Christopher Conti, *Proofs* (Puncher and Wattman, 2012)

You know those snippets in the newspaper which make you laugh because they are truly stranger than fiction? Those tiny 100 to 200 word narratives about someone’s silly misfortune or stupid misdeeds? They are the stories that cause someone to invariably yell out across the kitchen table, ‘Hey, listen to this’, and they are also the stories which spark entire novels from light-fingered writers willing to elaborate. Debut fiction writer Christopher Conti has stuck to the formula of those newspaper oddities and composed an entire book of such stories, aptly titled *Proofs*. It is not an original undertaking, as one of Austria’s most prolific writers, Thomas Bernhard, has done this before in his 1997 book *The Voice Imitator*. In fact Conti’s final entry is a cheeky tribute to his relationship with Bernhard where Conti just may be the poet who memorised the work of a more famous poet – who just may be Bernhard – and when the more famous poet died, declared it was him all along who wrote the poems, while the now-deceased, more famous poet became sullied as a word-thief. With this final entry, ‘Pseudonym’, we forgive Conti his template pilfering because he gives credit where credit is due, and does so cleverly, italicising within the text one of Bernhard’s often-used phrases in *The Voice Imitator*, ‘in the nature of things’. But let’s leave Bernhard aside and focus on Conti.

In *Proofs*, Conti creates entire scenarios in less than a single page. There is the Swedish student who engages in lofty conversations with Australian travellers at the Veste Oberhaus in Passau only to pass them off as his own adventures to his parents via postcards; the genius who has given up all intellectual endeavours in order to devote his time to applying for jobs, which he cannot win because he is too smart; the ageing best-selling author who has left behind writing in his endless search for inspiration to write; the famous actor who descended into oblivion in an effort to immerse himself, as he had with acting, in new work and was then deemed even greater than before by his critics, as if his new ‘work’ was indeed a theatrical performance. These are some of my favourite accounts, and they happen to come at the beginning of the book. I think there is good reason for this. When I began to read *Proofs*, I found I was gobbling up the stories, one after the other in quick succession, amazed with the technique, enamoured with the idea that in one page – sometimes one paragraph or even one sentence – Conti can so succinctly and matter-of-factly show how brilliance is apt to become madness. These are weird and tragic stories written in terse and unbiased journalistic style, ensuring the pathos with which we normally read fiction is obsolete. The neurosis, or simply ‘bad luck’, works as a paradigm for our times: we live in utter chaos and if we cannot see the humour in it, the absurdity of it, we very well could fall prey to the same level of insanity in which Conti’s characters have found themselves. Once I got beyond this *Eureka!* moment and fell into the groove of *Proofs*, however, I began to tire of the formula. Each story begins with a name of a person, a country from where the person hails, and a job description of the person:

After dropping me at the Civic on Pitt Street, the former president of Bolivia, pointing to a pistol under the driver seat of his cab, told me he always kept a weapon near to hand in case of revolution. (‘Civic’, 36)
Not only was the set-up becoming arduous but the density of the information heaped into a single sentence, and the complexity of the grammatical structure on top of it, was failing to entice me in an ongoing fashion:

A onetime colleague who rose to division head at the National Oceans Office by cultivating a reputation as a Russian chess grandmaster, a reputation which proved invulnerable to validation and invalidation alike and thus consigned all judgment of his character to limbo, has written to me and another onetime colleague for over a year now about his intractable problems with the local council and its compulsory notices and red tape. (‘Cordon’, 16)

These two components, and the fact that the main characters are habitually males, made me question the book’s sustainability. Of course just when you begin to question whether you have the stamina to continue on in this monotonous way, the story of the philosopher of morals pops up. A snippet of pure brilliance and madness in which the philosopher’s entire belief system is thrown into turmoil because an Arsenal fan saved a Chelsea fan from an oncoming train. The question of ‘why’ so plagued him through the years that it became a point of obsession and when, by chance, he saw the Arsenal fan and seized the moment to ask him ‘why’, he failed to understand the everyday hero’s answer as ‘the guy obviously needed help - so I helped’. The philosopher of morals threw the Arsenal fan under an oncoming train. Now I see that I, too, am getting caught up in information overload and complex grammatical structures in trying to sum up the story. And that’s just it: where the novelist or short story writer has the option to use pages of description to tell the tale, Conti (and myself) only has a few sentences. So rather than let the style drag you down after that initial high, my suggestion is to not try to read this book in one sitting, or even two or three. Make sure you give yourself every chance to enjoy the story of the seven Nobel-Prize winning physicists who have checked themselves into an exclusive clinic in Switzerland in order to watch Disney films. It’s a little ripper.

Heather Taylor Johnson