

## Discerning Between Truth and—

John Bennion. *Spin*. Art by Amy Bennion. Newburgh, Ind.: By Common Consent Press, 2022. 460 pp. Paper: \$12.95. ISBN: 978-1-948218-53-5.

*Reviewed by Julie J. Nichols*

What would I do if cast out of my life with nothing?

Forced to ask ourselves this question in the first two chapters of this genre-bending, disturbing novel—John Bennion’s most complex yet—we get, early on, a glimpse of what he’s up to: the verb tense shifts from scene to scene, as Lily, our protagonist, is cast out of her life, deprived by a vicious ex of money, credit, phone, home, and child, and she must now cite paragraph-long lists of privileges and possessions impossible to obtain without those keys to entitlement. Her memories recount the story of her wealth-endowed marriage and her checkered past before that, with accompanying art, ostensibly by Lily herself. All she has now are dire uncertainties, both about what will happen next and what is actually happening now. Does Lily have borderline personality disorder, as her ex insists, or not? Who has been abusing whom? Has her ex really done what it seems he has done? Who would do that? Where can she get help? Who is telling the truth? Is there a truth that can be told about this situation?

So far, in these first two chapters, less than 10 percent of the book’s total length, we’re cast into the depths of anxiety, not only for Lily but for ourselves. We don’t know whom to believe. It does seem clear that Lily’s in a world of hurt. With a few of the three hundred and fifty dollars she has in her wallet—all the money she has now, given that her ex has closed down her bank accounts and stolen her belongings with all legal approbation—she goes to Deseret Industries to buy herself a

change of clothes. There she finds and buys, for fifty cents, an “Executive Decision Maker.” It is this device that she spins to help her decide what to do—in the process providing the novel’s title. The theme, Lily’s life, and the devices of storytelling spin far from the ordinary and expected.

It isn’t until the third chapter that we see another device Bennion uses to spin this tale: an insertion of authorial self, the first of a series of passages interrupting the story to comment from Bennion’s own voice. There’s no mistaking it: he identifies himself as the author of this novel, with self-reflective questions about theme and craft, verisimilitude and verifiability, choice and possibility. He liberally quotes Emmanuel Levinas, “[his] Virgil on this journey of self-exploration” (167), Kant, and many other writers, ruminating on the ethicality of what he’s doing as a novelist as well as on the implications of Lily’s choices (which are, of course, his).

At this point the reader—just like Lily—has little choice but to say, *Okay, we’re in for an unsettling ride. Might as well settle in. Take one chapter at a time and figure out how to do it.*

How does someone determine right from wrong? . . . One implication of [Kant’s] thinking is that all our ways of knowing are limited. We can’t know the world independent of our subjective perception of it. . . . Intellectually I [Bennion] embrace the idea of an ordered disorder in both ethics and reality, but as I drag my pilgrim flesh along my journey, I long for a simple pathway, where decisions are clear and life is free from obstacles and mishaps. (187–88)

But there’s no such path. Bennion says that in real life, an actual Executive Decision Maker (a vintage novelty toy) determined the course of the plot—of Lily’s happenstance—as he wrote (80). He says that he even allowed his students to cast the lot at least once and that, just as Lily commits to doing what her device tells her to do (though she herself sets the rules, since the cast-off machine is blank), he always wrote what the device directed, even if it wasn’t what he, or we, would want for Lily.

Spinning the Executive Decision Maker, she determines

- which direction to travel in to run away from her spouse and the law enforcement he enlists
- what transportation to use
- how long she will stay at each new place

Soon she realizes she needs the EDM to anchor her, as she has no other anchor. She is “outside the institutions that help most of us” (123), so she goes where the EDM says to go, looking for what it says to use, because she can’t trust anything else. Though she knows on one level that this is crazy behavior, she knows on another that she has to do it or risk becoming even crazier, even less grounded in any reality. Neither the church nor the law, neither capitalism nor social organizations grant her what she needs. Only following the spin of the wheel can she feel any semblance of control.

By increments her perceptions turn upside down. She is now the homeless undesirable her former affluent self ignored or detested. She now detests even more the people inside the stores and agencies who refuse to see her because she has no money. Utilizing the shoplifting skills that entertained her in high school, she scavenges food for her daughter and herself, resolving to do whatever she has to in order to flee her husband and the legal system that says her daughter isn’t hers to keep. She’ll steal; she’ll hide; she’ll change her identity; perhaps especially, she’ll lie. “In writing there are rules,” says Bennion. He continues:

In the fictional parts of this book it’s expected that I’m making things up. When I essay in my own voice, as here, I’m not to lie. The problem comes with mixing the two, especially when I say that some of Lily’s choices are random, but I determine what happens when she makes those choices. When am I lying and when telling the truth? Even I don’t know for sure. . . . [Lily’s] lies expand the potential of the universe . . . to bring possibilities into being. We lie to change the past and create the future. (141)

Lily lies herself through several mercies: people know she's lying about herself and her daughter, but they're kind to her anyway, observing her destitution, and she gets far enough away from the punitive ex-husband that she becomes safe for a relatively long time. In this new situation, largely built on lies, she creates a life. I'm vigorously avoiding spoilers here because this is a novel in which much of the pleasure is in the push-pull of not wanting to see the protagonist in worse trouble than she's already in and wanting very much to know what happens next, how she will survive, what choices she will make when she's found out.

As a new life builds itself around her fabricated identity, quite far from the moneyed, narcissistic husband (but is he?), Bennion reveals more devices, more manipulations, demonstrating how communities evolve, member by member, need by need, individual by individual, and how there is never the option of complete safety. We watch out for each other, but then other priorities arise and we can't depend on each other as we thought we could. Gangs, random acts of violence as well as kindness, narrow escapes, and generous helpers—all these ask us what we would do if there were nothing to trust but chance.

Another identity change for Lily later, Bennion reveals one more layer of his own project:

Why would a man in his late sixties write a novel about a lovely young woman? [Am I] a voyeur of my own character? I admire Lily's intelligence, will, determination, and devotion to her child. . . . Writing, I feel a tension between myself and Lily, that of host and guest. I've invited her into my head, but as host I am obligated to care for her. . . . I have come to believe that my own emotional health depends on my ability to open myself to the Other, [to welcome] guests into the house of my mind and [become] respectful of how they perceive themselves. (293–95, 319)

Through the roller coaster of Lily's post-divorce-court life, Bennion is working with (I was going to say "playing with," but it's more serious than that) notions of free will, cosmic forces, individual capacity,

and social justice. How much of anything that happens to us is in our control? How much can we blame any one factor, any one person, for the vicissitudes of their—or our own—lives? How much of what is said and done is constructed? What constitutes reality? Can we extricate ourselves from dire circumstances, ever, even for a moment? Whom can we trust?

Good things happen to Lily, and bad things happen. How will it end? You'll keep reading this book to find out, as with every new chapter in her story, every new philosophical mini-essay in Bennion's voice, your assumptions about possibilities—in life or in novel-reading, in Mormon upbringing or in secular education—are upended.

There are as many meanings to the word “cast” as there are directions in the spin of the Executive Decision Maker. I would not want to be cast out of my life with nothing, but I believe one of the things Bennion wants us to think about is that we are all castaways. Nothing, not our wealth or our place in society or our health or our safety, is cast in stone. We must—we *do*—all cast our futures in the spinning devices of our brains and hearts. *Spin* may not be the most optimistic book you'll read this year, but it's sure to be one of the most provocative and compelling. We are lucky indeed to have John Bennion in our midst, spinning his ever-evolving magic; we are lucky indeed to have BCC Press to publish that magic as we attempt to discern the impossibly slippery castings of trust, survival, and truth.

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