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## Two Kinds of Metaphysical Joke

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

**C**laude Rains, experiment six, Monster Monster. I call myself that because that is what I am." Indeed that is what he is--the narrator of Rick De Marinis's talented first novel, "A Lovely Monster: The Adventures of Claude Rains and Dr. Tellenbeck." He is a monster ("I do not mind. The noun is correct and it is not nomenclature."). He is the sixth of an experimental series called Alpha. ("But that is not a name.") He calls himself Claude Rains, "after the actor Claude Rains, whom I admire very much and wish to emulate." ("I watch all his movies when they appear on TV.") He is put together from the parts of many donors, including the brain of a Venezuelan gentleman that sometimes experiences jealous rages in Spanish, and the member. . . of a Shetland stud, a feistly little stallion named Luigi."

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**A LOVELY MONSTER**  
The Adventures of Claude Rains and Dr. Tellenbeck.

By Rick De Marinis.

**DEAD BABIES**

By Martin Amis.

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He lives with his creator, Kraft Tellenbeck, in a Southern California singles condominium called the Sun Spot. His scars are healing. He is a growing human. He is learning humor. ("Neo-frankensteinian meta-man,' I say, proud of my flawless syllabication. . . 'The creature from the black lagoon,' I say, and Tellenbeck puts his fist to his cheek and moans. It is amusing.") He likes to draw with sharp new crayons and to snack on "endive and mayonnaise on whole wheat toast with pepper and salt and a glass of ginger ale on ice." Occasionally, for old times' sake, he goes "Narr."

### 'All Men Are Monsters'

What is one to make of this oddly charming replay of the Mary Shelley story? "All men are monsters. . . Trapped in a gumbo of flesh and bone," says Bully Eckstein, the failed hamburger king and achieved occultist, when Claude Rains tries to explain to him why he cannot love his body more than he loves his electric shaver ("Look, I am a *monster*,' I tell him, suddenly reckless and angry"). It is as useful a message as any to take away from Dr. Marinis's controlled surreal fable.

But make of it what one will--whether a parody of our disjointed ways of communicating, or a mad metaphysical joke on the mind-body dualists--you can't

reduce "A Lovely Monster" to its fundamental logic. It's like when Bully Eckstein tells Claude about "Dread, Despair and Terror." "Just like love. . .you know D.D.T. through its effects. That's why stories are so good at telling you *what* it is without trying to nail it down. All the big guns in the mysticism game use the parable, Claude. Philosophers have tried to reduce the truth of parable to something you can fiddle with in the lab, but [they] have been stirring up the hive for a number of years now and I've yet to see any *honey*." So read "A Lovely Monster," and see the honey.

Martin Amis's second novel, "Dead Babies" (his first was "The Rachel Papers"), is also something of a metaphysical joke, but far from being oddly charming, it is oddly boring. Some time a few decades from now a grotesque collection of young people gathers for a weekend in an English country house, there to try out sex and drugs in as much variety as they know how.

### **The Piper Is Paid**

And do they ever know how! As Marvell Buzhardt, an American visitor, points out to the gathering: "Look. . .we're agreed that life is a rat's ass and that it's no fun being yourself all the time. So why not do with your brain what you do with your body?" Never mind, "all this dead babies about love, understanding, compassion--*use* drugs to kind of. . .cushion the consciousness, guide it, protect it, stretch it. We have a fantastic range of drugs now. . .We have chemical authority over the psyche--so let's use it and have a good time." And so they do; and so they pay the horrifying consequences, when "street sadness and false memories" and an organization called the Conceptualists take their predictable toll. (The Conceptualists? "They're new, different," explains one of the English weekenders. "I think they're the only people who've made creative sense of what's happening to the world now. For me, they're the only ones to have really made something out of what technology has done to sex and violence.")

Why does "Dead Babies"--with all its elegant verbal play, its nightmarish scenes, and its sexual savagery--finally fail to stir much interest? Very simply for the good old reason that there's never any tension in the story. The babies are already dead at the beginning, and there's nothing for them to get but deader. It's like the scenes in which one character goes out into the garden with an air rifle to shoot the white doves that fly around the house. It's no contest; and too obvious into the bargain.

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