Samantha Hunt. *The Invention of Everything Else*.
New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008.

The task of describing Samantha Hunt's second novel (her first, *The Seas*, won her a "5 under 35" award from the National Book Foundation) is deceivingly simple: *The Invention of Everything Else* is part reanimation and part reimagining of the end of inventor Nikola Tesla's life and the world of 1940s New York City. Nikola Tesla relies on facts, and so the pages are dripping with them—information about New York around the turn of the century; scientific and tactile details about inventions of the time; biographical information about a host of characters including Tesla, Marconi and Edison. Still, I cannot say this is a "novel of facts." That would ignore the equally viable summary of this novel as a parade of the bizarre: people talk to pigeons, statues come alive, embodied ghosts have lively discussions with the living, time machines take flight. And yet neither can I say, despite the pages teeming with an almost magical world, this is "a novel of the occult."

More aptly, this is a novel which tries to discover what happens when the world of fact and the world of the otherworldly intersect. This is a novel of questions. Why does the world choose to support one unlikely invention over another? Why do we love who we love? Why can we not, or rather why do we refuse to, forget the past? And how could such an intelligent man, a man who gave the world alternating current electricity and the remote control and the radio, create a death ray thinking that something that could destroy human life would save it?

These questions are not just asked by Hunt in order to fulfill some "thoughtful-fiction" prerequisite. She is not looking to resolve and dismiss them, to exonerate anyone or to reinvent history; rather she is looking to explore the moral gray areas which make these questions important. *The Invention of Everything Else* is not just an intellectual exercise; it is the enactment of a philosophy of life. Hunt is interested in the dark and dirty caverns of our minds, and so fills the novels with oppositions and juxtapositions. Even when we are first introduced to Tesla we see that

nothing—no one—is easily definable. He tells us he is a: "Serbian, world-famous inventor, once celebrated, once visited by kings, authors and artists, welterweight pugilists, scientists of all stripes, journalists with their prestigious awards, ambassadors, mezzo-sopranos, and ballerinas" although "Now, more regularly, no one visits." One moment he is inflated, a man beyond myth, beyond reach, and the next he is a frail body sipping broth alone in a dirty hotel room.

The brilliance of Hunt's novel is that she makes no judgments about this fall from grace; actually she seems to favor it. Nikola Tesla the driven inventor is incapable of real love—except for a pigeon. The man we meet in 1943, no longer creating viable inventions, no longer grounded fully in reality, is loveable, sympathetic, and kind. This is the man that Louisa, a chambermaid in the Hotel New Yorker where Tesla lives, meets, befriends believes in. Much of the power of the novel, as well as much of Hunt's focus, resides not with the "interesting," "brilliant" Tesla, but the "ordinary" Louisa and her father Walter, her burgeoning love Arthur, her "Uncle" Azor.

This is not to say that the lives of these ordinary folks are mundane. While there are carefully researched details about the lives of a chambermaid in 1940s New York, her World War I veteran father, their regular house, and regular desires, Hunt uses these "regular" characters to explore the almost unbelievable obsessions of the time period with time-travel, synchronicity and Martian invasions. She flawlessly recreates not only the whir of invention ("There was coughing, spitting, matches being lit to burn pipes, lunch pails being tossed aside at the sudden burst of a good idea. There was swearing and steam pipes clanging") but the chaos of an entire time and place where discoveries like the Rhythm Method, electricity, the Dewey Decimal system and penicillin having been popping up every day for years and World Wars are both in recent past and the not too distant future. When Louisa's "uncle" Azor not only builds a time machine, but convinces her father to take a trip in it, when people who are dead start reappearing, when government agents begin using their resources to spy on an almost irrelevant old man, we believe it. We don't even blink.

This is where the true acrobatics begin. Sure, *The Invention of Everything Else* creates the requisite alternate universe where we can believe just about anything the author tells us occurs; but this is standard great writing. What brings the novel beyond that is Hunt's ability to estrange us from the world we currently live in, to show us something about ourselves. First she attaches us to her characters. Hunt's ready access to and honest portrayal of her characters' inner-worlds helps counterbalance the potentially cold scientific details necessary in a novel about an inventor who forgoes food, sleep and love for his discoveries. The writing throughout is strong, but the most beautiful language, the most energy-filled sentences, are those related to love. When Louisa meets Arthur he "stares at her and Louisa stares right back, her mouth open a bit because it is this staring that seems to make him so very different from other men Louisa has ever known, even Walter. Arthur, unlike the others, actually seems to be trying to see her." This is a complex and interesting world where people can be simultaneously cold and passionate.

The connection we feel to the characters, allows Hunt to have them ask questions we, in the modern world may find silly. As a child Louisa asks her father of the radio how "so many people, so many voices could fit inside such a small box." And then Hunt takes the question and she uses it to demonstrate to us how strange the world we live in is: "Walter's explanation, rather than dispel any mystery, created an even larger one. Miniature actors squeezed inside each radio was silly, yes, but understandable. Magical waves of hidden sound, secret messages traveling around the globe just waiting to be decoded in Louisa's living room? That was a true mystery." Miniature people in a radio is laughable in the modern world, but invisible waves transmitting voices still sounds impossible.

Soon we are completely distant from our own world and we can see that despite the details and facts of New York changing, much of the world hasn't changed at all. There are still foreign doctors, mayors, textile mill owners, "immigrants who had found it impossible to ply their trade here." There are still people talking about time-travel, there are still people holed up in small shops trying to invent death rays.

Hunt's venture then is not just to recreate history, or the people (both famous and ordinary) who lived through it, but to ask what the role of invention truly is, if we can never invent what people covet the most: immortality. Throughout the novel Tesla's part of the story is being narrated to a friend, Samuel Clemens. He says, "I'll just tell you what I can remember because memory is as close as I've ever gotten to building my own time machine." And although as he nears the end of his story Tesla realizes that words are not enough to convey his life and its meaning, he knows words are what we have. As Louisa says of the New York Public library: "How could there be so much, so many lives, so many books that were, each one, filled with stories, filled with letters, as if the library were some sort of tremendous brain. Memories, history . . . Each book was a doorway to the past, to the dead."

Jena Salon