

Lee Maynard. *The Pale Light Of Sunset: Scattershots and Hallucinations in an Imagined Life*. Morgantown: Vandalia Press, 2009. 256 pages. Hardback with dust jacket, \$23.95

REVIEWED BY PHYLLIS WILSON MOORE

Some books should come with a warning: Caution, this high-speed fiction may cause flashbacks and is not recommended for readers with hypertension, heart disease, or inclination to nervous tics. If the sound of motorcycles revving, bones breaking, or rapid gunshots cause you to cringe, stop. *The Pale Light of Sunset: Scattershots and Hallucinations in an Imagined Life* is such a book; it spontaneously combusts in your hand. I call Lee Maynard's style Alpha-male-lit, or shot-and-a-beer-lit, or testosterone-laden-lit; all of which I prefer to fiction about kindly granny women gathering herbs for the baby's thrush mouth.

The story begins with the birth of a screaming baby boy in a parlor in West Virginia in 1936 then explodes in short chapters: "The Shotgun"; "Whorehouse"; "Faggot"; "Scorpion"...you get the idea. Racing through the book, the faster I read the faster I want to read. The scenes are visceral. At 2:00 a.m. I reluctantly stop reading the believable/unbelievable story and turn out the lights. That doesn't work. I toss around and wonder what is happening under *The Pale Light* cover. Is it fiction (as labeled) or is it memoir? Is it a novel? If so, why does it read like a bunch of short stories? Will it be a film? How could it be filmed? I hope it is a film. Who will play the lead? Clint Eastwood is too old. John Wayne is dead. Hugh Jackman gets my vote. By 4:00 a.m. I give up, get up, and finish the book. It's a road trip. I follow the unnamed protagonist through more adrenaline soaked episodes. He is usually being shot at, beaten up, or in danger of being stung, bitten, drown, raped, or run over. Occasionally he's about to die of thirst or be maimed. I'm on his side. He's an authentic likeable guy with a sense of humor.

From the time the protagonist begins to ricochet through childhood, he isn't on the same page with his family. Family is peripheral to his story. Early on, the muscular kid outgrows discipline. Savvy about people, he is intelligent and eager to try life his way. At 19, the dare-devilish high school graduate lands a summer job as a lifeguard. In the evening he's a dance hall bouncer, willing to run booze from Kentucky to Virginia for a few bucks. He likes to outwit the cops and drive his mafia-style boss's Cadillac. He tries college. Let me reword that: he is enrolled briefly in college but is expelled. Drinking beer in class might have had something

to do with his expulsion. He doesn't ask. He is out of there. He travels, carrying his childhood emotional baggage with him. Sometimes he finds cohorts. They work jobs together, the kind involving pickup trucks, horses, filling stations, and paychecks spent in whorehouses. There is screaming, drinking, and fighting.

He doesn't exactly fit in; in the pickup he carries books to read, especially books by Hemingway, and journals to write it. Sewn in the lining of his parka, at a spot close to his heart, is a button from his mother's old coat. It will remain there in many parkas to come. Each short chapter indicates the passing of time with about 10 chapters a decade. He's on his way to somewhere. Where? Not back home or back to college. He's looking for dangerous and exciting, maybe even surreal. He might join the military. A stint in the Army proves to be a really bad idea with one major exception, love at first sight: "I stand there and look at her. I am seeing something I have never seen before. I am seeing the future." He finds love, a government job, and ends up driving around in a Buick wearing a camel hair coat. But the road still calls and, government job be damned, he still answers, especially if long excruciating trips on motorcycles and a chance to get killed, maimed, or arrested, are part of the picture.

The novel's final chapters slow the pace. No longer full-throttle, the protagonist spends time in old haunts with old friends. In the final chapter, "Journal's End, the once screaming newborn is nearing 70 and spending time alone in the mountains: think time, journal time.

I stand in the pale light of sunset and look into the canyon, a lifetime below, the river so far down and away that it is nothing more than a silver thread, motionless against eons of time. I stand on the edge of eternity. Under my heels there is solid rock. Under my toes, there is 2,000 vertical feet of empty space.

I feel the weight of the old composition notebooks, the journals, in my hands. Dozens of them.

I don't know why I ever decided to keep a journal.

Chetlehe said only white guys were so proud of what they did that they actually had to go and write it down. He said if what I did really mattered, other people would write it down, or tell the stories to their children and grandchildren. I wouldn't have to. Write it down. I thought about that for a long time. It worried the hell out of me. It still does.

Because other people don't write it down.

Because I am only left with me.

No matter.

I will finish this last entry and then I will not keep a journal anymore.

He makes the entry, closes that journal, and picks up another. It is his South Carolina journal. He closes it and begins the process of throwing them "out into the emptiness of time."

There is nothing pale about *Pale Light*. It is powerful work from a mature writer with an uncanny talent. His full-throttle style and powers of description propel you into and along with the story. He raises the bar for future writers sure to be influenced and inspired by his body of work. Maynard has something to say. He says it his way. It is worth saying. It ^{is} well worth reading. It is well worth reading more than once.