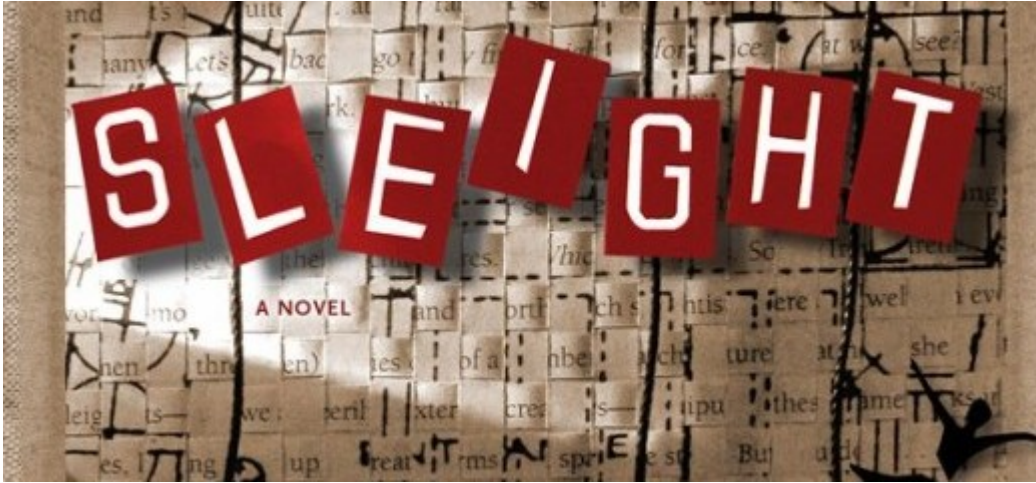


# thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



## Swimming in a world of Sleight

by Beau Hancock

### Note from the Author:

*What you are about to read is an analysis of a new novel by fellow thINKingDANCE writer Kirsten Kaschock. The editors and writers of thINKingDANCE felt it important to cover Kaschock's book *Sleight*, not merely because we are proud of one of our own (which we are), but because Kaschock's descriptions of the fictional performance form sleight contain such striking similarities to the dance experiences we cover for this site, this compendium of all things dance-related in Philadelphia. And it is this primacy of the physical and performative in *Sleight* that led us to include the following review:*

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I like to swim in fiction, all books really, but specifically those creative worlds developed by those creative world-makers dubbed novelists. I glide through their settings and periods and places and sneak up against their characters, our bare skin touching with the most sensual of intimacy. I want to be lost in the author's liquid space of words and ideas. And it was with great pleasure that I stroked, crawled, and waded through Kirsten Kaschock's debut novel *Sleight* and its intoxicating layers of form.

*Sleight* feels like several books in one: a work of poetry, of fiction, of history, of performance theory and social commentary. And it is not surprising that the text is capable of living in so many disparate spheres given Kaschock's own biography: an art-maker and poet and academic, a product of a self-proclaimed "dance family," a graduate of Yale and currently a doctoral fellow in dance at Temple University. She draws on this conglomeration of influences, styles and experiences to weave a richly textured story, a novel that surpasses genre definition in its framing of the interlocking narratives of its central characters.

Other critics have noted the text's unconventional nature, and it is unconventional, not simply because of the footnotes and imagined critiques that pepper the work. Each performance of sleight—Kaschock's fictional time-based art that marries architecture, dance and

poetry into evening-length concerts—begins with the recitation of a precursor, a poetic listing of non sequiturs. The sleightists, the live performers of the form, then navigate the architectures, polyhedral constructions of either blown glass or fiberglass that are nearly invisible on stage. Troupes hire sleightists in a parallel to the traditional dance company model, which are managed by directors who shape the sleight. And it is this insistence on portraying the characters through the body, through physical experience and performance that makes Kaschock's freshman effort as a novelist so unique.

She introduces Lark, a former sleightist, disgorging her Needs, beetle-like entities that are desiccated, their vibrant color eventually forming the palette for the Souls Lark sells to support her family. Clef, Lark's sister and star of the sleight troupe Monk, is presented through her bruises and achy joints, through the reciprocated pain of Lark's pregnancy (the sisters connection goes far beyond emotional attachment, literally sharing the pain of each other's physical traumas). Byrne, the unlikely Hand (a practitioner of sleight whose job is to develop the precursor), is shown with rock in hand, the egg-shaped stone rubbed smooth from years of use and switched every New Year to the opposite appendage but never removed. Kaschock rounds out the quartet of central characters with West, the coolly detached brain behind the ingenious creations of the celebrated sleight troupe Kepler. It is West's drive to produce a new sleight performance that binds these four characters together, their fragile and fragmented lives intersecting, and forever changes the art form to which they have all, in their own way, devoted their lives.

Within the text (and contained largely in the footnotes) lies the history of sleight: from its questionable origins on the island of Santo Domingo through possibly schizophrenic French Jesuit Pierre Revoix, to the Isadora Duncan-esque figure of Antonia Bugliesi and her formation of sleight from Revoix's original drawings, to the codification and board certified standards of later years. It is in this period that we find West negotiating these precedents, pushing at the seams of regulation to fashion a work that moves beyond the regimented and into the profound, into the revolutionary. And through West's struggle Kaschock illustrates the underlying challenge of any creative process, to not only create but also create anew, to shift the rules from what was to what is. We see West's seeming failure, even after breaking nearly every convention in the sleight rulebook, until the final pivotal performance when his desire is made manifest, but with far-reaching implications for dark and stormy Lark, red-headed sister Clef, and Byrne the rock-handed Hand.

I not only recommend reading *Sleight*, but suggest several readings, as the copious connections, the links of character, thematic elements, and description, are so finely knotted as to be nearly imperceptible. Kaschock provides a clear pool for the reading, but like a favorite childhood swimming hole, there are surprises under each rock, each cranny a possibility for shock or trauma, and it is this submersion into the unexpected that led me to delight in the electric world of *Sleight*.

More information on *Sleight* can be found here: <http://kaschock.wordpress.com/>

*Sleight* is available through Coffee House Press:

<http://www.coffeehousepress.org/authors/kirsten-kaschock/>

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