

A MEANINGFUL LIFE

L.J. DAVIS

Introduction by

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INTRODUCTION

This can only be entirely personal for me, I have no way around it. Not least because in considering the matter of “the Brownstoners”—those straggling individuals and families, nearly all of them white, who, by laying claim in the 1960s to a few of the aging and tattered row houses in the neighborhoods on the periphery of downtown Brooklyn, set the groundwork for the disaster and triumph of Brooklyn’s slow-motion gentrification, so full of social implications and ethical paradoxes, and trailing any number of morbid and comic life situations not unlike those depicted in L. J. Davis’s three novels of Brooklyn—I am considering the matters of my own life. My parents were Brownstoners, and the complexly uncomfortable facts in the case, discernible behind Davis’s Brooklyn novels and also behind Paula Fox’s *Desperate Characters* and Thomas Glynn’s *The Building*, are the facts of my childhood. These were the facts I eventually excavated in a long novel called *The Fortress of Solitude*, yet which no matter how deeply I dig, I will never completely demystify.

Not least, but not only. Writing about Davis’s book is personal for me because L. J. Davis was my first writer, and by that I mean not in the sense of Lewis Carroll or L. Frank Baum, who were among the

first writers I read, but that he was my first captive specimen. L.J. and his family lived on the next block (he still lives in the neighborhood, and so do I), and I was best friends with his son Jeremy. When I first conceived the wish to be a writer, the thought was pretty easily completed by the phrase: “like Jeremy’s dad.” I liked what I saw. L.J. sat at the back end of an open, high-ceilinged parlor floor devoted to bookshelves. (That I alphabetize my books now is probably attributable to the fact that his were alphabetized.) His desk was massive—I think it had to be, to support the weight of his manual typewriter, which I recall as a piece of epic ironwork wreckage, something you’d seen driven around on the back of a flatbed truck in search of a vacant lot where it might be safely abandoned. In that office, when Jeremy and I weren’t shooed away, I was introduced to the existence of the books of Thomas Berger, Charles Webb, Leonard Michaels, and Kingsley Amis (“I was happy to be called Brooklyn’s Kingsley Amis,” L.J. once told me, “until I had the misfortune of being introduced to Kingsley Amis”), and to Leonard Cohen’s *New Skin for the Old Ceremony* LP. These are all tastes I’ve retained, and the flavor of which seem relevant now to the pleasure I take in L.J.’s novels—rightly relevant, it seems to me, though I could never defy the associative force of childhood memory.

So, Davis’s *A Meaningful Life*, along with the true literary thrill it offers on rereading, provides for me a shudder of recognition, or a whole series of shudders. In three of L.J. Davis’s four novels, young men who can only be described as sick, chronically ill with self-knowledge of their prejudices and reservations, find their ambivalent fates manifest in scenes of brownstone renovation in downtown Brooklyn, where the joists and pillars of the grand and tempting old houses are too often rotten to the core. More than that of Fox’s great novel, close to the bone though it cuts, is the world I dawned into when my parents moved to Dean Street. The dystopian reality of late 60s and early 70s outerborough New York City can be difficult to grant at this distance; these streets, though rich with human lives, were collectively damned by the city as subhuman, crossed off

the list. Firehouses and police stations refused to answer calls, whether out of fear, or indifference, or both. As L.J. told me once, most simply: “Anyone who chose to move to the neighborhood was in some way crazy. I know I was.” How precarious this existence was—morally, sociologically, financially—was never exactly permissible to name outside of L.J.’s books, or at least not with such nihilistic glee.

L.J., by refusing to blur the paradoxes of racial and class misunderstanding in idealist sentiment, was “un-PC” before there was such a thing. By being so, he turned some of his neighbors against him, exemplifying a loneliness he, from evidence of his books, already felt as a innate life condition. That he also chose with his wife to adopt two black daughters to raise in his brownstone alongside their two white sons is a fact that still stirs me in its strangeness and beauty. I remember thinking even as a teenager that L.J. had made his home a kind of allegory of the neighborhood as a whole, perhaps partly in order that he might refuse to stand above or apart from it. Then again, with characteristic dryness (unforgivable in the eyes of some local parents), L.J. once awarded a friend of mine and Jeremy’s the Dickensian nickname “Muggable Tim,” and recommended we avoid walking the streets with him. When after thirty-odd years of personal shame at such stuff I finally managed to open my mouth in *The Fortress of Solitude*, I had L.J. to thank.

L.J.’s novels, like those of Berger and Webb—as well as those of Bruce Jay Friedman and a few other contemporaries—could be fitted into the uncomfortable category of the Black Humorists, an unaffiliated clan of writers who strained European existentialist angst through residual American optimism, arriving at a mordant hilarity just shy of doom. I call the category uncomfortable because nearly any writer ever associated with the label disavowed it, and while most were critical darlings (Davis was), too many bumped to the lower rungs of the mid-list (certainly Davis did). If a concocted literary “movement” doesn’t sell books, what good is it? In any event, most of these writers could be called sons of Nathanael West, but unlike

West, giddily free of the formal pressure of modernist aesthetics. In L.J.'s case, he appears to have tempered his West with a jigger of West's brother-in-law, S.J. Perelman, or even of P.G. Wodehouse. "I like slapstick," L.J. recently told me, as if guiltlessly confessing a murder.

L.J.'s family home also gave evidence of a fanatical interest in world history, which had been Davis's major at Stanford. He and Jeremy shared a fondness for antique lead toy soldiers, John Huston's adaptation of Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King*, scrupulously realistic board-game re-creations of European wars, and the Flashman novels of George MacDonald Fraser. Born in Seattle but raised in Idaho, L.J. explained in a typically caustic autobiographical statement (written for the jacket of his first novel, *Whence All But He Had Fled*):

There is something about Boise, its isolation and its inbreeding and its density, that fosters a specialized kind of hatred of parent for child and child for parent. I think the West, the concept of the heroic West, has a great deal to do with it. The pioneers are closer than they are in other places... It has something to do with the great good place found. The second generation agrees almost by default with the first, and the third can think of nothing but going away. Going away is not easy. Its goal out there is specific: San Francisco, and San Francisco is 642 miles away.

The context of American history, its grand themes of Manifest Destiny and Manifest Disappointment, are terrifically relevant to *A Meaningful Life*, the most pointed and severe of L.J.'s novels of Brooklyn. It is precisely this undertow of pioneer failure that gives the book its oxygen and reach, and which make it undismissable, more than just a brilliant complaint or comic-existentialist howl in the night. By the description of his hero Lowell Lake's failing attempt to pen a novel of—surprise!—"the founding and settlement

of Boise, Idaho,” and by various other nearly subliminal keynotes (Lake suffers his premarital jitters at Donner Pass), we come to see Lake’s disastrous reverse-pilgrimage into Brooklyn, the easy destruction of his tissue-paper WASP idealizations upon immersion in the racial boiling pot of the inner city, in terms of an American incapacity or unwillingness to meet the true implications of its founding promises, made to itself and to the future. Every arrival aimed at some golden San Francisco of the mind falls leadenly short, landing in a Boise of regret and loathing. In this, Davis’s America opens unexpectedly into Kafka’s unattainable Castle, and the Zeno’s paradox hopes of breaching its doors.

“Do you realize that I’m the first member of my family to cross this thing in a hundred years?” said Lowell as they bridged the Mississippi at Saint Louis. His emotions were strange and sinking, but not precise enough to put a name to.

“Big deal,” said his wife.

They came to New York at night, hurtling through a hellish New Jersey landscape the likes of which Lowell had never dreamed existed, a chaos of roadways and exits, none of which made any sense, surrounded by smoke and flashes and dark hulking masses and pillars of real fire a thousand feet high, enveloped in a stench like dog’s breath and dead goldfish.

In Davis’s helpless vision, West collapses into East, the American future into the bloodstained European colonial past. Plus the contractor you hired just wrenched out and demolished the irreplaceable Carrara marble mantelpiece, without asking.

—JONATHAN LETHEM