Jun-2001

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Recommended Citation  

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Book Review

A Certain Slant of Light
by Charles F. Angell

Cynthia Thayer, a Bridgewater graduate, has written a quiet novel about a man and a woman who, in an accidental encounter with one another, attempt to thaw their frozen lives. A Certain Slant of Light develops the story of Peter MacQueen, whom we meet living a hermit's life near the coastal Maine village of Black Harbor. He awakes one early spring morning to discover the world glazed with a thick layer of ice and outside, leaning precariously against a white birch, a young, fair-skinned woman, some eight months pregnant. Elaine, her name, has fled her husband and is seeking a haven safe from him, for he, with the support of his Jehovah's Witness congregation, has branded her a sinner and threatened to disfellowship her.

Peter, if I may suggest his literary ancestry, recalls the Nick Adams of Hemingway's "The Big Two-Hearted River." Like Nick, Peter concentrates on the minutiae of daily existence, which he has developed into an unvarying routine. He rises and lights his woodstove, having his aged dog—named Dog—fetch a stick; he prepares his coffee; he opens his doll's house and places the three miniature figures, a mother, son, and daughter, at their breakfast table. Like Nick, Peter tries and fails to forget a great hurt and enduring pain. We learn as the novel develops that Peter's family had perished in a housefire while Peter was away competing at a bagpipe competition, a competition he had won. When later in the night the call came informing him of the lethal fire, he was having sex with an admiring and aspiring piper named Kate. His family's death has filled him with guilt. Peter has convinced himself that a faulty wire he hadn't got around to repairing had caused the house fire; he condemns himself for his adultery the night his wife died. He has withdrawn from his former life and believes that by keeping his guilt and remorse constantly before him in the form of the doll house, he can at least keep the memory of his wife, son, and daughter alive. He is frozen in time and, as the ice storm implies, finds navigating its slippery passing ever more treacherous.

But suddenly, "Sounds like we have some company," Peter says to Dog; Elaine arrives. Peter initially has no choice but to shelter her, making very plain she's an intrusion he considers temporary. "I can't have you staying here," he tells Elaine, "there's no room." Stay she does, however, for the ice is slow to melt. Elaine's husband Oliver appears one morning in Peter's driveway, looking for her. Peter, taken aback somewhat by his immediate dislike of the man and his mannerisms, lies about Elaine and thus commits himself ever more deeply to sheltering her.

Gradually Elaine's story, and in telling it I condense rather too much of the novel, comes out. Before her marriage to Oliver, when she was sixteen Elaine had had a sexual liaison with her first love and become pregnant. Terrified of her mother, a devout Jehovah's Witness who used to beat Elaine with a stick, she told no one of her pregnancy. She miscarried; her stillborn girl "was about the size of a small puppy, a head smaller than a tennis ball." She buried her fetus in a park. Because her blood-type was Rh negative, Elaine, when she became pregnant after marriage, felt she had to tell Oliver about her previous pregnancy and warn her husband that should the infant be Rh positive, it would likely die. Oliver, hearing this revelation, struck her and called her a fornicator, thus precipitating Elaine's flight. Despite the injury done her by her deeply religious family, Elaine herself remains devout and regards herself as entirely sinful.
Music creates the common bond between Peter and Elaine. Peter hears Elaine singing "in a voice high and sure" the first morning of her stay and "covers his ears with his hands to keep its power out. Power like bagpipes. He realizes he hasn't heard anyone sing since the funeral, except on the radio. Never a lone voice singing pure and clean like this one." Hearing Elaine from outside his cabin, Peter begins to cry. Later inside the cabin, Elaine asks Peter what the instrument is on the shelf and learns it's his practice chanter for the bagpipes. Gradually, Peter resolves to resume playing his pipes.

Despite Oliver's threats and coercion to force her home, Elaine elects to stay with Peter until her child is born. As prelude to Elaine's labor and delivery Peter's goat Ruby gravid with kids comes to parturition. Elaine assists Peter with the birth. The first kid arrives healthy and active; the second, however, is born with its heart external to its breast and quickly perishes. Elaine has been holding and singing to the dying kid. Her "humming continues, all notion of a tune gone. Just a low hum, like a drone. Then the image of the baby goat with its heart hanging from a string changes to a fetus with a head the size of a tennis ball and he feels like he might sigh out loud with the pain of it. Her tears flow like water from a pitcher, run down her face unaccompanied by motion or sound...."

With the help of Peter's elderly neighbor Dora, a midwife, Elaine delivers an infant girl whom she names Azelin, spared by Jehovah. The child survives, its blood untainted by Elaine's earlier pregnancy. Eventually Oliver resurfaces and attempts to claim his child. He tells Elaine: "If you won't come, I'll have to take the baby alone. Many men wouldn't take you back after what you've done." Elaine refuses to yield to Oliver's version of the laws of Jehovah which stipulate that the wife must obey her husband in all things and, in the novel's turning point, picks up Peter's shotgun and fires it at Oliver, hitting him in the foot. She tells her husband no mother will relinquish her child without putting up a fight. Oliver leaves.

Thayer's novel offers considerably more events than space allows me to include in a brief review. Though Elaine knows Peter loves her and Azelin, she finally decides to reunite with her husband and make a go of marriage. Peter after she departs burns the doll's house and as the flames consume it muses "They're only dolls. He believes that. This is only a dollhouse full of furniture and dolls, a dollhouse that has outlived its usefulness." He enters his cabin, sits down at his table, and begins to compose Azelin's Lullaby.

What began in ice ends in fire, but in this case a fire that releases Peter from the spectres of his past. He knows he must give himself to nature, that in the terms of Emily Dickinson's poem that provides Thayer with her title, the certain slight of light "When it comes, the Landscape listen-/Shadows-hold their breath-/When it goes, 'tis like the Distance/On the look of Death." In the conflict between an arbitrary and relentless Nature and a regardless Divine, Thayer seems to suggest, only the compassionate and concerned can discover the harmonies that permit them to negotiate the icefall.

Note: Cynthia Thayer received a Master's Degree in English from Bridgewater State College in 1972. She resides currently in Gouldsboro, Maine where she continues to write and, with her husband, to operate an organic farm.

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