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Memoirist of mediocre fame, Charles Homar has a problem: his bride-to-be, Gillian Lee, has nixed their nuptials and fled to the high seas in search of a legendary giant squid, unleashing an unholy heart wreck upon him. In a hell-bent effort to prove his mettle as an American male and win back Gillian's affections, Charlie crisscrosses the nation seeking counsel, confronting creatures both mythic and real—Bigfoot on the Canadian border, space aliens in Seattle, a professional bodybuilder with Asiatic sex slaves in suburban New Jersey, the demons dancing a rumba inside his own heart—and then writing about his travails every week for a popular slick magazine. Echoing a narrative tradition that includes *Don Quixote* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*, William Giraldi's debut novel is a love story of linguistic bravado that explores American excess, the diaphanous line between fiction and fact, and what desperate men and women will do to one another.

Busy Monsters Details

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From Reader Review *Busy Monsters* for online ebook

Leah Lucci says

When I first cracked the book and read the bizarro writing style, my socks were charmed all the way off. I was barefoot and loving it. After a while, though, the charm wears down.

The book's conceit is that every chapter is a memoir short story (kind of like David Sedaris), in chronological installments that combine to create a novel. Each chapter takes place after the release of the last chapter, so people are reading and responding to each previous installment when they encounter him. (The stories of Sherlock Holmes ran a bit this way, too, with Holmes' fame coming from the previous installments of Watson's diary.)

The story itself, which is actually kind of secondary to the bizarreness of the plot mechanism and writing style, is that the protagonist's fiancée leaves him to hunt down the elusive Kraken (giant squid), with which she's been obsessed since childhood. She does this right before the wedding, leaving the protagonist in a lurch.

After a stint in jail (it's a whole thing I'm not going into here), the protagonist emerges and decides what he needs to do is bag himself a monster to show her that he's passionate, manly, and into her interests. He encounters a strangely racistly-portrayed (sp?) black man and goes after Bigfoot.

The Bigfoot thing doesn't pan out. He then:

- Goes off in search of a UFO with a corrupt midget (??)
- Watches a boxing match between a Jewish guy and a giant lesbian (???)
- Visits a body builder with a few \$1k/hour Asian prostitutes (????)
- Goes to his dad's funeral (?????)
- Stays at a haunted hotel (??????)
- Reunites with his girlfriend in a totally anticlimactic way (???????)

As I mentioned earlier, I didn't perceive the plot to be the point. Structurally interesting. I enjoyed the ride, but was ultimately disappointed in the ending. Started out as about four stars ("I am so charmed! this is so fun!") but wound up around two ("why is this still going? what is the point of this damn thing?"), which averaged out to three.

Mac says

The narration of “*Busy Monsters*” is an achievement worth bragging about. Not only is the voice of Charles Homar immensely entertaining – enjoying himself somewhere with Ignatius Reilly and Raoul Duke and H. I. McDunnough – but it’s sustained incredibly well. Giraldi has essentially sprinted through a marathon course, and for that he deserves a great deal of credit.

But the success of the book is pretty much skin-deep. It’s funny – laugh-out-loud funny, another achievement – but not terribly much more than that. And if all it wanted was to be funny, then power to it – but clearly, particularly in the “Interlude” chapter, the narrative is reaching for something a bit deeper than a farce about chasing mythical monsters to find love. Reaching, that is, but never grasping honest emotions.

The book is aware of its flaws – characters will outright tell the narrator what’s wrong with certain scenes, certain discussions (there’s a handy gimmick for this that helps make the metafiction not as annoying as it could be), but all this really does is serve as a cop-out for avoiding honesty. If the book weren’t clearly trying to achieve that honesty, it wouldn’t be such a problem, but since it seems clear that it was attempting something beyond a funny story about chasing a squid, it falls short of the mark.

To phrase it more simply: Funny, but what’s the point?

Tom says

Busy Monsters, William Giraldi's first novel, has just about everything a reader wants: highwire prose, a loopy, picaresque of a plot, larger than life characters, and a kind of sweetness that you find only when the writer is as enamored of the characters as he hopes the reader might. Not to mention the novel weighs in well on some salient issues of the day: American excesses, the uproar over fake memoirs, among them.

And name me a literary novel that features giant squid, UFO hunters and Bigfoot? But don't be surprised if the busy monsters of the title that matter most are the ones confronted in the mind of the central character, the lovably logorrheic Charles Homar.

I might be biased because Billy's a friend, but I don't think we're going to see a debut novel quite like this for a while. A few years ago Julianna Baggott called Billy the best writer in America without a book. Billy has gladly shed that title and, with Busy Monsters, is likely to be granted some new ones in its place.

Alena says

Maybe 3.5 stars for sheer brilliance.

I am so jealous of Giraldi's brilliant humor that I spent the first 100 pages of this book just laughing and shaking my head. But then it got old. By the end I was fighting my way through.

Charlie has been jilted by his fiancée and sets off on a cross-country quest to prove his mettle. Along the way he lands in jail, hunts Sasquatch and generally pisses people off. He's a memoirist so he's writing about all these adventures, naming names and revealing his inner-most thoughts. This is a brilliant device as it allows Charlie (really Giraldi) to break the fourth wall and speak directly to us, "dear reader."

In the beginning, I really appreciated Charlie's snarky attitude. With his mean spirit and graphic language, I clearly understood this is not a book for all tastes, but I thought Charlie was a smart loser I could love -- "Yes, this was middle-class melodrama, folks. Just think how much melodrama sounds like melanoma and you'll begin to get the picture."

Unfortunately, about half way through, he just grew tedious. I started to think Giraldi might appeal to me more as a short story writer because I was no longer rooting for him to win back Gillian (off on her own quest for a giant squid).

Giraldi does ultimately rally, providing an ending both satisfying and fitting. And, as a picaresque, this

works. The satire is heavy handed, but "in the name of love" is a pretty intense topic so I get it. Maybe it's just not the genre for me.

Christopher DeWan says

Never have I worked so hard to learn about a narrator for whom I cared so little.

Amelia says

If you picked up this book at the library, based on its graphic cover and comparison to Vonnegut, like I have... put it back down. The main character/narrator is a pretentious ass-hat who has seemingly no idea how relationships work. It's the kind of guy you turn down at a bar, who then follows you around the rest of the evening, not close enough for you to say anything, but definitely on purpose to make you uncomfortable. The way he talks about his fiancée will make most women's skin crawl. The first time they meet, could not stop rolling my eyes at his tired pick-up-lines and feigned chivalry. I can't believe this was published. Put it down and walk away, confident in knowing you are not missing anything.

Heirloom Books says

Well, I'm gonna try to do a good job on this review, so I'll start off slowly: (1) The author is obviously extremely gifted with the written word. Stylistically, he's no slouch. In fact, he's a riot. I'm jealous, frankly. (2) The plot is fun, engaging, bright with just the right percentage of the absurd. It feels like an intellectual's version of a Dane Cook stand-up routine...

Oh, yeah? You caught that jab? Okay, so you may be getting the picture. Regardless of how intellectual the content, the sentiment is wrought with paralyzingly male insecurity, chauvinism (what's the difference, eh?), and a maddening lack of real earnestness. No matter how hilarious the comedian, if you can't recognize or sense his or her pain underneath it all--you know that human feeling called Life--the hilarity is tempered by the taste of metal, specifically tin. So. While I understand that the dust-ye-shoulder-off irony of the prose is intentional and even brilliantly so, it still ends hollow. We've all suffered a broken heart and all the subsequent hopes of retrieval and redemption, post mess, but I still couldn't connect to this tongue-in-cheek master of the wronged. A quote that helped clinch my verdict: "A man is not better than biology." Ok, sure. I'm with you. Females, males, sex, nature, I get it. BUT when that is one of the most heartfelt and true lines of a book, that's a problem. I believe that a man CAN be better than biology. Isn't that what literature is about? Transcendence? Betterment?

Basically, the upshot is that this book was exactly what I needed after a long streak of reading almost exclusively Hemingway, Steinbeck, DeLillo, Crevel, you know--the guys who make you want to kill yourself because you're thinking so hard about the Big Stuff. It was like smoking a joint and watching Comedy Central and the Discovery Channel on loop for three days. Awesome to a point and then mind numbing and then annoying. Then awesome again, in afterthought.

Give it a go. Why the hell not?

Ron Charles says

“Busy Monsters” may be the best literary present you could bring to a brainy guy’s bachelor party. It boasts lots of gonzo adventure, wacky sex and an endorsement by Harold Bloom that’s so pompous I can’t tell if it’s part of the joke. No matter: William Giraldi’s cocky first novel is a romance for real men — real nerdy men willing to fight for a woman’s heart. Here’s a book to help you celebrate “the stimulating incipience of romance, the excitement of possibility, of being rescued from the abscess of lonesomeness and having someone to share your hydrogen with.” Got that?

And who can resist an opening line like this? “Stunned by love and some would say stupid from too much sex, I decided I had to drive down South to kill a man.” So begins the testimony of Charles Homar, a “memoirist of mediocre fame.” But he’s being too modest. A whirling dervish of classical and pop allusions, Charles thinks of himself as a reincarnated Templar Knight, and he chronicles his bizarre life in the pages of the New Nation Weekly, which sounds something like the New Yorker: “political assessments, persnickety film reviews, poems as space filler, fiction by the same six people, some fine cartoons, and, of course, the fanatical personal pieces penned by me.” Everywhere Charles goes — and he goes some extremely remote places — people recognize him and beg him not to mention them in his next article. No dice.

The 10 freaky chapters that make up “Busy Monsters” describe Charles’s efforts to win back his errant fiancée, the gorgeous Gillian — “as if the word gustatory had grown legs and got a dress.” She’s vanished just weeks before their wedding. It turns out she never loved him as much as she loved the giant squid. Snooping around her abandoned computer, Charles discovers that she’s run off with a marine biologist on a three-month voyage to capture one of those mysterious deep-sea creatures alive. Driven crazy by the thought of “Gillian in the multiple arms of another organism,” Charles pledges to win her back with haywire schemes involving guns, explosives, UFOs and ghosts.

“I was three parts impulse and one part woebegone,” he says, and the “Homeric” tale that follows bears that out in a million little pieces of satire about fraudulent memoirs. Guided by an old friend who’s a Navy SEAL, Charles canvasses the country trying to learn what it’ll take to get Gillian back, seeking the conflicting advice of everyone from an oversexed Italian bodybuilder to “a Filipino leprechaun.”

Man up!

Be more sensitive!

Fight for her!

Forget her!

Everybody’s got an opinion for this lovelorn hero wandering through the wilderness of America’s monstrous imagination.

Although the pacing is erratic and there are dull stretches, some of these busy antics are awfully funny, particularly his scheme to impress Gillian by capturing Big Foot with the help of a crazy hunter-scholar named Romp, whose card claims, “I Bring It Back Dead.” As they tramp through the Pacific Northwest, Romp prods Charles to stop being such a wuss: “You’ve been so brain-scrubbed by ironic feminists at them

liberal universities,” he tells him over the campfire, “now you think it’s wrong to be a man.”

I suspect Giraldi’s dexterity with antique sexual and racial stereotypes won’t win him many friends among those feminists unless they’re very ironic, indeed. We hear a lot about Romp’s extraordinary African American endowment. And during another adventure, Charles consults with an astronomer married to a “chocolate companion,” whose lovemaking is like “rumba or boogaloo.” That meeting falls apart when he watches a black lesbian “clobber the gal Negress-style, as they do in the ghettos of Detroit or Harlem.” We’re supposed to be laughing at him, right? But don’t worry, Charles is the first to object: “We are Democrats from Connecticut and I will not have you speak that way,” he says in righteous political correctitude. “We believe in suffrage, pro-choice, and penicillin, and you, my friend, are a powerful, dignified woman.”

Hijinks keep spiking through this screwball narrative, but what really keeps pumping it alive is that impossibly odd and self-conscious voice, a mixture of 19th-century gentility and modern hipster. Meeting Gillian for the first time, “I proffered her my hand, a-tremble,” he says. “I bowed here like a squire or some-such. Someone who owns property, fights criminals, admires estrogen.”

As his bitter father complains, “Who talks like that?” Ignatius J. Reilly in love? It’s irresistibly strange. “I’ve been told my sentences salsa,” Charles boasts, but he frequently finds himself defending his memoirs against accusations that he lacks “Jamesian interiority and the plotting proficiency of Wilkie Collins.” Another reader complains, “Most of the events in your memoirs occur outside the scope of normal human possibility. .??. I also think your people all speak alike.”

True, I’m afraid. But Giraldi knows all that and has used this young lover’s manic, incongruous voice to produce one of the weirdest comic novels of the year. And he has a delicate sweetness that shows through at just the right moments in what is, after all, a very old, romantic story: “Mind always,” Charles tells us, “that Adam wasn’t a schlep fruitily duped by Eve. He turned his back on God because he knew that a paradise without her was no paradise at all.” If that kind of devotion can’t win your girl back from the many arms of a squid, let her go.

<http://articles.washingtonpost.com/20...>

George Ilsley says

What a glorious mess! Almost decided a number of times to give up on this book, and can't say that I am happy I didn't. A combination of a brilliant use of language and empty in content. A satire must choose what it is about. This post-modern satire, Seinfeldesque, is a book about nothing. Parts were nonetheless engaging, and I enjoyed the faux-archaic speech (pompous and pretentious, ripe for self-mockage). Overall though there were too many boring and baffling segments and the entire Hollywood plot (although probably intended as satire) was entirely too predictable.

H R Koelling says

There were some *very* funny moments in this novel, but I almost didn't finish the book. The voice of the narrator was annoying. At several points in the novel various characters comment on the strange speech he

uses. They mostly say that no one talks like that. No one does and no one should, even if you're trying to surround a character with a certain ambiance. This diminished the enjoyment I wanted to receive from reading this novel. If the main character, and most of the other characters, used everyday speech and not the highfalutin prose of a Doctorate level intensive English elective on 19th Century Literature, I would have felt more connected to the story. Tone it down, Mr. Giraldi! You're an excellent author, but not everyone appreciates your Ivy League tone of voice.

Also, there are two errors in the book. There aren't any elk in Maine. And, when the protagonist visits the Seattle area he is constantly complaining about how hot, bright and sunny it is there. Unless there was a freak weather phenomenon, which could and does happen for maybe a day or two every 25 years, Seattle is as cool and cloudy as the persistent stereotype.

Nick Mariner says

I made it exactly twelve pages into this book. I read the plot and really, really wanted to like it. It sounded like an A Lee Martinez story, who I love, and was compared on the back-cover review to Kurt Vonnegut, who I love even more. My question to whoever wrote that review is this: why do you hate Kurt Vonnegut? This book is written in the voice of a first-person narrator who I believe fancies himself quixotic and garbles the English language to do so. There are people who write, Bradbury, Vonnegut, Dick, McCarthy, and their are people who try to write. Who make it obvious that they are writing and trying to write something that will knock your socks off. That's what this book feels like - an essayist with some impressive accolades trying to write a story that you will like. Well, I didn't. I couldn't even get through chapter one. Now I'll go read Cat's Cradle to remind myself what writing actually looks like.

RandomAnthony says

Ok, I finished *Busy Monsters* on Christmas Eve after my wife and kids were asleep, and today, four days later, I'm trying to remember the novel. I recall, without revealing spoilers:

- A) Something about a squid. Yes, a girl obsessed with squid.
- B) A couple ancillary characters with names like Romp and...I can't remember the other ones.
- C) A road trip to the Pacific Northwest, Boulder, and New Jersey.

So I remember more than I thought I would. In fact, upon reflection, I think I could put together a decent *Busy Monsters* wikipedia entry. But I didn't like the novel much. *Busy Monsters* functions as more of a collection of potentially funny (70 to 30 not funny to funny ratio) sentences than a cohesive story. Most of the characters speak with the same voice (not, like, as part of the novel's plot, they just sound the same). Giraldi writes in a tedious wink-wink nudge-nudge style that's meant, from what I can tell, to cover (through meta-acknowledgement) the novel's weaknesses. He gets off a few solid one liners and one very funny campfire scene, but otherwise *Busy Monsters* is forgettable. I get the feeling Giraldi was going for a *Confederacy of Dunces* vibe, but he fails. Maybe his writing students thought this book was the shit. I didn't. Two stars.

Rachel says

We have, in *Busy Monsters*, an unreliable narrator with an un-be-LEEV-ably precious voice. The reader gets absolutely no relief from the narrator's hyper-alliterative, -allusive, -verbose style of expression. All other characters are filtered through him, and therefore speak exactly like him. The fact that Giraldi announces this affected style as his express intention does not make it less irritating. In fact, I hate it when authors do this. I find Giraldi's implication that he could write honest, believable characters if he really WANTED to, and that the racism, female objectification, and histrionic tone of the novel are all just a part of the narrative gaze, to be spurious. It's a bit like Meghan Fox saying she could be winning Oscars if she really wanted to, but she thinks crop tops are just a better career move for her right now. PROVE IT.

Also, I don't want to spoil anything for anyone, but the ending? SHEESH. Suffice it to say that it's pat, abrupt, and completely defies the very structure that was supposed to justify the irritating narrative voice throughout. Imagine if, 3/4 of the way through *Moby Dick*, the central conflict is resolved by Ahab joining Greenpeace. It's like that.

Keith says

Mr. Giraldi turns the dictionary, and a smattering of Western culture, into a big bounce house. He then proceeds to play inside for an almost interminable 282 pages. Yes, it can be fun to name check the dark corners of the OED, but if there was a point to this book, then I missed it.

Kira says

This book was terrible. I hated this book so much I was hoping for a sad ending, because I thought Charlie Homar was such an asshole that ending the story with him miserable would have made it slightly enjoyable. But of course there's a happy ending and Charlie is still a jerk, and I'm the one miserable for having wasted my time.
