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Hilarious Novel Stars Modern Tom Jones

CONSENTING ADULTS OR THE DUCHESS WILL BE FURIOUS. By Peter De Vries. Little, Brown. \$10.95.

By THOMAS BONNER JR.

When summer is well upon us and *The New Yorker* grows thin, the Mark Crosses, Tiffanys, Cointreaus, Hartmans, and Jerry Silvermans all have departed for the beaches; Peter De Vries comes to rescue readers with a hilarious novel, "Consenting Adults or the Duchess Will Be Furious."

De Vries, a veteran writer for *The New Yorker*, has written 20 novels and has edited *Poetry* magazine. His more recent novels include "I Hear America Swinging" and "Madder Music." Between the witty title on the front cover and the waggish photograph of the author at an outdoor telephone booth on the rear cover, "Consenting Adults" offers a continuation of the entertainment found so consistently in his sketches and longer pieces.

The protagonist, Ted Peachum, recalls his early manhood by focusing on his relationship with three women: Kathy A'peggio, a policewoman whose equipment belt fascinates him; Snooky von Sickle, well-endowed in family, wealth and physique; and Columbine d'Amboise, flat of chest and junior in years. Recovering from a breakdown

of sorts following his college years, Ted knocks about from one to another of these females — always in pursuit, more often rejected, and finally accepted by one after an interval with the Peppermint sisters, triplets.

Peachum has a Tom Jones quality with his mixture of innocence and devilishness. In fact the novel has the comic tone associated with 18th-century English fiction, especially Henry Fielding's. Peachum's self-consciousness about his motives, state of mind, and sexual tendencies parody Fielding's use of the moral sense. His sexual encounters are described in an open, playful, and often robust manner. Curiously, Peachum has many of the characteristics of a contemporary hero as well, Ignatius J. Reilly of "A Confederacy of Dunces."

Gently and sometimes not so, De Vries satirizes the literary motif of the Midwesterner going to the East, the new woman in her masculine trappings, and the New York stage and its proclivities. For his rather pointed humor, De Vries also uses a panorama of characters from other works, Faulkner's the Snopes in particular. Literary allusions like schools of minnows race through this novel from the "Alice in Wonderland" title to a ques-

tion from "Little Women." As Peachum teases the New York director with his enormous vocabulary, he also teases the reader, who is addressed directly in the closing of the narrative. "Consenting Adults" does more, of

course, then supplement the summer issues of *The New Yorker*. It brings smiles — ultimately laughter — and helps one forget the possible demise of Harper's and the melancholy of the coming presidential election.