

PARODY



John Crace

“The Crying of Lot 49” (2008)

[a digested version of the novel, which was published in 1966]

Mrs. Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupperware party to find that she had been named executor, or she supposed executrix, of the estate of her former lover, Pierce Inverarity, a California property mogul who once lost \$2m in his spare time. The letter said her co-executor was to be a lawyer called Metzger from a firm called Lookat, Meimtrying, Toohard, Tobewacky.

As she mixed herself a whiskey sour and waited for her husband, Wendell ‘Mucho’ Maas, to return home from FUCK radio, Oedipa allowed herself some anarchic thoughts about Vivaldi’s kazoo concerto and how Pierce used to call her in funny voices.

“You’re too sensitive,” she said in an access of helplessness as Mucho detailed his latest defeat. “I’m going to see my shrink.”

“Why are you not taking the pills?” Dr Hilarius asked. “I need you for my LSD trials.”

“I’m hallucinating already,” Oedipa replied.

“So early in the book.”

She felt the onset of revelation, a shimmer of mystic meaninglessness and lowered her hair, Rapunzel-like, into the studied opacity of chapter two. Oedipa drove south to San Narcisco, less of a city, more a rather dull concept that had been Pierce’s domicile, and checked in to the Echo Courts Motel. A drop-out called Miles appeared from behind a statue of a nymphet. “I’m lead singer with the Paranoids,” he said. “I’m too old to Frug.”

“You can leave all the enigmatic shit to me,” said another man, who introduced himself as Metzger. “I live inside my looks. I was once a child actor called Baby Igor. How about we play Strip Botticelli?”

Oedipa went to her room and put on several more layers of clothes. It could have been a good gag but she blew it and went to bed with him anyway. That was the problem with post-modernism. No self-will, no motivation, no character. She wondered if she should confess her infidelity to Mucho, but why bother when he might have been writing the story? Things did not delay in becoming more curious when they came across Pierce’s stamp collection, thousands of coloured windows into time and space, ex-rivals for her affections that would be broken into lots.

Oedipa sensed a revelation as she drifted into a bar called Scope.

“Join the Peter Penguid Society,” said Mike Fallopiian, a rightwing nutcase. “We communicate via rebel mail service using the WASTE system.”

“What’s that?”

“I could tell you but it still wouldn’t make any sense and you wouldn’t care anyway. Best to keep you guessing. That way you might think there’s a point.”

"You're right," Metzger agreed. "We should go with the Paranoids to check out Pierce's investment at Fangoso Lagoons."

"I'm your inverse," said a man called Di Presso. "I'm a lawyer turned actor. I've no idea what I'm doing here but a load of GI bones got turned into charcoal filters."

"That's like the Jacobean tragedy that's playing at the Tank theatre."

They absorbed themselves in *The Courier's Tragedy*, a play of incest, murder, the Thurn and Taxis mail system and the mysterious breakaway Tristero postal sect. Nobody said an in-joke had to be funny.

"Where's the text?" Oedipa asked. "There is no text," the director Randolph Driblette answered. "This is the text. I made it up." She longed for meaning. Maybe she could find it in Zapf's bookshop. Who were the Tristero assassins? Had she given them life? Had someone been smoking too much dope? She came across a man drawing the Tristero sign of the horn. Why? She visited John Nefastis, the man who postulated Maxwell's Demon with his perpetual motion machine. "Entropy connects the laws of thermodynamics to information flow," he said.

"There's a conspiracy theory," Genghis Cohen, the stamp expert, explained. "All Pierce's stamps are deliberate Tristero errors."

Metzger was not that bothered at Oedipa's leaving, but then why should he be? He'd had enough and he had never existed without her. Besides he had a 15-year-old nymphet to fuck. Oedipa looked at some deaf-mutes, went to a fag club and dropped in on Mucho. He had dropped out on acid. She went to see Dr Hilarius. "I tortured the Jews at Buchenwald by making them read this kind of crap," he laughed, firing a gun indiscriminately, before the police arrived.

Oedipa headed to Berkeley to meet Emory Bortz, a world expert in Jacobean tragedy. "Driblette has committed suicide," he said.

"Why does everyone leave me?"

"I can't imagine."

"Now I'll never know the secrets of the Tristero. Did it really exist? Was it Pierce's last elaborate hoax? Am I mad? Or am I just stuck in a dated timewarp of empty counter-cultural allusions to which 60s stoners and reviewers too scared of being thought stupid will attach great depth and revelation?"

Self-absorbed with her own one-dimensionality, Oedipa never heard Pynchon laughing as he scammed the literati once again. Instead she waited for the crying of lot 49 to see who would bid for Pierce's stamps. Oh, look! It's you.