

Mister Trippy

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Running Away by Jean-Philippe Toussaint

I read *Running Away* about two weeks ago and ever since I've been thinking about blogging it, but there's something in me that revolts against writing about this book. It's short and light and Matthew B. Smith's translation reads really well... but the narrator is repulsive, a middle-class idiot savant who has no redeeming qualities whatsoever. He goes to Shanghai to deliver money to a guy called Zhang Xiangzhi, and then indulges in all the usual orientalist fantasies; including misreading menace into acts of friendship in a culture he doesn't understand. This culminates in him concluding that Xiangzhi is a heroin wholesaler. After returning to Paris, the narrator heads out to Italy where he fails to connect with his girlfriend.

The plot doesn't really matter, this book is like Jean Baudrillard turned into very finely wrought fiction, a study in alienation by an unreliable narrator who doesn't understand that everyone in a capitalist society is alienated (in an economic rather than a psychological sense). I read and enjoyed this very well-crafted book as a damning critique of capitalism and the middle-classes; my fear is that some of those who are delusionally attracted to literature as a mark of their own 'distinction', will identify with Jean-Philippe Toussaint's obnoxious narrator. I guess that's the risk of writing this type of fiction... *Running Away* is published in English by Dalkey Archive Press early next year. Since it's hard not to love a book named after a Sly & The Family Stone tune, let's hope its reception in English isn't marred by too many nerds announcing their love of the ridiculous narrator.

And while you're at it don't forget to check – www.stewarthomesociety.org/blog – you know it makes (no) sense!

Tags: [Dalkey Archive Press](#), [Italy](#), [Jean Baudrillard](#), [Jean-Philippe Toussaint](#), [Matthew B. Smith](#), [Running Away](#), [Shanghai](#), [Sly & The Family Stone](#)