

# The Million-Dollar Tattoo

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## LAURA'S SKIN

By J.F. Federspiel

Translated by Breon Mitchell

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By D.F. Wallace

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**S**ardonic cultural parody is so hot that we're now importing more of it from abroad. If you like ultra-ironic contemporary fiction - mordant sendups of consumerism, celebrity, pretension and vanity, laced with arty swirls of surrealism and myth -- then the Swiss author J. F. Federspiel's "Laura's Skin" is a novel you'll want to read.

The first half is set in Milan. Primo Antonio Robusti is a rich old sugar daddy and art collector who collects women and keeps his paintings lined up sideways like books on shelves; he's a hard-core capitalist so laden with neuroses that he does things like make "the sign of the cross three times over the safe which was hidden behind a toilet bowl." He covets one Laura Granati, a gorgeous barracuda-naïf from the provinces who is cruising Milan's fast lane. Laura's most flawless feature is her bottom, and Robusti decides to make that bottom his finest art acquisition. He offers her all his dead mom's jewelry if she'll let him have the world's pre-eminent tattoo artist, the New Age American Omal O'Hara, place his magnum opus on her buttocks. The tattoo is a very pretty map of the world from which Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" emanates -- apparently because of magically musical ink.

After some interminable needle sessions, both Robusti and O'Hara fall in love with Laura-as-masterpiece, and both promptly exit the novel after grisly coital mishaps. Laura flees with her loot and Robusti's maid, Lucia, to the United States, where, because O'Hara is apparently such an important artist that Newsweek devotes its cover story to his obituary, Laura's rear end is appraised in the minions, and she tours the nation like a museum show, displaying her posterior to various professional and civic organizations, cosmologists and Japanese gangsters for meaty fees, all the while feeling appropriate rations of sexual degradation, existential confusion and fiscal glee.

Mr. Federspiel, the author of the novel "The Ballad of Typhoid Mary," is immune to the criticism that his characters in no way resemble real people. This is because his novel presents itself as a satiric fable. Its diction (assuming Breon Mitchell's translation from the German is faithful) is simple and gentle. Its plot seems purposely stagy, its scenes brief and episodic, with disorienting transitions and abrupt authorial asides. And the characters have to be seen as intentional stereotypes.

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Robusti, the archetypal art patron, is "lonely in the midst of his riches," ashamed of his peasant heritage and as relentless in his exploitation of women as he is haunted by his dead mother. Lucia, the earthy clubfooted maid who becomes Laura's business agent, is a bawdy sidekick right out of Chaucer. O'Hara, a caricature of the modern artist as narcissistic mystic, sports silver makeup and disposable eyebrows, communes with "the angels of the -moon" (angels repeatedly intervene in the book's action) and gets erections from flexing his muscles in the bathroom mirror. Laura is the most complex character because she is the least consistent. She moves without much trauma from being coveted as an erotic object to being famous and

venerated as the medium on which is projected a great male artist's vision of the world. Her occasional angst is romantically resolved by a blind New York street person named David, a parody of a wounded healer who can really love the spoiled heroine because he can't see O'Hara's transcendent work.

If these characters seem shallow and unengaging, it's because they are. But we're not asked to feel anything for them, just to smile knowingly at their allegorical significance and admire Mr. Federspiel's ironic commentaries on the rotations between property/power/display and phallus/leces/firmament, respectively.

More compelling are the angels from various religions who pop down *ex machina* in the middle of scenes, discharge some intricate duty according to exhaustively described celestial regulations and then vanish. It's completely unclear whether the human characters know they are there. A lot of the angels' missions serve no discernible purpose--as when Oertha, "angel of the North and of glaciers," Freeze-dries and then thaws Manhattan--but some work yeomanlike to advance the plot. Another reason the book's human characters seem so flat is that whatever development they undergo isn't caused by what they learn or decide, it's simply zapped into them by angelic decree: it's when a nice angel blesses Laura "with the gift of being able to love" that she falls for the blind David, and this

*An obsessive art collector,  
a bevy of angels and a  
tattoo artist transform  
Laura from naïf into a  
venerated work of art.*

allows the rest of her emotional story to be resolved along desperately conventional lines.

Mr. Federspiel's surreal flourishes and commentaries straddle the line between interesting and otiose. Most of the surrealism is pretty but pointless. And the authorial asides--usually in the service of some fuzzy theme about spatiotemporal relativity--start out somehow incongruous and apposite at the same time but quickly become annoying. The narrator is such a breathy presence that he finally emerges as a kind of archangelic master of ceremonies, orchestrating the whole silly plot and inviting us to laugh at every pratfall. Yet Mr. Federspiel has a near-maternal compassion for his pathetic stick figures, and the gentle charity he extends them offers a welcome contrast to the cynical manipulations they suffer at the hands of one another, of the angelic puppeteers and of the novelists' unsubtle thematics.

"Laura's Skin" is least interesting in its tired, derivative rehashing of the contemporary correspondence between art and property, love and consumption. But the novel does a service in suggesting that our modern habit of reducing one another to commodities has its origins not in greed or lust but in plain old fear.

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D.F. Wallace's most recent books are "Girl With Curious Hair" and "Signifying Rappers" (written with Mark Costello).