

## The Rapist

By Les Edgerton

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Reviewed by Vicki Lambros Gund

Les Edgerton's *The Rapist* lures through prurient interest of a heinous crime and the promise to peek into the mind of the rapist. It begins as smut, some pages feel dirty. The rapist, Truman Ferris Pinter, is unrepentant, even spiteful and arrogant toward those who would judge him. He is a condemned man, sits in a cell awaiting execution. He recalls his crime and his hates, even an infant hate. Complexity and contradiction nudge their way in. Edgerton tracks Truman's thoughts and dreams, which are unusual and particular—in this way creating an uncanny realism of an individual mind. The book evokes consideration of art and life. It does not debate right and wrong but aims higher, toward the possibility of salvation.

The rape lands Truman in the cell. The plot ends and the real story begins: the ruminations of the rapist and perhaps all the guilty soon to die who contemplate death. The book exists outside of time—in the manner of a classic—no contemporary references plus Biblical-level language. For example, here is the opening, a thought monologue by the rapist:

*Let me tell you who occupies this prison cell. Perfidious, his name is Perfidity. His name is: Liar, Blasphemer, Defiler of Truth, Black-Tongued. He lies down with all members of the congregation equally, tells them each in turn they are his beloved, while he is already attending to the next assignation, in his relentless rendezvous with the consumption of souls.*

In the cell Truman dreams and he begins to fly, adventures that relieve him of prison time and place him in the condensed world of thought and visitations to his childhood when he could truly hover above the ground, until the age of eleven. He suddenly lost the power because he learned to fear, he had become an adult. The power to fly “insists on suspension of all fears and laying yourself open to the actions of others. Pure trust and guilelessness must be achieved....I suspect that is what Christ is mystically saying when he tells the Pharisee he must become as a ‘little child’ again.”

Truman also tells of his childhood power to leave his body and float above it, a power also lost at age eleven: “Unlike Christ at the same age, I felt no call to proselytize, my main activity at this period becoming an intense desire to satisfy my carnal nature. I self-abused my flesh, incessantly.”

Truman practices flight in his cell and plans an escape. During practice he meets with his father and mother, and then he's in a dream that seems real and people run for their lives. He also debates a man in a robe on a mountaintop about religion, heaven, hell, humanity, love. Partway through their talk the old man loses his smile, saying "Could it be that God has been misinterpreted by man?"

One of the most virtuosic performances in the novel is the well-read and articulate Truman's run-through of religion, philosophy, psychology; God, Freud, Kant, Jung, Skinner, Einstein; John Milton, John Donne; prisons, the veracity of his own murder charge, and his existential challenge to the warden: "You are looking out of hell, not into it when your eyes lock with mine."

Edgerton, via Truman, proposes an original view of life and souls that reads like a metaphor of string theory—but which was written before publication of the string theorists (revealed to me in correspondence with the author, 2014).

And in writing this theory of life—and Truman's flirtations with destinations of hell, nothing, strange loops, or heaven—Edgerton seems to have written like his life depended on it. The book's conclusion is a seeker's twist that might not have been found but was.

It is a slim book—a novella (142 pages)—with a tightly woven narrative that springboards from the guise of pulp fiction to its destination as guidebook for lost souls. There would never be a love child between Albert Camus and Harold Pinter (the original Pinter—the playwright famous for his comedies of menace) but such an invention comes to mind for the book is one of a kind. The book satisfies the entreaty "Make It New" made famous by Ezra Pound.

*The Rapist* is difficult only if you are troubled by the grisly beginning or don't want your head in the game of thinking. The author will not strand you as a guide.

How else to persuade you all to read it? If some nerd creates metrics for measuring the amount of book per page—lyrical communication of ideas, inspiration, insight, brain tickling, suspense in the service of story—this book would win. (Not that I'd want a nerd to do this. The best books, like this one, are mysterious.) Can today's publishing world of unjuried plenty spawn a classic? *The Rapist* is a work of genius. It is a classic work that should be read for generations.