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BOOKS | NOVEMBER 2023

Louis Bury's *The Way Things Go*

By Raphael Rubinstein



The Way Things Go

by
Louis
Bury



“Everything can be put into a film. Everything should be put into a film,” Jean-Luc Godard announced in 1967, following the release of *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, his sprawling collage-film masterpiece that encompasses documentary footage of urban redevelopment around Paris, satirical Brechtian skits about everyday French life, pointed criticism of the US presence in Vietnam, scenarios linking capitalism and prostitution, countless pop-art images from the world of advertising and, among much else, that famous five-minute close-up of a cup of coffee accompanied by Godard’s whispered philosophical commentary. In his recently published *The Way Things Go*, Louis Bury seems to have followed a similar imperative. Here, briefly, are some of the items you will find in Bury’s book (I’m using the general term “book” because I can’t think of any more specific way to characterize it): a chapter on what it’s like to play online poker at a professional level, two spinoffs from Joe Brainard’s *I Remember*, letters and emails to Bury’s sister, a “pandemic diary” of life during Covid, a “waste diary” listing every item Bury used and threw away during a two-month period, documents from his application for tenure, his notes from an academic conference on “Ecofeminisms,” a “player evaluation” from his young son’s soccer coach, nearly ten pages of lab results from blood tests and an MRI ordered by his doctor, three exhibition reviews (of Olafur Eliasson, Andy Goldsworthy and Maya Lin) he wrote for art magazines, and an application for a fellowship leave from the college where he teaches in order to complete a book-in-progress titled *The Way Things Go*.

Louis Bury
The Way Things Go
(Punctum Books, 2023)

All of this takes up maybe a third of the book, with the balance given over to Bury's recollections of growing up on Staten Island; accounts of the anguish he and his parents felt as his older sister struggled with a diagnosis of pediatric lupus followed by years of heroin addiction; memories of his Holocaust-survivor grandmother; granular glimpses of parenting; and aphoristic reflections on poetry, politics and art writing. How in the hell, you may wonder, does Bury organize this mass of diverse material? An adept of constraint-based writing, which was the subject of his marvelously unconventional 2015 scholarly study *Exercises in Criticism: The Theory & Practice of Literary Constraint*, Bury solves this problem by borrowing from Oulipo the "melting snowball" form. Previously used mainly for poems in which each successive line is one letter or one word shorter than the previous line, the melting snowball (and its counterpart, "the snowball" where each line grows by a word or a letter) usually results in a cone-shaped quasi-concrete poem. In *The Way Things Go*, where each of the seventy-one chapters is one sentence shorter than the preceding chapter, the scale of the constraint is so vast and the process so gradual that it's only in the last few pages that one can easily see the "melting" at work. For some chapters, Bury highlights the form by numbering each sentence, but for most of the book the constraint functions as something churning away almost invisibly in the background.

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Early on (in sentence 2,546) Bury explains why he chose seventy-one: it's the average life-expectancy of a white American male born, like Bury, in 1981. He also reveals the source of the title: his 2016 visit with his son Ethan, then four, to the Guggenheim Museum where both of them became engrossed in Peter Fischli and David Weiss's 1987 film *The Way Things Go*, a thirty-minute record of absurd chain reactions assembled from a random array of everyday objects. Just like Fischli and Weiss using gravity and fire to drive their wobbly contraptions, Bury is wagering that the kinetic energy of words, and his quiet countdown, will fuse his disparate parts into some kind of meaningful sequence.

Maybe “meaningful” is too strong, too positive, a word for what seems, in both the Fischli/Weiss film and in Bury’s book, to be Beckettian universe, where the only feasible response to the utter futility of human existence is to devote yourself to tasks like transferring stones from pocket to mouth to pocket.

Running quite literally through every page of *The Way Things Go* is the climate crisis. In bold uppercase letters on the bottom of each of the book’s 283 pages is a headline that Bury has culled from the *Guardian*’s reporting on climate change. Resembling TV news crawls far more than academic footnotes, these grim statements (“Locust crisis poses a danger to millions, forecasters warn,” “Summers could last for half the year by 2100”) serve at least two functions: they connect the author’s personal travails (and pleasures) with larger issues, and they help stitch together the book’s diverse elements. For Bury, confronting the prospect of climate disaster creates an “anticipatory grief,” an emotional condition that permeates this book.

Another recurring theme is the author’s whiteness, starting with the very structure of the book: as Bury makes clear, seventy-one is the average lifespan for a white American of his age; the internet tells me that a Black American male born the same year as Bury can only expect to live to sixty-four-and-a-half. In an example of the fearless honesty that gives *The Way Things Go* so much of its power, late in the book Bury writes, “It’s a very white thing to be writing a book about whiteness and not realize that’s what you’re doing, until far along in the endeavor.” I can’t resist quoting two other sentences from the same chapter (twenty-four): “This book’s countdowns are coping devices, ways to make the steps between here and there feel manageable” and “This might be the saddest book about happiness ever written.” In *Exercises in Criticism*, Bury speculates that while the mostly Francophone Oulipo writers viewed constraint-based writing as “a playful literary laboratory experiment devoid of political ramifications,” more recent Anglophone authors “often view the practice as a form of cultural critique.” While I believe that Bury may be overstating the political disengagement of Oulipian writing, in the genre-defying openness of *The Way Things Go* he convincingly shows us that ludic literary experiments and responding to hard truths, political and personal, needn’t be—shouldn’t be—mutually exclusive.

Raphael Rubinstein is the New York-based author of *The Miraculous* (Paper Monument, 2014) and *A Geniza* (Granary Books, 2015). Excerpts from his recently completed book *Libraries of Sand* about the Jewish-Egyptian writer Edmond Jabès have appeared in *Bomb*, *The Fortnightly Review* and *3:AM Magazine*. In January 2023, Bloomsbury Academic will publish a collection of his writing titled *Negative Work: The Turn to Provisionality in Contemporary Art*. Since 2008 he has been Professor of Critical Studies at the University of Houston School of Art.

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