

Three  
by Ann Quin  
Dalkey Archive Press,  
April 2001  
143 pages  
List Price: \$11.95

# Fragments of Fantasy-Reality

A new edition of Ann Quin's "Three" with all the old flavor.

by Kate Rockwood

"What does this taste like?" my mom asks, holding out a fork of mush. I close my eyes and nibble. "Banana peppers ... no ... jalapenos," I reply. It is a game I have played too often with my family — someone tries to cook dinner and I am asked to identify the flavor of the meal. Yet the game remains easy, my mom always relying on one dominant spice while my father searches for the perfect 'tang'.

I approach reading in much the same way, eager to find the perfect adjective to describe an author's work (Burgess: bold, Lamb: creamy, Blume: fluffy and light). Yet reading "Three" by Ann Quin, I kept swirling my tongue around in my mouth, moving my eyes over the page, unable to pinpoint exactly what I was tasting.

"Three" opens shortly after the probable suicide of a young woman, identified only as S, who boarded with a married couple, Ruth and Leonard. It details the conversations between Ruth and Leonard, discussing the probability that S has taken her own life, as well as their daily interactions and frustrations with one another. Ruth shifts between needy and biting, refusing Leonard's sexual advances and opting instead to endlessly play dress up with her cat. Leonard, in contrast, remains the intellectual, reading and watching programs, ashamed of his own desires. Their interactions, when not argumentation, consist of a pair of monologues as opposed to a dialogue between spouses. In a journal entry S writes that "She talks to the cat. He reads out loud." This observation captures their simultaneous self-interest, passed off as an interest in a relationship. S both completes and disrupts the tenuous bond between them. She becomes the audience Leonard has always craved, eager to take long walks and discuss critical theory. Yet she also comforts Ruth, brushing out her hair and assisting her in games, fulfilling Ruth's need for a playmate and friend. By committing suicide, S not only removes herself from the balance of

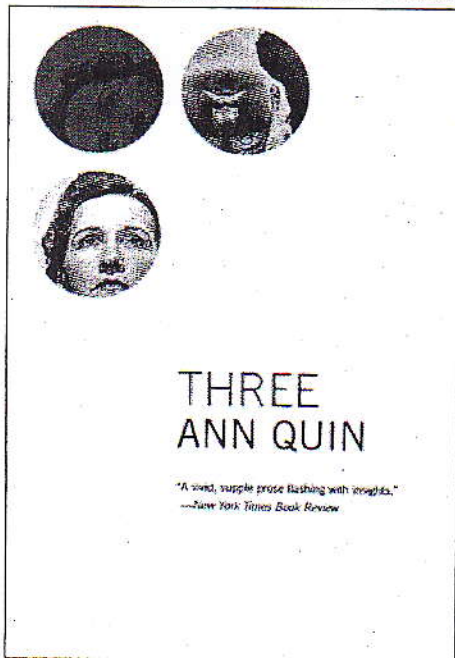
Ruth and Leonard's relationship, she forces them to examine her place in their lives and their relationship with each other. The reader endures a series of banal arguments concerning the care of the cat, in the hopes that some meaning about S will surface. Though slowly more of S's life is revealed, understanding remains elusive.

This narration is mixed with diary entries from S that, unfortunately, do little to clear the confusion. S seeks to create her own reality, describing in detail the motions of hands in a single night without recounting the event she is recording or the people she observes. Thus, only pronouns are found in her entries and the reader struggles to distinguish between her observations of Ruth and Leonard and S's observations of her mother and father. Though elusive, understanding does glimmer just beneath the surface, teasing the reader to continue the chase. Glimpses of incest and abortion appear in S's diary, a recounting of a fight that could have happened between Ruth and Leonard or S's parents or both. It feels as if S was aware that both Ruth and Leonard (and the reader) would turn to her diary for answers. She teases "Three months now of living with two people and not any nearer. Tactics flounder before even begun. There seems no answer. And yet..." The entries themselves are quite long, both appearing and reading as poetry. Likewise, the audio tapes that S leaves behind consist of a series of fragments as opposed to full sentences or thoughts.

This difficulty is no mistake or oversight on Quin's part. The introduction warns that in Quin's fiction "reality and fantasy leak into one another, selfhood is depicted as fractured and transitory, and style and technique serve as a catalyst to propel the reader into an affective encounter with the text." In fact, the entire novel remains bereft of quotation marks or heavy punctuation. Many of the sentences are run-on or fragments. Thus a paragraph which consumes an entire page may actually consist of a dialogue between Ruth and Leonard with no visible way to distinguish between speakers, as well as narration. This forces the reader to approach and reapproach the text, unable to sail through with an easy read. Of course, the first few pages of the novel were frustrating as I read and reread, deciphering who was saying what. But by mid-novel, I could read a paragraph and quickly align the dialogue with the characters, an indication that Quin has made her characters fully accessible and three-dimensional, while still keeping them bound together as mismatched misfits. Yet the style serves a further purpose than forcing the reader to distinguish between nuanced characters; it slows down the reading process itself, forcing the reader to reprocess their approach to the reading experience. The introduction points out that "the book refuses to stay at a comfortable distance."

The novel consists of a series of unveilings as the reader is invited further into both the marriage of Ruth and Leonard and the life and death of S. It remains vibrant and heady on all levels, unwilling to focus on one character lest the balance of three be disturbed. It is not just one unidentifiable flavor; if anything, the flavors feel eerily familiar and safe. Piled onto one another the flavors grow complicated and perplexing. And yet Quin's style forces the reader to savor the meal, to taste and to go back for a second helping. It is a novel with an aftertaste that cannot be shaken. **FP**

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Kate Rockwood co-edits free press *Dirty Laundry*.