
Anna Burns's *Mostly Hero*: an Experimental Tale

Anna Burns: *Mostly Hero*. London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 2019

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Self-published as an eBook in 2014, and published by Faber & Faber as a paperback in 2019, Anna Burns's novella: *Mostly Hero*, is the liminal tale per-se. Inspired by the plotline and the characters of classic-era film noir, action comics, and non-rogue like role-playing video-games, this topsy-turvy tale plunges the reader into the middle of an interminable quest for world-domination, revenge, and true love. The story, in spite of its episodic nature, is easily summarized. The protagonists: Superhero, Femme Fatale and Great Aunt live in an urban setting made up of skyscrapers, courthouses, restaurants and hospitals. The city is a dangerous place, where a number of gangs and individuals (the villains from downtown eastside, Great Aunt and her henchmen, Superhero, Monique Frostique) fight for supremacy. Tired by the repetitiveness of this war, where they can be only winners or losers, the protagonists have lost focus and stamina, and, therefore, are less pro-active than expected. Hesitation becomes the order of the day, and the plot of the story gets stale until the arrival of episodic character Freddie Ditchlingtonne'ly who murders in order to please the love of his life: Monique Frostique, one of the episodic villainesses of the tale. By the end of the story, some characters die, but death is not the ultimate end in this world. The story ends as it began: in medias res.

Among the hesitant protagonists, Superhero occupies most of the pages of the novella. Hence the title of the tale: *Mostly Hero*. Having been suspicious of everyone but himself, and keeping a dossier even on Femme Fatale, the love of his life, before the beginning of the story Superhero finds out that he is not the grandson of Mr. Squeaky Clean Great Guy Top Ace Superhero, as his father has always told him, but of Mr. Grand Villain Extreme Omni-Imperious Arch-Grand-Arch Emperor Supreme Baddie of the World and of arch-villainess Great Aunt. Often, in the course of the tale, the reader finds him questioning his true motifs for taking part in world-saving projects, and also of the truthfulness of the villain-hero dichotomy.

Hero, owing to a sense of anomie, of dragging anchor, indeed of a new sensation called depression, only imperfectly took in what was happening.

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He was struggling with the incomprehensible idea of things systematically being taken away from him, as well as himself no longer being himself. Also, of not yet having turned into another person. Also, of himself not being good guy, or perhaps never having wanted to be good guy, because under the not wanting to be bad guy seemed to have lurked a discrepant seed demanding he be bad guy but with him thinking he wasn't allowed to be because of fealty to dead heroes who, it now transpired, had been villains all along. (Burns, 81)

Self-reflection results in inaction and also in lack of alertness to imminent danger. Therefore, the increasingly absent-minded Superhero saves none, not even himself. By the end of the story, he gets drugged and starts to hallucinate.

His lover, Femme Fatale, is under the influence of a less than perfect evil-spell meant to turn her into the murderer of Superhero. At the beginning of the tale, she has already made no less than forty unsuccessful attempts to murder Hero. In the spans when she is not under the spell she has no memory of any of her evil doings and behaves as a woman in love. By the end of the tale, when she manages to cast off the evil spell, she finds that her ambivalent attitude towards Hero hasn't changed at all, for love renders one vulnerable, and when hurt and angry, one has murderous thoughts, anyway.

Great Aunt, who has already dominated the world four times before, and murdered almost all her enemies, has spent the last twenty years of her life in the penthouse of a skyscraper giving orders to her henchmen, and watching and getting emotional about her favorite film noir: *The Third Man*. She receives regular visits from her niece: Femme Fatale, the only character in the novella who has no knowledge of Great Aunt's criminal activities, and the only person that Great Aunt truly cares about. It is because of her regard for her niece's feelings for Superhero that Great Aunt hesitates to murder him, thus forfeiting her last chance to dominate the world once again: "The child was besotted. Clearly now, she couldn't just obliterate hero – not with little chocolate here being so in love with him. Of course, there can't be any future in it, but when had that ever stopped anybody before?" (Burns, 18-19)

The sentences of the narrative, reflecting the undecidedness of the protagonists, abound in stative verbs, gerunds, progressive tenses, subjunctives, and an astonishing quantity of modifiers. And yet, although many of these sentences are half-page long, the story is surprisingly easy to read. And although it is filled with the clichéd characters of action comics and film noirs, by investing the protagonists with the capacity of self-reflection, and by giving up the customary well-knit plot, it is also surprisingly postmodern and innovative.