Sigrid Nunez's National Book Award-winning novel, *The Friend*: One form of contemporary misanthropy

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The Friend (2018) is Sigrid Nunez's National Book Award-winning novel about a middle-aged writing instructor whose recently deceased friend and mentor has bequeathed her his enormous Great Dane.

That's it. With densely weighted details and chatty digression, Nunez wrings both emotional depth and incisive social observation from a story about the adoption of a burdensome dog by a grieving woman who doesn't like dogs.

The Friend is narrated by the woman who, like all the other characters except Apollo the dog and Hector, the superintendent of her Manhattan apartment building, remains nameless. The novel is told in the first person, addressed to "you," the woman's friend, who has committed suicide. You, a teacher and only moderately successful writer, was unwilling, the woman surmises, to endure an autumnal existence bereft of the womanizing that appears to have been the chief reward of his career.

The strength of *The Friend* is Nunez's characteristic narrative restraint. The novel is written in her trademark crisp, unadorned prose, which compels the reader through the pages as if we are being led by Apollo on a brisk walk. More than this, the narrative reveals itself to be a tour de force of understatement as we come to know the complexity of the woman's relationship to You, and to Apollo, likely better than she herself.

Early on, in a conversation with Wife Three, who is delivering the news that You wanted the narrator to take his dog, Nunez offers up an impressive display of doubling. The narrator's thoughts digress to her deceased friend's increasingly pathetic sexual encounters with students and from there to the J.M. Coetzee novel *Disgrace*, in which the protagonist exhibits the same sad proclivities, at which point Wife Three brings up "the dog." The narrator relates,

When you decided you wanted to keep the dog, you and she had a big fight. A beautiful animal—and how could she not feel sorry for the poor thing, being abandoned like that. But she didn't like dogs...She told you she refused to share any responsibility for it—for example, when you had to go out of town.

And it is a taste of Nunez's poignant sense of humor when Wife Three complains, "You can't explain death to a dog."

Nunez makes reference on several occasions to Milan Kundera, whose novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* also features an adopted dog, and *The Friend* decidedly shares formal affinities with the Czech novelist's work. Such as the references to other writers. In the course of *The Friend*, Nunez alludes to Flannery O'Connor, J.R. Ackerley, Heinrich von Kleist, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Elizabeth Bishop, to name a few. Such allusions occur naturally enough in a novel narrated by a creative writing teacher. (Although she teaches in a college, the woman never refers to herself as a professor.)

As with Kundera, the literary allusions, as well as the many historical and scientific asides—we are told, for instance, of Kleist's murder-suicide pact with his terminally ill lover and a wealth of knowledge and lore about canines—bear a certain formality, presented not in dialogue or in narrated events but as discrete digressions addressed at once to You and to the reader.

Also, like Kundera, Nunez conducts with her novel overt intellectual inquiries of which the narrative is both the occasion and a functioning component. In the case of *The Friend*, these inquiries take up matters of love, contemporary academia and misanthropy.

In keeping with this contemplative, agreeably didactic form, the overall tone of *The Friend* is a cool detachment, a mulled-over past tense that seldom broaches emotional immediacy. Even a description of her crying over her dead friend and imagining seeing him on the street is prefaced with a factoid:

It's true that if you cry hard enough for long enough you can end up with blurred vision.

Of course, such moments serve purposes in the novel, and

in this instance, Nunez continues *The Friend's* interesting consideration of lasting trauma as a cost of love. (She opens the novel with an account of Cambodian women who suffer blindness as a result of seeing loved ones tortured and murdered.) A consequence of this reserved tone is that, when Nunez does bring her narrator to a moment that exceeds contemplation, the effect is arresting.

It is the costs of love, of friendship and marriage—and conversely, the ideals of love—that work quietly within the woman's narrative. Has fear of love kept her from taking a partner? Has her love for You prevented her marrying another? Apollo too suffers from the loss of his owner, and the woman wonders intermittently about the grief and famous loyalty of dogs. To the consternation of her friends and colleagues, she too exhibits an overwhelming loyalty to Apollo, risking homelessness rather than live in her pet-free building without him.

Given its academic setting, it is possible to read *The Friend* as a postmortem of the dead white male (one of the deceased writer's colleagues quips in the funeral parlor that he is now a dead white male), an expression of a high anxiety of influence. Nunez writes in and of a historical moment that is "post-feminist," "postmodern" and self-consciously multicultural. In fact, some of the novel's most intellectually energetic moments come when the narrator confronts the effects identity and so-called "cancel culture" have on her students, who are thoroughly indoctrinated, and her colleagues, who are demoralized. (Where, one wonders, are the indoctrinating professors?)

Nunez's treatment of identity politics and other symptoms of education's decline is sensitive and humane, giving time to her (narrator's) frustration with the triggered campus and to sympathy for the argument that writing should now be "dominated" by those whose voices have been underrepresented in print. But *The Friend* does seem to give the last word to an identity politics of race and culture, which may have played a role in endearing it to those arbiters of contemporary taste, the National Book Award judges. Missing from the novel is any unifying vision of an oppressed *class*, of a bourgeoisie in crisis, of an upper middle-class scramble for diminishing dollars in the worlds of art and academia.

When a writing student tells the narrator that writing is made to seem difficult because "the pie is only so big," we might move beyond the narrator's dumbstruck silence to an implied social analysis, but such an analysis is hardly encouraged by the novel. Instead, we are prompted to recoil at the new generation's pragmatism (at one point her students complain that they aren't reading more "successful" authors). As a result, Nunez falls short of identifying the deeply reactionary and menacing character of identity politics, which deals in harms that go far beyond the worlds of publishing and teaching.

This shortcoming marks *The Friend's* political limitation. And now that we have the *New York Times' 1619 Project* with its mendacious pseudo-historicism, and the irrational anti-education of "ethnomathematics," a novel set in the world of contemporary academia must be weighed, in part, in terms of its position on identity politics. The effects of this lack of a historicizing vision, however, run deeper, and it is ironically its misanthropy that most mars this self-consciously humane novel.

Ultimately, the narrator arrives at, or finally reveals, her conclusion that human relationships are too complicated, unfulfilling and, worst of all, not conducive to a kind of beatific goodness she, and Nunez, seek. At least this is the case with living, healthy humans. Again, citing Kundera, the narrator endorses the idea that true human goodness "can come to the fore only when its recipient has no power." The quest for such goodness is at the heart of *The Friend*, as it is of Nunez's post-apocalyptic novel *Salvation City*, whose adolescent protagonist achieves maturity and independence upon the occasion of the incapacitation of his own caretakers.

To see oneself as blessed by virtue of the suffering of others is, by one reckoning, humanism's highest calling. As an end in itself, however, such a position betrays a resignation to the causes of suffering. Why has every aspect of the narrator's social and academic life (she has even given up reading) becoming so repugnant, characterized by a calculating, misanthropic ethos? *The Friend* does not delve into this question. Instead, in a novel that does so much to chart the symptoms of contemporary bourgeois demoralization, the salvation we are offered is an individual altruism and a preference for the nonhuman. The lot of the discouraged or even the misanthrope.