

Werther Fausten's progress

In 'My Mistress, Humanity,' Chuck Rosenthal constructs a complex, ambiguous future.

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Contributing writer

With the publication of his "Loop Trilogy" in the late 1980s, Chuck Rosenthal caused a considerable cult buzz by uprooting the predominately Latin American genre of magic realism and transplanting it, to flourishing effect, in the cold soil of northwestern Pennsylvania—Erie, to be exact, where Rosenthal was born and raised.

In these novels, the lyric and fantastical romanticism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez is crossbred with Rosenthal's urban sensibility, philosophical *Anschauung*, and skewed, hyperbolic sense of humor to produce a hybrid prose of striking originality.

But the magic realists weren't the only romantics to play a part in the evolution of Rosenthal's oeuvre. Like all good writers of Germanic descent, he has fully absorbed his Goethe—who, by way of an 18th-century novella entitled "The Sorrows of Young Werther" (and, later, through his version of the "Faust" legend)—managed to deliver literary romanticism from the swollen womb of the Novel of Sentiment and give life

to a movement that would eventually overwhelm the entire continent, Britain, and beyond.

Rosenthal himself is at the tail end of this long chain of Goethe-inspired romantics, and nowhere is his lineage more evident than in his latest effort, "My Mistress, Humanity," an unabashedly romantic novel, whose primary character is a Nobel Prize-winning nuclear neurologist named Werther Fausten.

As his name suggests, Werther is endowed with many of the same qualities as his Goethean forebears: From Young Werther, he inherits a highly sensitive disposition, and from Faust (an alchemist who wagered with the devil to achieve God-like enlightenment), an insatiable yearning for knowledge and experience.

WERTHER FAUSTEN IS, THEN, A classic Faustian hero, driven, like Victor Frankenstein (titular hero of Mary Shelley's romantic masterwork), to penetrate the deepest secrets of God and nature. This is the ultimate hubris, a crime of pride perpetrated by humanity whenever its technologies dare to trespass too far into the dominion of nature, compelling the true romantic to wonder, with some alarm,

whether or not science has gone too far.

In Frankenstein, the answer to this oft-asked question is a resounding "yes." Piecing together a deformed superhuman from inanimate tissues didn't turn out at all well for Victor.

Nor do things turn out particularly well in Rosenthal's vision of science-run-amok. "My Mistress, Humanity," set in the year 2015, closely parallels the plot of Frankenstein, which, simply stated, is this:

Scientist creates monster; scientist rejects monster as an abomination, monster (unloved) wreaks havoc, scientist hunts monster across vast stretches of arctic wasteland, intending to kill it before it murders again.

In Rosenthal's retelling the monster is a dragon, set loose from the inky substratum of Werther Fausten's own psyche during a dream experiment in "the nexus of communal unconscious."

Once free, the dragon, in the manner of an extreme, fire-breathing, ecoterrorist, begins to incinerate the world's petroleum-fueled machinery, electrical grids, mechanized animal-slaughtering facilities and weapons of mass destruction.



'My Mistress, Humanity.'

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She—the dragon is a she—then proceeds to burn every monotheistic house of worship to the ground, claiming that science and religion together "have justified your [humanity's] domination of the planet, your destruction of the ecology, your disdain for other species." Which might be true, but millions of innocent people are also being vaporized in her crusade.

And so, Werther Fausten sets out for Antarctica to slay his creation, while the book's other narrator, a precocious 14-year-old named Lisa Piccolo Zu, trails in his wake, hoping to find the dragon, and understand her, before it's too late.

I won't reveal who wins or loses in the end (or if such a facile denouement is even possible), except to say that here, as in every great romantic work, the search for clear, allegorical meaning is a difficult one.

Rosenthal constructs a complex future in "My Mistress, Humanity," one as conflicted and rife with ambiguity as human (and nonhuman) life itself.

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