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and a feature on

THOMAS WOLFE

by GAITHER STEWART

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ABOUT CRITIQUE

Critique is a monthly Internet magazine dedicated to publishing quality reviews of modern and classic fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, as well as insightful features on and interviews with publishing's icons. *Critique* is an English language publication that caters to a well-educated international audience between 25 and 65 years of age.

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THOMAS WOLFE IN ASHEVILLE:

'SURELY HE HAD A THING TO TELL US.'

REPORTED BY GAITHER STEWART

At some stage of life we seem to make an unconscious choice between sticking close to our roots, or becoming uprooted wanderers. Home or permanent exile? It usually comes down to one or the other. Home is sweet but in the words of Omar Khayam, "there is nothing more delightful than to be a stranger." Once land-locked, it is hard to wander, but in your dreams, in your fantasy, in your imagination, you will always wonder what it's like "out there" on the edge. On the other hand, even if the willing exile becomes bitter at his loss—and he *has* lost something of himself—there is never a real return home and he is condemned to remain a stranger. A stranger in exile, a stranger at home.

One of the strangest moments of my journalistic life was a two-day interview I did some years ago with the Russian-French writer and former KGB officer, Kirill Chenkin, at his summer home on the southeast coast of France. The Cold War was still on. Spies were everywhere. Chenkin had defected to the West and had just published a book about disinformation and the role of double and triple agents,

titled in Russian, *Okhotnik Vverkx Nogami*, or, *The Upside Down Hunter*. Imagine my surprise when it came out that Chenkin, in his long and complex life of wandering through Europe, Soviet Russia and America—including fighting in the 13th International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War—had taught French literature at Asheville's Black Mountain School of Arts in 1939-40.

A few moments about my native Asheville and we were already into Thomas Wolfe, who had died only shortly before Chenkin arrived there. Thomas Wolfe too, like Chenkin, like myself, was a wanderer and a stranger but different from many wanderers in that his home in Asheville in the mountains of North Carolina remained forever the center of his world.

"I THINK NO ONE could understand Thomas Wolfe who had not seen or properly imagined the place he was born and grew up," wrote Maxwell Perkins, Wolfe's friend and editor at Scribner's Sons. "Asheville is encircled by mountains. The trains wind in and out through labyrinths of passes. A boy of Wolfe's imagination imprisoned there could think that what was beyond was all wonderful—different from what it was where there was not enough of anything for him."

Thomas Wolfe's fictional town of Altamont, that is, Asheville, was a town of 50,000 people, at an altitude of 2,100 feet, ringed by the Blue Ridge, Pisgah and Newfoundland mountains. That Asheville, today number one on many polls of tourism and retirement sites, has always had a magic attraction. Every other house in Wolfe's time hung out a "tourist rooms for rent" shingle. Sumptuous hotels like the Grove Park Inn overlooking the city, the Biltmore Castle modeled on those of Bavaria's "Mad Ludwig," the East's highest peak of Mount Mitchell, the Cherokee Indians, trout-filled rivers and a four-seasoned climate make it special. Surprisingly cosmopolitan, it is a major arts and cultural Mecca, once labeled "Little Paris."

In Wolfe's time, that Black Mountain school became an internationally famous arts school under the direction of Josef Albers, attracting teachers like Willem de Kooning, John Cage, Merce Cunningham and Kirill Chenkin. As one could imagine, teachers and students alike of this unique school were considered looneys—if not all queers—by the good normal people of Asheville.

Yet, Wolfe's Asheville was sophisticated also. It attracted visitors from the Antebellum plantations of the Deep South, rich people from Florida, and puzzling visitors from New York. Scott Fitzgerald, then from Hollywood, visited his wife Zelda confined in the Highlands Hospital and with his drunken antics titillated

guests at the plush Grove Park Inn where he lodged, while Glenn Miller played swing in the Battery Park Hotel. Asheville was a hidden "in" place.

Wolfe's town of the 20s, 30s and 40s was divided into three groups: the rich who lived in exclusive areas along the lakes, in the forests and on the mountainsides; the middle-class and poor whites who lived in wood frame houses in town; and blacks who lived segregated in wood shanties in "niggertown" in the downtown.

That's the town Wolfe seemed to attack in his masterpiece, *Look Homeward Angel,* published in 1929 when he was 29 years old. His over 200 characters of Asheville were hardly disguised. Ashevillians of the day read the book and were furious if they were identified or chortled about the others if they escaped notice. Wolfe anticipated their anger and never returned home again until 1937, while the book was officially banned in Asheville.

As one of the most autobiographical writers of the 20th century, two Wolfean images remain in literary memory: trains and niggertown. Marvelous descriptions of one, racism in the other. Wonderful trains of escape out of the mountains that carried him first to Chapel Hill, then later to New York. And trains like the Carolina Special and the Asheville Express that brought him back. His "niggertown," the black ghetto in the Asheville downtown just behind the police department and the city jail, instead earned him a racist label for all the things said or left unsaid, a reputation from that he never escaped. He didn't need Nazi Germany to feed his inbred racism, the kind that was just there in him as a result of his epoch. As a product of his upbringing. Not a racism based racial hatred, but simply a society of two races symbolized by the two water fountains, one for "white", one for "colored", that once stood on Pack Square near his house.

I mean, Thomas Wolfe was not one to stage sit-ins in the rear of Asheville city buses to which blacks of the day were relegated. He never took off his shirt to sweat with the "niggers" in the stifling non-air-conditioned cars of the New York Express. Nor was he ever thrown out of Asheville's black beer parlors. He was much too early for that.

Six-feet-six and 240 pounds, Wolfe ate and drank and consumed life in huge portions. He wrote the same way. There is precious little tranquility in his works. Life for him was a desperate affair. He attacked life. His art was shouted at the top of his lungs. His favorite words are "furious" and "savage." His world reeled about him. Life was a demonic dance. Of his own creative process, he wrote: "The words

were wrung from him in a kind of bloody sweat, they poured out of his finger tips, spat out of his snarling throat like writhing snakes; he wrote them with his heart, his brain, his sweat, his guts; he wrote them with his blood, his spirit; they were wrenched out of the last secret source and substance of his life."

His work has been called "a vast but incomplete saga of one man's pilgrimage on earth, a saga so formless that the term novel can be applied to its parts only with extreme caution and so monumental that it exploded the covers of four vast books in which its portions were imprisoned."

It is true. For Wolfe the separate parts of his writing formed portions of a great whole. He wanted to put one man on record and through that person represent America. Yet, his central theme was eternally the loneliness of the individual—the stranger, the wanderer, lost in the complex currents of time. Wolfe himself said he was dealing with 150 years of time, 2000 characters of every racial and social class of America.

In a letter of 1932 he wrote: "The book on which I have been working for the last 2-3 years is not a volume but a library." He was always shuffling around the parts. In 1934, he wrote two long novels, really the same book, *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time And The River,* and five short novels.

In 1936, he traveled to Germany, a country he loved. But once there his eyes were opened to Nazism. His stay in a Munich pension in Amalienstrasse and the beating he took at the Oktoberfest left an imprint on him. He then wrote the truth about Hitler's Germany in his novella *I Have A Thing To Tell You* [*Nun Will Ich Ihnen Was Sagen*], written in the crisp Hemingway style that he admired.

Between 1936 and his death in 1938 he wrote a huge manuscript from which his then editor, Edward Aswell of Harper's, assembled two novels—*The Web and the Rock* [the south and the north, the feminine and the masculine] and *You Can't Go Home Again* [published posthumously], seven short novels and many short stories. In a way, the latter have been lost even by those who know Wolfe well, although they contradict anti-Wolfe criticism that he had no control. In these shorter works as in his letters that read like perfect short stories he showed his craftsmanship, focus and artistic control.

His were nonetheless gigantic works. In the first scene of *Of Time And The River* at the Asheville railroad station he held the suspense for over 30,000 words. Yet he recognized the need for cuts and always agreed: he knew he had no time for revision.

WOLFE'S VOICE WAS LESS SOUTHERN than it was 19th century English romantic. Of all the Southern writers, Thomas Wolfe was not trying to come to terms with the South. He was held prisoner between a search for a tradition and his attempt to escape from any limitations at all. His goal was to describe all of American society. The South was only the flavor. The result of his attempt was violent and explosive just as his South was violent and explosive.

Yet, he always retained his deep feelings for Asheville, the cradle of his world. When he tried to come home in 1937 he took a cabin in the outskirts from where he tried to renew his contacts. He saw friends and threw great parties but like the eternal stranger he never really returned home. His life that summer was dedicated to so much drinking that he had to return to New York to work.

He saw life as a thing of "becoming." And he was always starting over.

Time itself stood at the center of the mystery of experience. Each scene, each person had to be placed in time in order to have meaning; isolated they had little value. In *The Story of a Novel* he breaks down his time into three types: present time, of people moving forward to the immediate future; past time, the accumulated impact of man's experience so that each moment of life is conditioned by all that one has experienced up to the moment; and immutable time, the time of rivers, mountains, oceans, the earth, the unchanging universe of time compared to the transience of man's life.

ASHEVILLE'S ACKNOWLEDGED Wolfe specialist, Kenneth Brown, calls Thomas Wolfe the Tchaikowsky of writing. "Even though Tchaikowsky was a good orchestrator and Wolfe was not a good organizer, they were in the same vein. You cannot mistake anything Wolfe wrote. He has a stamp. Like also Dostoyevsky who fascinated Wolfe! At a time the Russian writer was still unheralded and disreputable, he was Wolfe's model. Wolfe once wrote a dozen pages about his experience of reading *Brothers Karamazov*. Joyce," says Brown, "was more skilled. Wolfe's writing was a great outpouring of ideas. He gave the reader the sensation of living through a continuous virtuoso performance. To read him you must accept it all in order to get to the gold his works contain. The only way to get it is to read it all."

BERNARD DEVOTO INITIATED a great anti-Wolfe campaign in 1936 in an article in *Saturday Review* entitled "Genius Is Not Enough," in which he lambasted the

excesses and deficiencies of Wolfe's first two novels. DeVoto argued that Wolfe lacked the maturity and discipline to achieve real art. Critics, personally offended at his lack of restraint, spoke of the neurotic side of Wolfe's writing: He wrote in a compulsive frenzy. He did not know how to compose. John Peale Bishop concluded that, "he achieved the utmost intensity of which incoherent writing is capable." Alfred Kazin labeled the writing "an imperial maladjustment" and his imagery "swollen and turgid." Wright Morris called Wolfe's work "a river of clichés, nouns and soaring adjectives," repeating the charge that "appetite and raw material are not enough." The English critic, Pamela Hansford Johnson, in "Thomas Wolfe and the Kicking Season," while admitting that critics sometimes gang up on writers, writes that "Wolfe had almost all the virtues of major novelists except good taste and power of organization," and that "he was not only an adolescent like us: he was a sillier adolescent and at his worst makes us blush."

Wolfe was hit hard by the critics. He was hurt and reacted to the mildest of criticism. His reactions appeared pettishly in later writings, like his play on words with DeVoto's name- DeVoto Blotto – to signify his contempt for despised critics. The criticism that he both needed and accepted in the form of extensive editorial assistance was allegedly the primary reason for leaving his friend and editor, Maxwell Perkins, to go to Harper's and a new editor. Yet the fact that Perkins let Wolfe convince him to retain those passionate flights in his work made of Perkins one of America's most famous editors.

American critics, however, have always had precise ideas about how novels should be written, being oriented toward form, poise and orthodox sophistication that cannot tolerate the country bumpkin, which Wolfe was. Academics tend to avoid him like the plague, unforgiving of the fact that he wrote like Thomas Wolfe. And other writers too join in the anti-Wolfean chorus.

Not only the Ashevillians who peopled *Look Homeward, Angel* worked against Wolfe. People there who never read a book in their lives joined in the outrage against native son-traitor Thomas Wolfe and his family. I once asked the elderly father of a boyhood friend, who had a garage just behind the Wolfe house, what The Old Kentucky Home—Dixieland in the novel —was like in the 1930s and 40s. He described it as a filthy pigsty and the whole family as pigs. The family was a bunch of drunks and nuts.

Yet, Thomas Wolfe was much admired by many other writers. Pat Conroy, a hopeless Wolfean, writes in his introduction to the Scribner Classics edition of *Of*

Time and the River that "that's all right, [the critics who despise Wolfe, he meant]. They are just critics, and he is Thomas Wolfe." William Faulkner rated him number one among significant modern American writers—before Dos Passos, Steinbeck and Hemingway. For Faulkner the problem was to discern quality among imperfection. "We all fail," he observed, "but Wolfe made the best failure because he tried the hardest to say the most."

Wolfe was the chief reason for Scott Fitzgerald's attraction to Asheville. He was so closely linked to Asheville from the time he brought his wife Zelda to the Highland Hospital on the advice of H.L. Mencken that he was considered a resident until his death in 1940. Zelda then stayed on in the hospital until she died in the hospital fire that Ashevillians believed she herself set. Legend has it that Scotty went to the public library quite drunk one day in 1937. When he was told that because of budgetary limitations the library had no books by native son and bad boy Thomas Wolfe, he rushed to a bookstore, bought two copies of Wolfe's banned novels and slammed them down on the library table. The library's Board of Directors met and took the historic decision to put Wolfe on its shelves. So was born the story that Scott Fitzgerald rehabilitated Wolfe in Asheville and really started the Wolfe Collection, the pride of the Pack Memorial Library today.

Other writers—and again Wolfe was doubtless part of the reason—were in the Asheville area in those years. Sherwood Anderson lived in the nearby countryside. There was also Hamilton Basso, who wrote a bestseller in the 1940s—*The View From Pompey's Head.*

I first wrote a story about Thomas Wolfe in the middle Eighties for the cultural pages of the Italian Communist daily newspaper, *L'Unitá.* The cultural editor who admired Wolfe was curious about his novella, *The Party At Jack's,* a study of social classes in New York that was labeled Marxian. Subsequently I was surprised at the interest in Wolfe in Europe as I sold stories about the American writer to publications in various countries of East and West.

THE LAST PART OF THE 20TH CENTURY has seen a gradual change in Wolfe criticism. His friend and literary agent, Elizabeth Nowell, wrote a predictably positive biography in the 1950s. Andrew Turnbull published a balanced biography in the1960s. Then rehabilitative articles and essays appeared. His name spread abroad. Meanwhile, his books have never been out of print. Beautiful new editions now stand on the shelves of Barnes and Noble. Positive treatment of Wolfe is the trend today.

Most certainly, perhaps above all, Wolfe influenced generations of youth. William Styron remarked that it would be difficult to exaggerate the effect Wolfe had on youth and especially on those from small-town, southerly backgrounds. Himself from Virginia, Styron said that Wolfe influenced him to become a writer. Perhaps no southern writer expressed Wolfe's total, all-consuming influence on him more than the young Pat Conroy who admitted that Thomas Wolfe took his boyhood by storm. Wolfe simply transmitted to him his fire. "Ride the trains with Thomas Wolfe in this book [*Of Time and the River*] and you will never look at trains the same way again," Conroy writes. His mother, after reading *Look Homeward, Angel,* urged her son to become "a *Southern* writer."

Faulkner underlined that Wolfe wrote on a grand scale. He was audacious. A more learned and mature person would never have attempted what he did. His writings sound like bluster and bravado. But he believed it. He was the ultimate romantic. Youth loved him for that, because he was speaking for them. He still appeals to some young as do Carson McCullers, J.D. Salinger, and William Golding.

Maxwell Perkins wrote: "Whatever happened, Wolfe would have been what he was. Those mountain walls, which his imagination vaulted, gave him a vision of an America with which his books are fundamentally concerned. He spoke of the artists of America—how the whole color and character of the country was completely new—never interpreted; how in England, for instance, the writer inherited a long accretion of accepted expression from which he could start. Wolfe needed a continent to range over. And his place was America. I believed he opened it up as no other writer ever did for the people of his time and for the writers and artists and poets of tomorrow. Surely he had a thing to tell us."

THE 1975 COMMEMORATION of the 75th anniversary of Wolfe's birthday in Asheville was a round-up of Wolfean lore. People came from all over the United States. His is a popular name in Asheville today. Time has healed old wounds. Pride in the native son replaced the bad reputation of his family and Tom's sallies against Ashevillians. A Wolfe cult has developed. Thomas Wolfe has been institutionalized. There is the Thomas Wolfe City Auditorium, the Thomas Wolfe Playhouse, The Thomas Wolfe Collection used by scholars from everywhere, and the old Wolfe house, the "Old Kentucky Home," is now a shrine—when it's not being restored it is opened daily as a museum.

Last autumn, like each time I go to Asheville, I made a kind of pilgrimage to

the state landmark, the beautiful Riverside Cemetery in the Montford historical district, which slopes steeply down to the banks of the muddy French Broad River. I made photographs of my Italian wife, Milena, who had just read *Of Time and the River*, standing behind Wolfe's tomb. That picture occupies an important place in our Asheville album.

Now Thomas Wolfe lies there near the short story writer O'Henry at the hilltop among the other Wolfe graves. Yet, you also realize that despite all the rhetoric he is remembered in Asheville more for his world-wide reputation than for his works. You read that birthday of 1900 and death 38 years later and wonder what masterpieces lie in that grave with him? One forgets that his talent was cut off long before reaching maturity. He died of brain tuberculosis in Baltimore on September 15, 1938, 17 days short of his 38th birthday.

Gaither Stewart
Rome, Italy

FEAR AND SYMBOLS

by Elmer Hankiss

Central European University Press
ISBN: 963-9241-07-5 (Paperback)

Review by Tamara Vishkina

Does our culture fulfill its "existential function" of answering the global questions of human beings? Does our society help us cope with the futility of our lives? Are we at home in this world? What forces generate and maintain our civilization? In *Fears and Symbols*, Elmer Hankiss focuses on these and a spate of other unsettling questions.

The author presents the hypothesis that fears and anxieties are the main forces for construction of our civilization, which represents a complex system of symbols people erect to protect themselves from the evils of an external "alien world" as well as against the horrors of an internal life. He discusses major myths in this light and their striking vitality; touches on underlying notions of guilt and redemption; contemplates the role of art and religion, the necessity of play and trivialities, the function of moral norms and justice.

He argues that the edifice of symbols helps us handle reality and survive spiritually, gives meaning to our lives, and mitigates existential fears. Moreover, it constructs a safe world, a protective bubble of purposeful and controllable microcosm in a savage and nonchalant macrocosm.

Mr. Hankiss adduces evidence that in the process of building their civilization, humans, being the most intimidated animals, added internal fears to the external or partially substituted them and developed a system of beliefs, social norms, and institutions to cope with them. He shows that not only does our culture beget anxiety, but in reciprocal pattern, fears give rise to civilization. Fears mobilize

defense mechanisms—our creative power—which develop our identity, a sense of self-worth, and a belief in a meaningful and just world. The author affirms that people throughout the centuries continuously create and recreate their microcosm by two strategies: technical/scientific, or Promethean; and the symbolic, or Apollonian. These strategies supplement each other in our standoff with the hostile universe and the monsters in our souls. We protect ourselves with houses and cities, arts and religions, science and technologies, myths and philosophies. The author argues that our civilization per se is "a sum total of these protective devices," and moreover, we would be extinct if we failed to create such an environment for ourselves.

He explains why the wish to be in the center of the universe is so important in shaping our culture; discusses the symbolism of consecration and paradise, the vision of our houses and gardens as castles and sanctuaries, orderly microcosmic images of the chaotic macrocosm; contemplates the overly mythological significance of cities, architecture, and "ultimate symbols of sacred enclave"—temples and cathedrals; presents the role of our search for "ultimate equation" in physics and mathematics and the art of "rational abstraction." He pictures television and the automobile as means of keeping us at the center; shopping malls as metaphysical heavens—"beatific versions of Utopia" on the one hand, and negative worlds gratifying our basic instincts and enslaving people, on the other.

Mr. Hankiss discusses theories and myths explaining the origin of evil and the concept of guilt that were subjects of Greek tragedies and constitute a core of all religions; he concludes that despite all efforts to rationalize their cause, evil, guilt, and fears keep besieging humans, and each civilization responds in its own way to the same challenge throughout history. The struggle between evil and good projected from our minds on the outside world was condensed in the opposition of Christ and Satan. In this war new tactics have been employed such as transformation of evil from a negative to a positive force. Among them, one of the most successful examples in Western civilization is the evolution of a fearful and indifferent world into a peaceful "moral universe." But an even more powerful transformation, contends Mr. Hankiss, was the transmutation of evil into guilt, which, however, generated as a protective device, became a problem of itself, a "jungle of guilt," a substantial source of fears.

He discusses the double role of reason and science; on the one hand, they become an instruments to control the forces of nature; on the other, they force us to face the fact that the universe is cold and empty. Despite our feverish attempts to

give meaning to everything in our lives and to proclaim goals of raising children, serving people, or a purpose sacred, cosmic plans of our existence are to be questioned. But the law of causality may be not a universal law; if this is not so, human reason will inevitably fail, and we will have to learn to live in an "age of uncertainty."

Mr. Hankiss studies the world of play, "the world of pure and undisturbed individualism and selfishness" that helps us create an innocent universe governed by our own rules. We introduce uncertainty into its sphere, the same uncertainty we fear and flee in the real world, thus imitating reality in a scaled-down, safe and still exciting version. The act of creation is meant to be light and playful, spirited and serene, asserts Mr. Hankiss.

Light pleasures like jokes and perfumes play an important role in fighting unpredictable forces within and outside us, transforming the world around us by combined efforts of creative artists and our docile acceptance or desire to be deluded by imagination and mythology. These fantasies, too, bring meaning and confidence into our everyday lives, a glimpse of happiness and freedom. Laughter is deemed not at all trivial; it breaks through our protective wall, contends Mr. Hankiss, sparks the world of rationality with the light of noncausal "law", and takes us back to the safety of our conventions and values.

The ordered and logical world we created, argues Mr. Hankiss, curtails our freedom, and these brief moments of escape from the trap of determinism are thrilling and terrifying at the same time. We are drawn by the "beauty and the beast" of the unknown and probably unknowable, sitting by a campfire of the universe, catching the flashes of the unfathomable, mesmerized by its flames, unable to rationalize or ignore it.

Where do these fears come from? The universe itself is not evil or cruel; it is indifferent to our emotions, and a source of our pain is not the world but our incompatibility with it, as Mr. Hankiss puts it. He also suggests that natural selection might be to blame for our acute suffering; strong pain signals favor the survival of the species. During our fight with nature we have formed societies that became a source of additional anxiety for individuals. Despite the fact that we have acquired partial control over nature, we are losing the battle with our minds, and this might be an indication of the crisis of our civilization, Mr. Hankiss alleges.

We transform chaos into order, death into immortality, or presume we do; but without harmonious and structured visions of the world, humankind faces a

profound social, economic, and psychological crisis, as it was during transition periods in human history, and it is now in "a transition from the declining civilization of modernism," according to some experts. However, there is a ray of hope; some scholars say our society is moving towards innocence. There are signs that the link between pleasure and guilt is loosening and that we are about to concoct a new myth of guiltless civilization.

Even though our concepts, fictions and logic do not subsist in the real world as we define it, they are real for us as products of our creation. Postmodern thinking, states Mr. Hankiss, replaces the aeon-old search for truth with a quest for new symbols—"vocabularies, language games, or arguments"—that not only give us a sense of fulfillment through creation, but modify and therefore create interaction of humans with reality, thus indirectly changing the world. Symbols may have changed us, he continues, from feeble and fearful creatures to conscious human beings capable not of full control but at least enough to alleviate menacing external forces.

He asserts that "it has been through them (symbolic systems) that human beings have become what they are." But do we really know who we are and what is our business in this universe? Have we managed to create freedom and harmony even in our illusionary existence? Hardly so. And the book is a wonderful proof to it despite its buoyant finale, an anthem to "the fascinating human adventure."

The hypothesis presented by Mr. Hankiss is a brilliant constellation of ideas, a breath-taking step outside the box of our well-settled perceptions and dogmatic thinking. It calls for further quest that might come back to where it started; what if our fears are constructs that don't have any correspondence to the reality? And instead of creating the whole universe of defense and imaginative freedom we would be better off trying to look beyond them for the truth as mystics of all ages urge us to do.

One may argue that we have so much to do in our everyday lives, why "brood over the tragic aspects of the human condition?" But the moment of such contemplation may turn out to be much more pragmatic and save thousands years of senseless suffering.

DROWNING RUTH

by Christina Schwarz

Doubleday, 2000
ISBN: 0385502532

Review by Christina Gosnell

It's one of those books you hold in your hand long after the last page is digested. It's one of those stories that stays in your heart for days after the book find its home again upon the wood of a bookshelf. The taste of *Drowning Ruth* lingers quietly, reminding you of its poetic saga.

Because of writer Christina Schwarz and the gravity of her first novel, readers are welcomed into a world of deception, young love, big choices, and a past that *always* comes back to haunt its owner. The author does this wisely, without hints or clues as to what each crisp page will bring us. Yet she grabs each reader, and makes each word fuel for a hungry intrigued soul. The plot is serendipitous. One moment it's heading one direction, a page later, we are sent hurling to a whole other dimensions with questions we demand be answered. Questions for each character in this startling novel. Ruth, the young girl we see grow up from a young child cared for by her mentally challenged aunt. We see Carl, her father, a man with many questions of his own that he struggles to even ask.

As with any book, we want to be lured in. We want the impression of something we just can't figure out. We want the writer to create a mirage that we just can't get close enough to see—Christina Schwarz does just that. From the beginning pages we can see that this novel isn't going to be just like the rest. From the first chapter we are able to see glimpses of a story so unlike all the others we've read. A task not so easily accomplished. Beginning with the first page and continuing to the last, Christina Schwarz satisfies the needs of restless minds

everywhere.

The novel takes place in the period from the close of the First World War, around 1917, through the late 1930s, before the beginning of the Second World War. The setting is rural Wisconsin near the Great Lakes, the nearest being Lake Superior, a frightening place that has swallowed many a huge boat. Ms. Schwarz describes this Wisconsin town so well the reader can almost feel the bitter winter wind as her characters travel through the pages.

The small town and farm where Ruth grows up with her Aunt Amanda, and her father Carl, and their handyman Rudy, has its own small lake that is described as very beautiful, like a sapphire in the summers when the sky is blue, beautiful enough that eventually—about midway through the book—much of the land around the lake is sold as resort property to newly rich families from the cities. Ruth's family property, a working farm on the opposite shore, includes an island that Amanda, all her life, has regarded as her own special place. This island, as we soon find out, is the centerpiece around which the whole novel rotates. The promise it holds, the secrets it eventually keeps, and the sadness each character will soon associate with this piece of family history.

The atmosphere of this small town and its lake is disturbed, and not by the intrusion of the newly rich. They come in during summertime only, blundering and innocent, to a place where families like Amanda's long ago learned to live with the ominousness of harsh winters and the heaviness of their secrets. There are certain things people don't tell, they grow up knowing they mustn't, they don't need to be taught, they breathe it in with the air. You don't tell, not even if it drives you mad. The summer visitors, by contrast, are like children, with no more understanding of what goes on around them than the summer child Arthur, who discovered Ruth's mother drowned under the ice of the lake when he was only five years old. Arthur's father, Clement Owen, a developer, inventor, and blunderer without peer, is first to see the possibilities of the lake as a resort property—and through one of those coincidences that happen in real life even more often than they do in books, Owen happens to have known Ruth's Aunt Amanda before. He called her Amy. She was a pretty nurse then, in a city hospital during the War. When Amanda returned to the family farm she certainly thought she would never see him again, and he thought the same. Arthur's father didn't know his Amy lived on the other side of the lake.

Drowning Ruth moves constantly from the voice of one character to another, and shifts back and forth in time and place with disturbing frequency; yet somehow

you always know where you are and who is speaking. Christina Schwarz' style and consistency is simple yet astounding; even though the reader is seeing the story through so many different eyes, it's never hard to understand. The reader never has to question the feeling or emotional message the writer is trying to get across. This, any reader or writer knows, isn't the easiest thing to do.

"Ruth arrived with the slush of spring. She was light, buoyant even, and yet when the midwife first shifted the tiny bundle into his arms he felt as if he might drop her, so heavy was she with helplessness, with the need to be protected at all costs." This description of Carl, Ruth's father, is dripping with meaning, of substance, and of something far more than even these words can present. This is just a small taste of the writing that simply drips with meaning and of fear the reader can expect throughout the whole novel.The plot, roughly, is about the coming of age of Ruth, who once drowned. Yet this is really a novel about the burden and consequences of keeping secrets, in families, and in towns, and in one's own heart. *Drowning Ruth* takes the reader by the hand and walks through the lives of these characters and the impact of a secret so heavy with angst that their lives are changed forever.

GOB'S GRIEF

by Chris Adrian

Broadway Books, 2001
ISBN: 0-7679-0281-5

Review by Elizabeth Routen

"I wanted to write a story where somebody gets his brother back."[1]

Mr. Adrian's grief over the loss of his brother prompted *Gob's Grief*, the first published novel from the accomplished medical-student-cum-short-story-writer. Given a mission of such profound personal meaning, it's hard not to produce a work of at least passable eloquence. But Mr. Adrian, apparently a chronic overachiever, settles more than his share of disputes on the state of literature in America. Not quite a masterpiece but far more than a reckless attempt at *Cold Mountain*-esque lachrymosity, *Gob's Grief* is both an inviting treatise on the nature of mourning and a sweeping look a nation obsessed with loss.

As an introduction, let it be said that *Gob's Grief* is set in the past but is not an historical novel, that its characters include Walt Whitman and Victoria Woodhull but it is not biographical fiction, that its protagonist builds a fantastic machine to bring the dead back to life but it is not a fantasy. Mr. Adrian's vocabulary is quite competent; his toolbox well rounded. But this is not a literary novel, no, no more than Agatha Christie wrote quaint mysteries. Think of *Gob's Grief* as a handbook for mourning, a door opened into a room where impossible dreams are allowed their head, and you shall begin to understand the power behind Mr. Adrian's prose.

Tomo and Gob are twin sons of Victoria Woodhull, the famous real-life

[1] Quoted from Bold Type Magazine (www.boldtype.com)

feminist who campaigned for women's rights long before the first Steinem-head burned a bra. Understandably, the boys' upbringing is a muddle of Free Love and idyllic images of a caramelized afterlife called the Summerland. Theirs is a world in which the Urfeist, a horrible creature who bites off childrens' fingers, may or may not live around the bend. But it is also a place whose reality is dire, where eleven-year-olds run off the war. Gob, scared at the prospect of his own mortality, is fortuitously injured before they make it to the train that will transport them to a Union Army camp. Tomo continues and, predictably, expires at Chickamauga.

Mr. Adrian has crafted an immaculate glimpse of madness born from the over-indulgence of one's passions. We are told that Gob's missing finger is a congenital deformity but are shown a trip to the Urfeist's lair in which Gob sacrifices his finger for the knowledge of how to bring his brother back to life.

> "I want something," said Gob. "I'll pay for it. I want my brother back. He's dead but I want to bring him here again, into the world. It's got to be so he's a living boy." He kept babbling because the Urfeist said nothing. He only moved one long finger slowly towards Gob's face. Gob did not try to back away, but did not think he could have, had he tried. The Urfeist put his finger gently under Gob's lips.
>
> "Hush," he said. He left his finger there for a long moment. Gob was dashed with horror, as if someone had filled a bucket with pure liquid horror and dumped it over his head.

Likewise, we are told of Gob's love for Maci Trufant but shown a homosexual gesture toward Walt Whitman. We are told of the horror of war but shown its aftermath—the blood, the tired surgeons riddled with doubt. Mr. Adrian's web of paradoxes is cunning. He challenges the mind saturated with belief in the concrete and socially acceptable by talking of considered reality in passing and elaborately reporting on the impossible. In the end, we are shown a mirror of ourselves, forced to question our memories and self-contrived reality.

Though Gob is the book's protagonist, it is Will Fie, a lesser presence but a stronger character, who is the backbone of *Gob's Grief*. Another veteran of the Civil War, Fie is forced to serve as a photographer's apprentice and thereby to witness firsthand the disgraces men serve one another. After the war, he builds a house of daguerreotypes of dead soldiers—literally, a house of glass—on the outside of which people live their lives and whose interior is thrown with the shadows of the deceased. It is a perfect representation of life as we assume it to be, and nowhere is

Mr. Adrian's skill more apparent.

This house of the dead becomes an integral part of the adult Gob's contraption. But the most important piece is Walt Whitman, the great "credulous man" who is somehow less than enamored of Gob's plan. "There's a place for you in it," Gob tells Walt of the machine. "I need you to go in it, and then bring them back, all the six hundred thousand … All the dead of the war, all the dead of all the wars. All the dead of the past. We'll lick death tonight, Walt, if you'll help us." Whitman leaves in something of a rush, only to return moments later, to sit in the grand machine and scream and scream while the dead flock to return.

Mr. Adrian's precise plotting is augmented by a decidedly perfect ending. Suffice to say, undeath is remarkably like life. *Gob's Grief*, the product of a tragedy, ends in a contrarian affirmation of life as we know it.

Gob's Grief is filled with the voices of spirits, living and dead, who are wisps of ideas and things once read in old texts and, undoubtably, a very real human pain. The work is a trifle long, but Mr. Adrian's mastery of the subject mitigates predictable flaws in execution. He adopts a tone reminiscent of post-war literature—Chamberlain's matter-of-fact flourishes, even, at times, Whitman's grandiose scope. There is nothing forced here, though it occasionally seems the author has restrained himself from going as far as is possible. Chris Adrian, the current leader of the next generation of writers, forgets—or has yet to fully absorb—that a novel is but a distanced cousin of a short story; in accordance, the pacing is occasionally less than sterling.

But let that not overshadow the fact that Mr. Adrian is both a practiced and a talented storyteller. *Gob's Grief* is a remarkable beginning for a young novelist destined to leave his mark on American letters.

ME TALK PRETTY ONE DAY

by David Sedaris

Little, Brown 2000
ISBN: 0-316-77772-2

Review by Paul Holler

I just got back from a business trip to Orlando, Florida. While there, I attended a conference sponsored by a software vendor for the colleges and universities they serve. It was an interesting trip, full of the kind of ironies that are inevitable when people gather to talk business, particularly the business of higher education, in Walt Disney's imaginary world. There were university administrators from across America and beyond, all on a quest for that one missing piece that would drive the gremlins from their systems and their lives. And there were the techies, like me, who never harbored fantasies about finding that missing piece but were known to believe in gremlins anyway.

There were hotels with outdoor stairways sheltered by giant football helmets and sports-themed wallpaper in the rooms. There were birds whose songs were not familiar and franchised night clubs whose facades were. And there was Mickey. And Mickey was everywhere.

"By the time this thing is over, I'm going to be really sick of Disney tunes," I said to Jill, a colleague and friend.

She laughed. But in the end, I was right.

Disney tunes. College administrators. Computer geeks. Palm readers. Adults dressed up as Mickey, Pluto, Cinderella and Snow White. And consultants by the planeload. It was all a heady mix.

And into that mix was thrown my reading for the flight to Orlando, *Me Talk Pretty One Day* by David Sedaris. It seemed appropriate somehow. After spending a

few hours with Sedaris and his particular view of the world, contradictions seemed to make sense. By the time I set foot on Disney soil, I expected the world to be full of them. It was a small world, after all. I was ready.

David Sedaris came to prominence a few years ago with his commentaries for *This American Life* on National Public Radio. His *Santaland Diaries* have become an annual Christmas tradition at NPR. Through these spots, and his books *Holidays on Ice, Barrel Fever* and *Naked*, he has won over many listeners and readers with his wit, intelligence and satirical take on human nature.

Although *Me Talk Pretty One Day* is a collection of essays, when taken as a whole, it can serve as a sort of autobiography. The book begins with stories from the author's childhood, continues through his college years, his time spent teaching at the Art Institute of Chicago and his experiences while living in New York and Paris. Along the way, there is a wide and varied cast of characters and a range of funny situations. And all along the way, there is great irony and unsparing satire, both of society and of himself.

In "Giant Dreams, Midget Abilities," a young David Sedaris is forced by his father, an avid jazz buff, to take guitar lessons from a midget named Mr. Mancini.

"Although I had regularly petitioned for a brand-name vacuum cleaner," writes Mr. Sedaris, "I'd never said anything about wanting a guitar."

It is interesting that the instrument of the author's torment and his father's pride is the dream instrument of many young people and a thorn in the side of many parents. But beyond that, the relationship between the young Mr. Sedaris and his guitar teacher is a fascinating one. In looking back on the event, the author views his guitar teacher with a very odd mixture of disdain and empathy. The disdain is to be expected, being the natural result of a child forced to learn a musical instrument.

But, in retrospect, Mr. Sedaris also understands that Mr. Mancini is an outsider because of his size. Mr. Sedaris also views himself as an outsider and something of a rebel. In so doing, he finds common ground with this man.

In "Twelve Moments in the Life of an Artist," Mr. Sedaris looks back on his years as an art student. He eventually turns to performance art and his memories of that time are superb satires of the notion of the artist's life as art itself.

"The Great Leap Forward" covers the author's post-college salad days in New York. He finds contrasts in New York between the privileged and the poor and between dreams and reality. And he views the rich in New York with a sense of self-deprecating irony.

"I'd watch a white-haired man slipping out of his back brace and ask myself what he had done to deserve such a privileged life," Mr. Sedaris writes. "Had I been able to swap places with him, I would have done so immediately."

Many of the essays describe Mr. Sedaris' experiences while living in France. Much of the humor in these essays comes from the expected clash of cultures that an American in France might face. But, as the title of the collection suggests, much of the humor comes from language and the strangeness of learning a new language.

In "Me Talk Pretty One Day," Mr. Sedaris recalls the French classes he attended with students from all over the world. David Sedaris finds particular delight in translating the fractured French spoken by him and others into equally fractured English, making for an interesting reading experience.

But *Me Talk Pretty One Day* is more than an interesting reading experience. Mr. Sedaris has a way of making fun of society without placing himself above others. We can believe him, and laugh with him, because some of his keenist satire is directed at himself. Some of the pieces here become funnier on a second reading, which is a very rare thing.

But I only read them once on the flight back from Orlando. Mr. Sedaris' journey ended about the same time as mine. I closed his book just as we were beginning our landing approach to O'Hare.

"Look!" said Jill, sitting next to me, "There's somebody out on the wing!"

"It's…a gremlin!" I responded, trying my best to sound like William Shatner in that great old Twilight Zone episode.

Nobody listened to me. I wasn't surprised. Nobody listened to Shatner either. But it didn't matter. I had just travelled a wondrous circuit of strange truths, courtesy of Walt Disney, the universities of America and David Sedaris. I may not have emerged from it a better person, but I was happier one. And the gremlins never got us.

Regarding Allegra Wong's Analysis of Margaret Fuller:

I JUST FINISHED Allegra Wong's analysis of Margaret Fuller's artistic awakening within Emerson's transcendentalist milieu. Its subtle presentation of the stages of Fuller's artistic maturation and the unique contribution of each member of Emerson's circle was lucid and masterful. A pleasure to read.

—Michael Lynne
(mlynne@nc.rr.com)

Regarding Tamara Vishkina's review of *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation*:

I AM AN ETHNIC RUSSIAN, born in Kiev, Ukraine, and still a Ukrainian Citizen. Exchanged my Soviet passport for Ukrainian in the New York Consulate, hence involuntary name change from Pavel to Pavlo. Last year I met my father; he still resides in Kiev. I live in Connecticut, USA, [but was] in Prague for my honeymoon. I did not see him for 8 years and we've spent few precious hours talking about our Country. I was amazed how desperate he was to attach a mystical history to the Ukrainian Nation. He actually sent me Yuri Kanygin's *Way of the Aryans*. I tried to argue the insanity that book is filled with. But it is very difficult to argue with a man who brought you up well educated, experienced etc.

I could not believe my eyes when I saw Mr. Wilson's book in the store--two copies! About a country in the south of Russia, across the sea from Turkey, as I have to explain daily. The book is factual, interesting and most important; more objective than anything that could be written by a concerned citizen of the country described. There is always National history. Objectivity seems to be a realm of outsiders unaffected by personal feelings or national pride. My only wish is that this book will be available in Ukrainian or Russian

—Pavlo Kizin
(trident3@att.net)

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