

City on Fire by Garth Risk Hallberg

I was so excited to pick up *City on Fire*, the debut novel written by Garth Risk Hallberg. The jacket promised me a page turner that I would not be able to put down, nor would I want it to end. Oopsie. My experience was not quite so riveting.

So, I settle in with this huge novel, 903 pages plus a postscript. I love language and vocabulary but not for the sake of simply using arcane language and uncommon words. The imagery wavered between brilliantly poetic to boringly long and painful. And by page seven, I had gone to the dictionary five times. Getting stumped on words does not make for a pleasant reading experience.

The characters are all sad and desperate, the revoltingly unaware rich and the disenfranchised angry poor. What brings them all together is young woman who uses friends and winds up shot and near death in Central Park. The mystery is begun and all the characters seem to be connected through one or two degrees of separation.

I found myself wanting to pick up my red pen, I am a former English teacher, and correct for clarity, simplicity and the use of pretentious and affected language. A description of a hangover lasted thirteen pages. I forced myself to every page.

The climax is rich and I would recommend this book with one caveat ... skim.

One of the main characters is the son of a very wealthy family who gives up the wealth to follow his art, music and heroin addiction. He is attempting to paint "the painting". Here what Hallberg says from the eyes of the art viewer:

She stares at it and realizes William is attempting "to recreate the face of the entire city" on canvas. She couldn't tell if it was good, exactly," Hallberg writes, "but no one could say it wasn't ambitious."

And that is how *City on Fire* left me... it was a good attempt, too grand, but no one could say it wasn't ambitious.

Deeya Pavelle for:
Between the Covers