History of a Pleasure Seeker by Richard Mason

Mildly Entertaining

From the acclaimed author of The Drowning People (“A literary sensation” —The New York Times Book Review) and Natural Elements (“A magnum opus” —The New Yorker), an opulent, romantic coming-of-age drama set at the height of Europe's belle époque, written in the grand tradition with a lightness of touch that is wholly modern and original.

The novel opens in Amsterdam at the turn of the last century. It moves to New York at the time of the 1907 financial crisis and proceeds onboard a luxury liner headed for Cape Town.

It is about a young man—Piet Barol—with an instinctive appreciation for pleasure and a gift for finding it. Piet’s father is an austere administrator at Holland’s oldest university. His mother, a singing teacher, has died—but not before giving him a thorough grounding in the arts of charm.

Piet applies for a job as tutor to the troubled son of Europe’s leading hotelier: a child who refuses to leave his family’s mansion on Amsterdam’s grandest canal. As the young man enters this glittering world, he learns its secrets—and soon, quietly, steadily, finds his life transformed as he in turn transforms the lives of those around him.

History of a Pleasure Seeker is a brilliantly written portrait of the senses, a novel about pleasure and those who are in search of it; those who embrace it, luxuriate in it, need it; and those who deprive themselves of it
This novel opens in Amsterdam in 1907 and is divided into two parts, with the first part comprising about two-thirds of the relatively short novel (less than 300 pages).

In Part One, we see the main character, Piet Barol -- a good looking, recent college graduate with multilingual, musical, and artistic skills -- charming his way to employment with one of Amsterdams richest, but also socially progressive, families as a live-in tutor to the familys only male child, Egbert, who is 10 years old and smart, but has quite a handful of psychological afflictions, including the fear of stepping out of the house for even just a moment. Barol's job is to further Egbert's education in the languages, music, and arts, as well as to coax him out of the house so that the future heir may partake in family outings.

Barol is first interviewed by Egbert's mother, Jacobina, who takes an immediate liking to -- and lust for -- him. Maarten, Jacobinas religious and now eccentrically celibate husband (the reason for this is explained in the novel), is similarly impressed. Barol gets hired and meets Egbert's beautiful, adult, and unmarried sisters, Constance and Louisa, as well as the household servants, two of whom -- the tall footman Didier and the slightly creepy, older butler Mr. Blok -- develop an immediate homosexual crush on him.

Against this backdrop of palpable sexual tensions that he immediately recognizes as favoring him, Barol intends to keep the cards he holds to himself and to play them adroitly. So it seems that the game is his to lose, but will he succeed or will he stumble?

In Part Two, we find Barol aboard a ship bound for South Africa. Soon after boarding, he realizes he has made a big mistake. Self-pity engulfs him, but he does meet an old ally, as well as new characters who have the potential to become allies or just additional conquests. The choices he makes can mean the difference between getting kicked out of the ship and left stranded in the middle of nowhere where the odds will overwhelmingly be against him, or making it to South Africa as planned where opportunities for pleasure seeking and, perhaps, even wealth building await him.

I thought the first part of the novel held many promising possibilities for interesting character and plot developments, so I was disappointed when the author apparently did not pursue those possibilities.

Had the author ditched the second part of the novel, which I thought merely changed Barols sex partners and did not substantially add to character or plot development, in favor of using the freed up time and space to add more depth to the characters and color to the plot in what used to be the first part of the novel, the resulting novel might have had
more substance and, therefore, appeal to readers like me who are looking for characters worth rooting for.

Sure, the author did a good job transporting me to what Amsterdam and America were like, at least to the super rich, during the earliest years of the twentieth century, and I did get a laugh or two at some of the characters occasional missteps, silliness, foibles, and/or bravados, and descriptions of the sexual acts were tasteful and some were quite fun and arousing. But overall, I was indifferent to Piet Barol and the fate that awaits him should he fail or succeed at finding the pleasures he seeks, because I have not been given any good reason to care about him. Good for him if he gets rewards or favors for sex, but no boohoo from me if he doesn't.

The novels ending suggests there might be a sequel or more. Here's hoping for a more fully developed Piet Barol and reasons to root for him!

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