

Leon the pig and a number of other reprehensible types

BY DONU KOGBARA

WYOMING TRAIL
CHERYL MOSKOWITZ
Granta, £9.99
TOUGH, TOUGH TOYS FOR
TOUGH, TOUGH BOYS
WILL SELF
Bloomsbury, £14.99

I'm always grateful when an author allows me to feel strongly about a character. And Cheryl Moskowitz has given me much cause for gratitude in "Wyoming Trail."

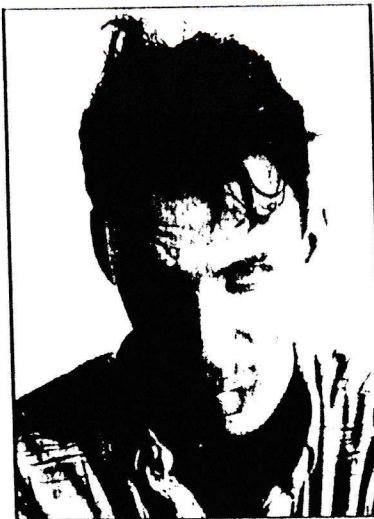
I absolutely loathed Leon, a pot-smoking, free-spirited Jewish-American doctor who dominates almost every page of this fine first novel that kicks off in the Swinging Sixties.

To tell you exactly why I found Leon so hateful would be to give away too much of the plot. Let's just say that, though he's a husband and father, family life is not one of Leon's priorities; and, while he's busy being "true to himself," he fails to be true about himself. His wife and kids are left in the dark about something pretty major for years and years until it is eventually dropped, like a bombshell, on their daughter Francine, through whom the tale is told.

"Your father is crazy," were the last words Francine ever heard her grandpa utter. The old man hit the nail on the head.

On one occasion, Leon tells Francine: "You have taken the only thing I ever loved and now you are going to deprive me again by your going. I have already cried a small pool of tears but it is only the beginning of the ocean I still have to weep."

Given that — according to him — the only thing that Leon has ever loved is not Francine (or any of his offspring), and given that he blames



Will Self: nuggets from the depths

Francine for for the loss of the only loved thing, why will her departure contribute to his reasons for crying on an Atlantic or Pacific scale?

"Crazy" is putting it mildly.

Francine — an aching needy daddy's girl — is flawed but likeable, and a great storyteller. She subtly guides us through her life — childhood, adolescence, coming-of-age, a move from the US to the UK, Leon's attempts to install them in a commune, and countless other experiences — and kept this reader riveted with a flow of surprises.

Talking about surprises, I enjoyed most of the stories in Will Self's new book. As the kind of female who finds masculine obsessions tiresome, I feared from the macho title that the entire collection would bore me rigid.

In fact, "Design Faults in the Volvo 760 Turbo" did. I found it soporific, self-indulgent and completely pointless.

As for the title story, I can live without pretentiously laddish and essentially meaningless scribblings

like: "[Bill] finally achieved the dharmic state he had been seeking all morning: an absorption of his own being into the very act of driving that exactly matched his body's absorption into the fabric of the car; a bio-mechanical union that made eyes, windscreens, wheels, legs, turbo-charger flight mechanism..."

Nevertheless, significant chunks of this story — and all of several others — are well written and reflective. "The Nonce Prize," my favourite, is brilliant from start to finish. It is about Danny, a crack-addicted black man who is wrongly imprisoned for a paedophile rape and murder.

Will Self is not famed for disapproving of drugs or for writing morality tales and yet he makes Danny's dependence appear tragic, sordid, desperate and self-defeating. It is only when Danny decides to do without drugs that Self allows him to blossom, physically and intellectually.

"Flytopia" made my skin crawl (all of these stories have a disgusting edge, and are not for the squeamish). But one can learn something from plumbing the depths.

And "Flytopia" is very, very good. Weird, wonderful, imaginative and thought provoking, it is about how one man and the insects around him make the transition from conflict to reconciliation.

The dust-jacket calls this "a nasty, heartless compendium of the muddy foreshore and the abysmal depths of the human psyche." For once, the dust-jacket is 100 per-cent accurate.

Donu Kogbara is a freelance journalist and critic.

John Diamond's book, "C: Because Cowards Get Cancer Too..." is published by Vermillion at £9.99 and not £17.99 as stated in our June 19 review.