is subversive" or "free yourself from your mind-chains" type. There's good stuff about how nostalgia is merely personal, never political. There's a hint that the main characters' real crime wasn't accidentally killing a woman so much as it was giving birth to the idiocies of the late twentieth century.

But really all of this is overwhelmed by the love story. *EtheD* is somehow sprawling (so many strands! so much jumping around in time!) and obsessively limited (it's really about true love). It's both perfectly historical (seventies communes! noughties vinyl collectors!) and entirely unrealistic. It's perfectly formed (the characters all have their own convincing PoV; the reveals are spaced out) and a complete mess (the multiple reveals have nothing to do with each other). It tries to write about group dynamics and historical change by focusing on individual identities and family relationships.

Spiotta tried to do the impossible here: write a novel in a contemporary form that didn't stick to domestic/romantic/existential maunderings. Since *Stone Arabia* is about rock music and siblings, I suspect she tried to do the same thing there. Perhaps she pulled it off? I'll give it a try.

* That's not true, I know exactly why: it's a perfectly generic novel about something cool and interesting. There's a place for that. More often than I will admit, I love novels that are about something in which I'm interested, even if they're really mediocre in every other way.

Michelle says

I bought a copy of *Eat The Document* after finishing *Stone Arabia*, also by Dana Spiotta. I guess now, I'll

have to buy her other book, *Lightning Fields*, because they are both pretty excellent. *Eat The Document* is primarily the story of Mary Whittaker, alias Caroline, alias Louise Barrot, who turns into a fugitive after an act of protest against the violence of the Vietnam war ends badly. Starting with her love for Bobby, another tester, and chronicling her journey to eventually become a completely new person, she is the focus. Of course, one protagonist would be boring, so we must also meet Nash, an older hippie who runs an independent bookstore called Prairie Fire that caters to tester youth and their forums. Henry, who owns the bookstore, suffers from the effects of Agent Orange exposure, and terrible flashbacks even with medication. Miranda, who desperately wants to make the world better, but has difficulty finding any real action to take aside from berating Nash for drinking Coke and thereby supporting the big corporations. And Jason, Mary/Louise's fifteen year-old son, who is immersed in cult classic music, and explains how to really be an aficionado. Of course, Jason is getting a little suspicious about his mother's lack of a past, especially when she starts to tell weird stories like about the time she met Beach Boy Dennis Wilson at a bar and bought him a drink.

I really enjoyed reading this novel, it went fast, but I felt like I could really savor some of the best prose, as Mary considers how easy it is to force yourself to commit a falsehood to memory. It can become easy to forget something real, or to remember something fake, with time. Again, Spiotta is delving into themes of documentation, memory, and falsehood, as well as, pop-culture and media that bring a bit of edge to this novel. And, as someone who attended a couple of SDS meetings in underground, I think she pretty well nailed the tenor and tempo of "facilitated" discussions.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

1966

Remember 1966? Neither does Dana Spiotta, though/because it was the year she was born.

It was the year the Beach Boys released "*Pet Sounds*" and started the "*Smile Sessions*". It was the year Bob Dylan undertook a second tour with an electric band, which was filmed in D. A. Pennebaker's documentary "*Eat the Document*".

I'd probably recommend this novel to you if you had the boxset of the "*Pet Sounds Sessions*" or you'd spent half a lifetime trying to get a bootleg of the Dylan doco or you'd heard of Skip Spence's solo album "*Oar*" or you had both Love albums or you have two or three Richie Unterberger books (especially "*Unknown Legends of Rock and Roll*"). In other words, I'd probably recommend it to Paul Bryant.

I'd probably recommend it to you if you were interested in alternative politics in the late 60's and early 70's, as well as the 90's and 00's, and how the two periods compared and contrasted.

Juxtaposition Occupied by Two Generations

My chief reservation is how the book is structured and whether it works.

It starts well with a woman, Mary, on the run in 1972. She had been politically active, and has done something with her partner that means the FBI is after them. Despite their relationship, they decide that they have to split and go their separate ways.

This is a fascinating premise, but by page 20, with no elaboration on what had happened to make her a

fugitive, we're reading the journal of a 15 year old boy in 1998.

This is the story of two quite different generations of alternative American culture.

At first it seems as if they have just been jammed together. Only in the last 20 pages or so are any connections made explicit. If you've been patient enough to last, the novel becomes quite poignant. However, it's a big ask to make us wade and wait through the intervening narrative.

This is a Post-Modernist narrative style that I've had to confront before, especially with respect to David Mitchell's *"Cloud Atlas"*. I don't object to juxtaposition, but I do want to see connections or links emerge, sooner rather than later. I'm not used to waiting for 250 pages to see the light, although that might just reflect that I'm not a seasoned crime reader, and therefore am not used to deferring pleasure to the end, when everything is revealed.

Je Suis Mary

To be fair, the other reason I experienced difficulty getting into this novel was that I started reading it the day before the Charlie Hebdo killings.

Little did I know that this book would explore comparable actions in the United States in 1972.

It seemed strange to be reading a piece of fiction when live terrorism and its consequences were all over the TV.

The day after the Paris sieges ended, I was able to resume reading the novel, and ironically I think this serendipity made for a more interesting read. Most of the quotes in my updates reflect parallels that came to me, mainly because I was consuming Charlie Hebdo almost 24 hours a day.

The difference between the two experiences is that, with Paris, it's inevitable that any white reader in a Western nation would look on the protagonists in the drama as terrorists who had no political cause. Certainly, they wouldn't identify with them.

I've read many times that, if they hadn't chosen to kill the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists, they would have chosen somebody else to kill. This point is reinforced by the fact that the third killer attacked a kosher supermarket. No matter what your views about the attack on Charlie Hebdo, the attack on the Jewish supermarket just seemed gratuitous and racist. It made it even less credible to understand the attacks as politically motivated.

On the other hand, I wonder how we would have reacted if the terrorists had been Chechnayans or Ukrainians, and the attack had been on Moscow. Would we have been more prepared to consider claims of political motivation and legitimacy?

The 60's Generation

Just as Islam is a broad church (if that's not the wrong word to use with respect to their beliefs), the 60's counter-culture housed a lot of different movements. Very few were intrinsically violent or motivated to achieve their goals by violent means.

However, because the movements coincided with the Vietnam War, their target, the military-industrial complex, was busy demonstrating just how violent and aggressive it could be. It was easy for the counter-

culture to adopt an antagonistic stance towards both the government and mainstream, straight society.

The novel deals with the aftermath of a politically motivated bombing of the private residences of executives of large American companies who supplied the tools of chemical warfare to the military.

The protagonists have tried democratic and peaceful means to end the war and brutality. However, all of their idealism has proved fruitless:

"We wanted to do something. There had been years of peaceful efforts. Things escalated. It was an act of desperation."

Suddenly, it seemed that the only way to achieve something was to embrace violence:

"The question is, do we want to leave action to the brutes of the world?...I believe we must fight back, or we will feel shame all our lives. We, the privileged, are more obligated. It is a moral duty to do something, however imperfect."

These are citizens taking up arms against their government and the corporate interests they represent.

The 90's Generation

Although current personal politics seems to be riddled with libertarianism and anarchism (view spoiler), American politics seems to have come to a grinding halt.

The two primary political parties might be quite different. However, both accommodate some level of Left/Right perspective that seems to have incapacitated any new initiative aimed at achieving anything but steady as she goes management of the economy on behalf of its post-Global Financial Crisis stakeholders. Either way, we seem to be stuck with the economic system that we've got, as sick as it might be.

Spiotta doesn't expressly endorse or condemn either generation of political activist or strategy.

The 90's generation, however, is prone to empty narcissism and social isolation:

"We exist because of suburbia. Suburbia is a freak's dreamworld, a world..with no interference. A place where you can listen to your LP's for hours on end. You can live in your room, your own rent-free corner of the universe, and create a world of pleasure and interest entirely centered on yourself and your interior aesthetic and logic. Suburbia is where you can pursue your individuality..."

Even the few (some younger, some older) people who are still politically active are sceptical about the efficacy of their own action groups:

"The point isn't to win. They'll never win, of course. They just make persuasive and powerful the beauty of their opposition."

The result is almost solipsistic. The government pretends to govern, and we pretend to protest:

"It is not so much that we do direct action to get a certain result...we do an action for the action itself. Our act is the end, the point."

There is no goal other than pointless activity.

If You Can't Achieve Your Goal, You Can Still Go All the Way

In contrast, some of the previous generation felt compelled to take up arms:

"There was a moment, a very clear moment, when I knew not only that it might happen but that it would definitely happen. And I was still willing to do it. And not because I really believed we would change anything for the better. I did it as a testament to my own certainty, as a test of my own conviction. I needed to prove to myself I could go all the way."

There came a point when you had to test your faith. Stop complaining and do something about it, even if you might fail. In the end, they decided to act out of desperation. They failed, but at least they acted, and having acted, they became fugitives.

They only stop running when they encountered the next generation (view spoiler), which responds:

"She's a revolutionary. She's a fugitive. She's a liar. She's a killer."

In the end, even the Beach Boys cease to provide any satisfaction to either generation:

"As more time goes by, I discover other things to fill that now vacated space...other interests and thoughts, some even unrelated to vintage music, have settled in, even flourished."

This could be the Incandenza family from *"Infinite Jest"*, had everybody turned on to politics and music instead of tennis and drugs.

Same outcome though: a book. Not a bad one at that, but not a great one either.

Meanwhile, across the globe, another generation needs to prove they can go all the way. And we watch them on TV. That's entertainment. The Entertainment. Ironically.

SOUNDTRACK:

The Byrds - "Eight Miles High" (Columbia Records version)

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

The Byrds - "Eight Miles High" (RCA Studios version)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqD_f...

Arguably better than the later Columbia Records version!

The Byrds - "Eight Miles High" (Live at Fillmore East on 9/23/1970)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ymkB...>

National Educational Television taped a show at Fillmore East on September 23, 1970 for broadcast. It featured The Byrds, Elvin Bishop Group, Albert King, Sha Na Na, Van Morrison, The Allman Brothers, and Joe's Lights. The show, "Welcome To Fillmore East" was aired on WNDT channel 13 in NYC and simulcast on WNEW-FM radio on October 10, 1970 at 10:00 PM in the NYC area. A thirty minute clip from that show of the Allmans can be seen on YouTube.

Husker Du - "Eight Miles High"

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

Arguably better than the Byrds' versions, even if they hail from the 80's!

Isabelle says

A quick two-day read; predictable yet well done. Nothing was wrong with the book: decent characters, an interesting premise (60's political activists gone underground after one of their protests turns deadly... good headline stuff!) Nothing was exceptionally great either... I read this in the airports, between planes and conferences... It was good enough for me to want to go back to immediately during downtimes but not good enough that I would hesitate to close the book and proceed with my day. Is there such a thing as a utilitarian book?

Violet wells says

If you garnered your notion of the USA solely from literature you'd probably end up thinking anti-establishment terrorism was a widespread phenomenon. You might even feel Edgar Hoover wasn't such a nutjob as he appears. The other novel I'm currently reading City on Fire takes up this theme as have countless others I've read - books by DeLillo, Roth, Pynchon, Letham, Franzen spring immediately to mind. In fact, there are probably more novels on this theme than deal with the infinitely more influential and important civil rights movement. Perhaps because most American writers are white. Anyway, this is just an observation.

Eat the Document introduces us to two young lovers who are sick and tired of the Vietnam war and the ineffectual protests. They decide to take meaningful action by planting bombs in the homes of the various chairmen of culpable corporations. There are four narrative threads. The Mary thread provides the novel with its narrative drive and is the most successful. After the bombings Mary and Bobby have to separate and change identity. The Mary thread is a compelling dramatization of a woman forced to change her identity and live on the fringes of conventional society. The Henry thread, there to provide an outlet for a more obscure philosophising on the theme, for me was the least successful, but it doesn't occupy much space so can easily be forgiven. Then there's the Jason thread which takes the form of the journal of an alienated teenager most of whose rebellion is expressed in the form of a wilfully obscure music taste. (The role popular music plays in revolt is a constant and edifying theme). Finally, there's the Nash thread. The link between Mary, Jason and Nash will be cleverly kept a mystery until late in the novel.

Lots to love and admire about this novel. She's been compared to DeLillo and though her writing falls well short of his inspired prose there are similarities, most notably in its depictions of the extreme forms feelings

of alienation can precipitate.

Brien Palmer says

This one crept up on me as I read it. It starts simple, and then moves back and forth in time sketching out the narrative and the characters. One of the best examples of "show, don't tell" that I've ever come across. Maybe my interest in the old 60's romantic revolutionaries flavored my initial attraction, I don't know....But before I knew it, I was drawn in--caring about the characters. And it used just the right level of Mimento-like flashes to pull you along without losing you in excessive complexities of detail. I would love to read more by THIS author.

Adam says

This book could be intimidating, addressing the cultural division between the 60's and the 90's, the failures of leftist protest in America, cultural obsession, and a critique of an overly medicated and corporatized society. A book handling that sounds bloated and unapproachable, but not in Spiotta's hands, her vision is almost clinical but somehow remains human. She is despairing but understanding and her characters live and breathe and don't exist to provide punch lines. Her understanding of record geek obsession shows her has a true audiophile, I can recognize a music geek, her placement of Captain Beefheart, Skip Spence, Beach Boys, the cult band Love, and Funkadelic's beautiful and desolate "Maggot Brain" in the text in ways that are more than name dropping show her capability to critique and analyze our culture.

Ubik 2.0 says

Vite in fuga

C'è un filo rosso che, lungo il XX° secolo, collega anche spiritualmente movimenti, gruppi e comunità della controcultura americana, alcuni ad impronta più pacifista, utopista e libertaria altri decisamente meno restii all'azione diretta anche violenta, benché si abbia spesso l'impressione che tale opposizione, a differenza che in Europa, non si illuda mai di poter sovvertire l'ordine costituito ma si esprima piuttosto nell'atto dimostrativo, liberatorio, esistenziale.

Proprio dall'urgenza interiore, dall'estemporaneità e impulsività del gesto, dall'assemblaggio degli indignati in piccoli gruppi isolati e mal collegati, nascono figure e situazioni che la narrativa e il cinema ci hanno spesso presentato: il fuggiasco, il personaggio dal passato oscuro e autocensurato, la ricostruzione di nuove identità, la propensione a spostarsi in continuazione tagliando ogni volta i legami, favoriti anche dalla varietà sul territorio americano di luoghi e cittadine marginali, dove è facile nascondersi e sostentarsi per anni o decenni, senza permesso di lavoro, con documenti di identità finti ed un passato facilmente reinventabile sul quale nessuno ti interroga, soprattutto se mantieni un basso profilo.

E' in quest'ambito che si colloca il sincero romanzo di Dana Spiotta, tradotto col titolo "Vivere un segreto" molto più sdolcinato e ordinario del tagliente originale "Eat the Document"; né l'edizione Mondadori si limita a questa scelta mediocre, esibendo nel risvolto di copertina un'esplicita raffica di spoiler su diversi snodi del racconto, in parte intuibili dal lettore più avvezzo ma che non fa mai piacere ritrovarsi spiazzati

prima di pagina uno...! Chissà perché poi?

Questo lungo preambolo è giustificato dal fatto che il contesto rappresenta l'elemento di maggior interesse del romanzo, poiché la trama narrativa è di per sé esile e i rapporti fra i personaggi piuttosto convenzionali. Gli stessi protagonisti, forse proprio perché banalizzati dagli spoiler sopra citati, sembrano disegnati in modo superficiale e appena abbozzato; meglio alcune figure di contorno, con una menzione particolare per il giovane Jason e il suo maniacale rapporto con i demo musicali, dei Beach Boys in particolare, tanto da avermi indotto a riesumare Pet Sounds (1966) dal mio archivio musicale.

ferrigno says

cri?i (ant. cri?e) s. f. [dal lat. *crisis*, gr. κρίσις «scelta, decisione, fase decisiva di una malattia», der. di κρίνω «distinguere, giudicare»].

Mi piacciono i romanzi in cui l'autore descrive personaggi colti in un momento di crisi. Durante una crisi si vaglia la situazione in vista di una scelta difficile: la crisi è sempre un buon motore della narrazione.

In Vivere un segreto c'è una donna che vive con suo figlio. La gente sa poco di lei; il lettore sa poco di lei. Non ha amici, passato, radici, famiglia.

Questa donna custodisce un segreto che ha quasi rimosso, ma adesso è costretta a fare delle scelte, per cui ripercorre gli anni in cui accadde Quella Cosa e il mosaico, gradualmente, si ricompone.

A questo schema va aggiunta una variabile impazzita, un punto di vista diverso: il figlio adolescente.

Cosa mi è piaciuto? Il confronto tra la madre e la ragazza che era stata. Il racconto induce a riflettere sulle dinamiche che trasformano un giovane avventuroso, idealista, imprevedibile, folle, in un adulto. Leggendo, mi è venuta spesso in mente una foto di mia madre sedicenne: indossa un vestito anni cinquanta un po' corto, i capelli neri sono scompigliati e lo sguardo, un sorriso malizioso, è puntato sulla camera (questa ragazza ha occhi pericolosi, mi disse un mio amico anni fa: non l'aveva riconosciuta).

Mi è piaciuto il viaggio nelle ossessioni del figlio adolescente, che ho seguito passo passo grazie a youtube.

Ma forse il cuore del romanzo consiste nel confronto dialettico tra la dimensione politica della vita negli anni settanta e quella individuale della vita contemporanea. Il titolo originale -Eat the document- fa venire in mente delle spie in fuga costrette a far sparire un documento segretissimo. Questa componente c'è senz'altro, però c'è anche quella intima e interiore suggerita dal titolo italiano.

Il romanzo mi è piaciuto molto; a volte i personaggi tornano a trovarmi, come viene a trovarmi la colonna sonora del figlio adolescente che è diventata anche mia.

E la foto di mia madre è un po' più misteriosa, e inquietante.

Prime impressioni:

«[...] chi stiamo prendendo in giro? Noi esistiamo grazie alla periferia ["suburbia" nel testo]. La periferia è il mondo dei sogni di ogni freak, un mondo di stanze extra al piano di sopra e lunghi, pigri pomeriggi privi di interferenze. Un posto dove tu puoi ascoltare i tuoi LP per ore e ore. Puoi vivere nella tua stanza, il tuo angolo gratuito di universo, e creare un mondo di piacere e interessi interamente centrato su te stesso e la tua

logica ed estetica interiore. La periferia è dove puoi inseguire la tua individualità, non importa quanto rancida o recondita: le grandi villette con garage da tre automobili possono ospitare infinite eccentricità.»

(traduzione mia e, ragazzi, che fatica rendere questo inglese secco ed efficace, l'italiano non ha gli strumenti adatti).

In questa "suburbia" anonima che non è la periferia quasi sovietica delle nostre città ma il sobborgo della media borghesia americana -villette indipendenti con l'antistante, proverbiale prato tosato- in questa suburbia si muovono i personaggi della Spiotta, vividi come fossero ripresi da telecamere nascoste.

Eat the document ("Vivere un segreto" nell'edizione italiana) parla di una latitante e del segreto che si porta appresso, di adolescenti che vivono reclusi nella loro stanza ad ascoltare la loro musica, di attivisti o media-attivisti o web-attivisti, della relazione uomo-donna, delle ingiustizie della società, degli anni settanta e degli anni duemila e -diavolo- parla di un sacco di cose questo romanzo. Tutte cose che sembrano contenute dal romanzo in modo assolutamente naturale ma che a lettura finita ESPLODONO! tanto che mi chiedo come diavolo abbia fatto la Spiotta a infilare tutto in questo libretto. I frammenti mi frullano ancora in testa provocando un persistente blocco del recensore come non lo avevo ancora conosciuto fino ad oggi. Non riesco a focalizzare un singolo personaggio o tematica o qualunque altro genere di appiglio e ciò spiega la citazione (non metto mai citazioni), la nota del traduttore (suburbia/periferia) e la confusione che ne segue.

Allargo le braccia sconsolato in segno di resa.

Questo romanzo è più vasto delle sue 304 pagine.
