

# A spectre is haunting Asia: the spectre of 1970s pop legends.

Dissident books, New York

## The Ghost of Neil Diamond by David Milnes

My rating: 5 of 5 stars

*Why do we review books from other publishers? Because we like to, that's why! There are a lot of good books out there, and we think you should know about them.*

*The Ghost of Neil Diamond* is the best novel I've read in years. I've not experienced fiction like it since *Suite Francaise* by Irene Nemirovsky.

Novelists can succeed at their craft four ways: storytelling, architecture, painting, and poetry. You almost certainly know what I mean by "storytelling." Great storytelling is exactly that: the ability to convey a tale that holds the reader's interest. It can be a story of high-school angst or interstellar war. Regardless, the writer spins a yarn that keeps your attention, one that you're glad you made the time to read. Architecture refers to novel's intricacy, staging, and development. *War and Peace*, a novel I don't like, is impressive in its sheer breadth, the swath of time, space, and people it covers. While the grandeur of its architecture is undeniable, its storytelling is abysmal. It's a hideously boring book. A novel doesn't have to be epic in scale to exhibit fine architecture. While a book might cover a single day spent alone in a protagonist's life, through its exploration of the character's actions, memories, and psyche it could be as vast as *The Odyssey*.

A novelist can paint portraits, scenes, and images so striking that it doesn't matter whether the novel's story and architecture are weak. Jim Thompson's *The Grifters* and *The Getaway* are like that. As a stories go, they're not terribly interesting, but Thompson wields his pen-brush with such artistry that it doesn't occur to you until later that the plots were pretty threadbare.

Poetry and painting are closely related, but not the same. "Painting" for a novelist is the creation of singular, beautiful, or shocking people, places, or events through words. The word choice itself doesn't have to be remarkable. With simple, unassuming brushstrokes, the writer can limn memorable language-paintings. Charles Bukowski was like that.

It's very rare to find writers who can imbue their prose with poetry. And by poetry I don't mean sonnets and the like. I mean language that conveys that which can only be communicated through words. Plenty can be told through multiple media: books into plays into movies into comics into musicals... Poetry is different. It expresses experiences—layered, ephemeral moments—that are language's sole domain.

A few rare novels excel in all four categories. *The Ghosts of Neil Diamond*, like *Suite Francaise*, is one such book.

Honestly, I had a good feeling about *Ghost* right from its opening:

Amen to all sorrows.

*With a few splashes of cold water Neil washed away his sins. He watched them slip down the plughole, one by wretched one. The wrongdoings and wrong turns, the bad debts and bad memories sank beyond the U-bend, and his soul lay empty and prepared. A whiff reached him from the urinals, the stale reminder of that catalogue of men who had fallen short just this point—the last call, the swan song. Well, forget them, he decided. They had their lives and this is mine. He lifted his aching head to the mirror. This time. Maybe this time.*

As Sinatra once said, “If you don’t like that, you don’t like ice cream.” It’s as simple a scene as one could imagine: a man washing his face in a public lavatory. But the painting (the meticulous details, the imagery) coupled with the poetry (character’s inner dialogue and the artistry by which it’s expressed) is exquisite.

“So what’s it about?” you ask. One the one hand, it’s “a dark comedy,” as its promotional bookmarks advertise. And an ingenious one at that. Set roughly ten years ago, it chronicles (figurative) death and rebirth of Neil Atherton, a middle-aged English folk musician. Well, more like a former folk musician. Atherton has spent most of his life touring the folk circuit, “the shabby pub rooms, the British Legion Clubs, cellar bars, back rooms, church halls,” struggling, waiting, plying and honing his art, waiting for the folk’s revival. But sadly, unlike rockabilly, big band, and ska, there’s been no folk revival. Folk died years ago, is still dead, and almost certainly will remain dead. (Now, to all you hipsters who are about to write angry emails about how there’s a vibrant folk scene in your town, chill. I’m sure there are some swell singer-songwriters warbling in basements near and far. But unlike the hip-hoppers, their music ain’t paying their bills. Day jobs at offices, libraries, and department stores are.) Neil’s wife, Angel, in a last-ditch effort to escape destitution, takes up a lucrative job selling shipping space in Hong Kong, dragging Atherton along.

In Hong Kong Atherton transforms from anti-establishment, gypsy troubadour to a kept man. The thing is, Mrs. Atherton isn’t so keen to keep her man. She’s taken to Hong Kong’s restlessness, ruthless meritocracy, and itches to trade Atherton in for a newer, sleeker model. Jobless and purposeless, Atherton keeps his self-esteem on life-support by singing karaoke, much to unsympathetic wifey’s disgust.

One night, a local shady businessman, Elbert Chan, catches Atherton performing “Reason to Believe” as Neil Diamond. Chan, sensing a hot-property ripe for the plucking, gives Neil his business card. “If you want to fix up some dates, some bookings,” he offers, “just call or stop by... I think you’re terrific. Terrific. I really do. Any time. Open door. Perhaps I can be of service.”

(Minor point: I can find no mention of Neil Diamond performing “Reason to Believe” under its Wikipedia page or that of its composer, [Tim Hardin](#). What does that mean? Any number of things. Maybe Diamond did cover it. Wikipedia is far from infallible. Maybe the author made a mistake; certainly not an important one. Perhaps this is an instance of a novelist rewiring reality ever-so slightly to fit better his novel’s architecture.)

What's Atherton's reaction to such a promising overturn? Disinterest, of course. But Angel (now that's an interesting name choice) pushes him to take up Chan's offer. ("Losers can't be choosers, Neil.") And thus begins Atherton's initiation into Neil Diamond's world, or more accurately, the world of Neil Diamond impersonation. Initiation to a literal cult of personality. Suffice to say nothing is as it seems, or as Atherton hopes.

Chan becomes Atherton's second wife. The relationship isn't intimate or loving, yet it's very sexual in that it's driven by lust: specifically, lust for recognition and money. (Neil *Diamond*.) Like a shrewd shrew, Chan alternately encourages and belittles Atherton, ignores and lavishes attention, knocks him down only to build him up again.

*Ghost*, though quite original, follows the noir trope of the basically innocent man suddenly swept into a strange and corrupt world. Although there's no gangsters or violence, the underworld pulsates just below the story's surface (forgive the pun).

I could reveal more of the novel's masterful architecture, but that would be unfair to you. If a family tells you they're making a pilgrimage to visit a beautiful cathedral, you don't show them photographs of its interior. No, let the church's stained glass, carvings, and sheer vastness astonish them. And at the risk of sounding effusive, you should make a pilgrimage to *The Ghost of Neil Diamond*. It's that superb.

*Ghost* is about a lot more than one man's venture into show-business's fringes. It tackles authenticity versus imitation, generations of duplication, identity, art versus commerce, representation, and transformation. ([Andy Warhol](#) would've loved this book.) It's not for nothing that *Ghost* is set in the Far East, where factories churn out products originally made in the West. The output's quality varies from shoddy knockoffs to substantial improvements:

*A beautiful Chinese girl came on, dressed in a silvery sixties slip that was little more than a nightdress... She delivered a flawless Downtown. Petula Clark had to stay on the opposite screen the whole song. But Petula Clark was ignored, irrelevant. She'd been upstaged. Against her beautiful Chinese impersonator, Clark—in her mid-thirties, in dowdy black and white, 1965, couldn't compete. Not even with her one and only British hit. There was a discipline about this girl's performance that was unsettling to Neil... It was like watching a mirror image to Clark, except that she was so much prettier and sexier and more exotic.*

Oh, and if that's not enough, *The Ghost of Neil Diamond* is also about culture clashes; performing; music; ambition; success; failure; desperation; home and homeless; music; sex; desire; flatulence...

*When he looked down, everywhere he looked, the thighs were trapped under the overflowing buttocks of European, Australian and American men, in their Thai silk suits or linen chinos... And trapped deep and tight between those overflowing buttocks were arseholes that had farted and shat on long haul flights to and from every capital in the world. Arseholes that had shat in Hyatts all around Asia, broken wind in conference rooms scented with rosewater, in Macau and Shenzhen and Guangzhou.*

If you can't see the lyricism in farting—although, hey, passing gas is as much a part of life as work, eating, and sex—savor this passage from late in the novel, when Atherton and Chan have a business breakfast at a swank hotel's cafe. Atherton contemplates the restaurant's stunning vista:

*Now, sipping his second glass of coffee, Neil came to understand what gave the view its power. It wasn't just the beautiful panorama itself, with all its gliding reflections and deceptions. It was the silence of the scene beyond the glass. The silence underscored it all, as it were. The wash in the harbor was heavy from the weight of traffic—the ferries, barges, crane barges and liners—yet they all went by without a sound, not a hundred yards away. In the closeness of the sea traffic to the massive glass walls there was a danger, a recklessness, but it was suppressed, silenced, there was not a word about that. The risk had been taken and forgotten, had sunk to the bottom of the sea.*

Like the hotel, Atherton seizes Hong Kong's spirit of risk and takes a gamble, perhaps the first real one he's ever wagered. Does he win? That's for you to find out. But *Ghost* itself takes a gamble—a story about an English folkie in Hong Kong impersonating Neil Diamond? *Really?*—and it pays off brilliantly.

Can I find any faults in *Ghost*? A few, but again, like Sinatra said, too few to mention. I would've liked a blurb about David Milnes: who he is, his past, and how come he writes Goddamn good.

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