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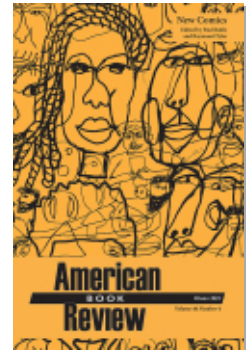
Out of Competition by Lew Collins (review)

Carla M. Wilson

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OUT OF COMPETITION

Lew Collins

JEF Books

<https://www.experimentalfiction.com/products/out-of-competition>

412 pages; hardcover, \$32.00

Carla M. Wilson

Set in Renne-Sur Mer on the French Riviera during an international film festival, *Out of Competition* is a hilarious, chaotic, sometimes grotesque metafictional novel; a rip-roaring adventure that takes the reader on a twelve-day ride during which everything that could happen does happen. With references to iconic French filmmakers Jean Luc Godard (*A Bout de Souffle* [1961]) and Francois Truffaut (*Day for Night* [1973]), as well as Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini (*La Dolce Vita* [1960] and *8 ½* [1963]) come to mind, a not-so-subtle mention of the May 1968 civil unrest in France, and even, dare it be mentioned, the January 6th 2021 United States Capitol attack; the disillusionment with democratic processes in the United States (voter fraud, hidden agendas, uncertainties about misappropriation of power), the abandonment of hope and Hollywood's influence on society, Collins crafts a novel in which art imitates life imitating art within a surreal world where the every-day "reality" of living in a social media-driven world full of "fake news" often feels as if we are heading toward implosion and/or insanity.

Lew Collins obviously knows his way around film festivals, filmmakers (and writing). He constructs his novel as a screenplay, engaging similar techniques to those found in filmmaking, mirroring, simultaneously the insane realities of the twenty-first century digital age, wrapping up the story "neatly" (inconceiv-

ably) at the end. Also impressive is the exaggeratedly large and absurd group of crazies he employs as his cast of characters. Worth listing here for their names alone are the “actors” in the “screenplay” including: “Larry Linsteeg, a bankrupt American film producer; Jack Kimmelon, home entertainment–businessman–wannabe–film–producer; Merryl Kimmelon, model and marine scientist; Edgar Gordon Olles, terrified director; Rob Le Riche, critic and blogger resident of France; Alex Zanayev, Russian billionaire, Annalise de la Forret, doyenne film correspondent; Bella Fibben, Australian gold-mining “billionaire”; Larry’s Writer, Bar des Poissons regulars; Bernard, journalist; Charlotte, film critic; Michel, bar owner; Charles, film critic for *Le Cigaro*; Viktor Andreyevic, ex-KGB officer and neophyte film producer; Elena, Russian showgirl and Renne resident; Zucca, Italian photographer; Daniel Martin, usurping director of Renne-Sur-Mer film festival; Daniel’s assistant; Local Chief Inspector; Ulyana Prystanova; Ivan Dzerzhinsky’s P.A.; Ivan Dzerzhinsky, Russian producer and former pornography businessman; Federico, Ivan’s boat driver; Show Shark; Zeena Zatters, festival intern; General Henri Pilot; F, intelligence officer; Maire’s aide; Madame Maire Pietra Colombes; Jeff Westbridge, Bella’s right-hand man; Semolina Pynes, Edgar’s lead actress; Severine, TV news studio anchor; Marceline Alles, TV reporter; M-iki; Sergei Berebanov; Cindy Turper; Voor; Detective Franck Marc; Marie Marc, Franck’s wife; Geoffrey Leads, jury president; Hubert Chen, kick-boxing security detail; Lieutenant Corot, a French president; Leo Stern, director of the Renne-Sur-Mer film festival; as well as a few helicopter pilots and groups of demonstrators protesting for democracy and against privilege,” and other minor characters, not necessarily in that order.

“Dramatic events at a festival not seen since nineteen sixty-eight” begin during the fictional ten-day Renne-Sur-Mer film festival (comparable to the annual Cannes Film Festival in the south of France) when an American film producer, Jack Kimmelon, a man with pretend list of films he says he is working on—films Jack speaks loudly about whenever he gets the chance to impress anyone, going from one film to another, hoping nobody pulls him up on them, including “Dances With Wolves III,” “Godfather IV,” and “Jaws III”—suddenly goes missing after a stunt shark falls from a helicopter harness while a failing director punches a reporter and is later accused of inciting protestors to riot as film fans called “cineasts” vie for tickets to see the film screenings that only the privileged few are invited to. The controversially artsy film “Death at In-

tervals” is pulled “out of competition,” leaving the festival almost completely shut down (the festival director Leo goes missing while his assistant, Daniel usurps command without any experience handling the press, politicians, or rioting film-fans, leaving the festival nearly spinning out of control). Meanwhile, the cineasts protest elitist film-screening-ticket-distribution in addition to the unjustly perceived juried selections for the best film awards, demanding a “democratic” voting process, which fails when the voting machines stop working and the votes must be counted by hand.

Prior to the protests, as a show shark was being helicoptered in, a Russian billionaire’s boat is anchored offshore carrying precious cargo, a selection of TV and print reporters are descending upon Renne-Sur-Mer from across the globe, hoping for the best celebrity scoops and a chance at salvation. Reporters and other supporting characters subsequently become mixed up in all sorts of shenanigans including a murder mystery, police investigations, riots, extreme violence; a traitorous leak about a secretly planned police raid, and a rookie reporter even gets the scoop of her career by being in the right place at the right time when she impresses a Russian billionaire-pornographer with her race, education, and poise.

How Collins manages to keep the narrative and characters straight is impressive. He keeps the scenes moving quickly like jump-cuts as he deftly weaves characters in and out, alternating between tumultuous relationships and kooky character developments to stunning settings to action and dramatic crime scenes, red-herrings, police procedural investigations, and military action, all while peppering the narrative with French, Italian, Russian, and Portuguese (mostly without translation).

He slings zings against the rich and famous (one actress shows up nude to a red-carpet event wearing only an overcoat as a wrap, dropping it as she ascends the stairs); he set-directs the mob mentality of film fans, the vulnerability of regular people “on the street,” the cruelty of spies and as well as a variety of commentaries on all echelons of modern society. Among the melting pot of characters, there are photographers, failing directors, burned out policemen, wives, writers, Russian oligarchs, spies, crazy fans, protesters, media reporters, and technology that fails; “fake news,” freeloaders, leaders with questionable morals, references to a plethora of popular films (a film fan’s delight), and a

spot-on illustration of the internet world where nobody really knows what's going on anymore, or whom or what to believe.

Current political events are scripted with equal acumen. When, amid the festival chaos an unknown writer is found brutally murdered on a boat, the current local "maire" must publicly give her constituents "a word or two on the value of writers to humanity" in a press conference; she must, at the same time keep in mind her goal of rising in political power:

Today the maire knows she must be politically objective, quite practical in terms of her career. . . . She is aiming at the highest office in the land. And for that to happen she needs the help of the people who own these boats [referring to the wealthy residents]. To her mind, at least, it is time a woman got to the highest position in the land. So now at this critical moment in time, her main political responsibility is not to deal in a down in the seaweed sort of way re-describing a tragically grotesque crime, but to somehow use the moment to prepare herself for future political victories. She knows she can't let any odd cats out of this bag, and she has told her secret backers that she won't.

The maire goes on to "reassure" her audience, "the hoi polloi" that she is "on message" with them as well as with the people in the street.

There are too many brilliant metaphors and similes to quote in this compact review. The book is at times hilarious, full of quick dialogue and comedic scenes that would work perfectly in a film. At times, Collins goes "overboard" when, for example, the unknown writer's murdered body is discovered, he includes a detailed description of the decomposition of the corpse and the scientific name of the bacteria infecting it, along with the flesh-eating crabs and maggots the police find at the scene. But Collins's way with language and his ability to depict the sex-and-violence-obsessed mentality of humankind is spot on and nothing short of prophetic. Shallow, narcissistic, greedy, deal-making Hollywood "businessmen"; oblivious, wealthy, sex-crazed, aging has-been filmmakers; drug-addicted, neurotic actresses; social climbers, lazy writers, lusty directors, neglected wives, ambitious young interns, treasonous and suicidal police officers, and all the other dregs of society one can imagine are included. This book is a veritable Pandora's box, a tour-de-force joyride leaving us enter-

tained, wondering whether “film and democracy” really do stand “shoulder to shoulder” or whether “profit trumps everything” after all.

CARLA M. WILSON (BA, Communication /MFA, Fiction) has studied art, design, languages, and literature, and has published book reviews, poetry, creative nonfiction, as well as two books of experimental fiction, including *Impossible Conversations: Imaginary Interviews with World-famous Artists* (2015) and *Curious Impossibilities: Ten Cinematic Riffs* (2017), an interpretive homage to some of her favorite iconic films and filmmakers. She was interviewed on the podcast “New Books in Film” (2018) and appeared in two short film documentaries featuring local artists and writers (2015, 2018). She has exhibited her artwork online, in person, and in print. She lives in San Diego, California, where she currently writes and makes art in her spare time.

CABBIE 1971, 1972: TRUE TALES

N. G. Haiduck

Finishing Line Press

<https://www.finishinglinepress.com/product/cabbie-new-york-city-19711972-true-tales-by-n-g-haiduck/>

38 pages, Print: \$24.99

Laurel Kallen

In *Cabbie 1971, 1972*, poet and writer N. G. Haiduck provides an engaging collection of eighteen stories based on her experiences as a New York City taxicab driver in the early 1970s. As “a small-town girl, new to New York” (Letter to readers), Haiduck (then known as Nancy Gerber) decides to drive a cab at a time when very few women are so employed. In her letter to readers, she explains that the idea for the book arose when, years afterwards, an old friend presented her with a packet of letters she’d written during her days as a cabbie. While Haiduck claims not to have recreated her youthful voice, the naivete of the narrator is nevertheless apparent. “I’m a big hit at the garage,” she writes. “It’s not just that I’m a woman. It’s that I’m so little. . . . Sometimes