

Franco's novel a confused, dirty, self-indulgent mess

Call him an actor, director, teacher, activist, volunteer – just don't call him an author

Actors Anonymous, by James Franco (New Harvest/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 304 pages, \$33)

Saturday, Nov. 9, 2013

When you think of the actor James Franco, what image comes to mind? Renaissance man? Genius? Ideal blind date? How about X-rated author?

That last label is the one that'll stick if you get through *Actors Anonymous*, the debut "novel" that has some critics and readers running for the hand sanitizer.



A hodgepodge of seedy characters in search of a plot and random scribbles in search of an editor, the book is part fiction, part TMZ kiss-and-tell, part Philosophy 101. It's padded with dropped names (Woody, Brando, River Phoenix), vapid aphorisms on art ("Culture is business," "The big picture is more important than you"), and footnotes that change colour and font.

Pretentious? You bet. Check out the YouTube teaser: tinyurl.com/llds52a. Much of the time, the book reads like a dirty old man's smutty memoir, the literary equivalent of bedside waste bin filled with well-soaked Puffs. There's bathroom sex, rape, and child abuse.

And in the middle of it all is Franco - leering, self-aware.

To wit: "The Actor had the unbeatable charm of being a famous actor. The seduction of the Virgin was as smooth as a bullet through a birthday cake."

Or this selfie:

"I am staring at a photo of The Actor's backside. It's a nice backside, one that has been used with varying degrees of success in his films; sometimes it reveals character."

Or this *cri de coeur pourri*: "F---business. F---money. F---fame. F---coolness. I am in a great position. I can say f---all of those things because I am a famous actor."

Is it satire? Or simply sophomoric?

Some critics haven't been kind. "Self-indulgent," says the Los Angeles Times. "A mess" and "a literary yard sale," says the Boston Globe. Adds Australia's Daily Life: "We read James Franco's new book so you don't have to."

Online, readers have weighed in. "Rambling," writes one on GoodReads.com. "No central cohesive plot," observes another. And more: "Predictable, vulgar, repetitive." "Bad grammar." "Boring." "I can't even get through the third chapter."

One reader read 12 pages and gave the book five stars, and in her rush to comment came out sounding as hyperbolically confused as the author: "James Franco, you cease to amaze me. You are so intelligent and so underrated."

If you follow pop culture, you're familiar with the multitasking Franco already: actor, director, writer, teacher, student, volunteer, painter, LGBT activist.

You may have read his 2010 short-story collection, *Palo Alto* (his hometown), or seen the new movie they made out of it, or loved him in that 2001 James Dean biopic on TV. He was a villain in the Spider-Man trilogy, a brave rock-climber in *127 Hours*, a phony wizard in *Oz the Great and the Powerful*, a frequent guest on *General Hospital*. You probably felt sorry for him when he hosted the 2011 Oscars looking so cowed (or maybe stoned, the rumours went) next to perky Anne Hathaway.

This fall, if you were lucky you saw the actor on the streets of Montreal, coming out of his Plateau apartment or sharing a table at Club Social. He was here to shoot a movie called *Everything Will Be Fine* by famed German indie director Wim Wenders, alongside Montreal's Marie-Josée Croze. Wenders called Franco "one of the great actors of his generation," and Franco said Wenders exemplified the kind of filmmaker he likes best: someone who stays out of his way.

"That's what I've learned from working with my favourite directors," said the actor, who's 35. "If you don't have to say anything because it's working, then don't."

Well, someone has to say something - and they are, in droves - about his new book, because it doesn't work. Its first half is awkwardly structured as a 12-step group therapy program for recovering actors ("Step 1: We admitted that life is a performance"), while its second expounds on 12 "traditions" of the craft ("Tradition 1: Our common cause (film) should come first"). Very little of it makes much sense.

At best, it reveals Franco as vain and insecure and a bit of a bore. Not that he seems to care.

"My work is my life and my life is my work," he proclaims in an early chapter of *Actors Anonymous*, in his own voice. "And something like this - this book - is totally free of the pressures of being popular, because I don't make my living off of books, I make my living off of acting."

It's all about getting "real," the actor writes.

"Maybe the search for the real is about playing the most roles and having the most sex."

Maybe. Or maybe, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein, with some actors there's just no "there" there, only an empty shell. They get a book contract, and we hear the wind blow.

© Jeff Heinrich