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A READER'S JOURNAL

Winter's Tale
by
Mark Helprin

Published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/NY in 1983
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2003



The epic scope of this novel reminded me of William Cowper Powys's great novel, [A Glastonbury Romance](#). Both involve a resurrection, but the Glastonbury one

takes place in midsummer and the New York City one takes place in midwinter. Actually most of the scenes take place in winter, not just one winter, but many winters. All the action outdoors takes place in the middle of extreme cold — the Hudson River is frozen solid all the way from the ocean to its source. Helprin has written a paean to New York City and a love song to winter. Not the bitter cold, desolate winters when everyone huddles inside for warmth, but a vibrant, active winter full of evocative scenes of festive block parties on ice, ice-boating on large lakes, ice skating on frozen rivers, and midnight silvery sleigh rides bouncing over snowy hillocks or gliding silently over glassy smooth ice surrounded by quaint candle-lit Dutch villages along the fictional Lake of the Coheeries near the headwaters of the Hudson. This novel makes great summer reading as it will keep you in a perpetual chill as you read it.

What Powys did for Glastonbury, Helprin has done for New York City — written a love story of a *place* — in which the place is the key character and everyone else has bit parts. Peter Lake has the biggest bit part as we follow him from orphan to Bayman, to pickpocket, to burglar, to mechanic, and to savior. We watch enthralled as he falls in love with a true ice queen, Beverly. With a terminal lung disease, *consumption*, she runs an intermittent fever and is only comfortable sleeping in a tent on the roof of her father's mansion in the city so she can breathe the icy air twenty-four hours a day.

Midway in the novel, the story jumps forward fifty years and we meet a completely new set of characters plus Peter Lake, who also jumped fifty years forward, but without aging due to a time warp he encountered when he entered the white cloud wall which hung around just off the tip of the city from time to time. Instead of going to Italy of the 1920s as he planned, he ended up in New York City of the 1970s — without his knowing it, his ticket was cashed in for a one-way trip to the future. No way was Helprin going to allow Peter to escape the endless winters in the city. How is Peter going to cope, having skipped fifty years of time without having a recollection of his previous life? Like pouring molasses on a frozen lake, Peter's story unfolds and becomes intertwined with the children of the characters he knew from his previous life. But the same bad guys are still around to bug him, Pearly Soames and the Short Tails. Hundreds of short fat guys in tuxedos with the tails cut off who try to do *en masse* what they lack in brains to do singly.

If the book has a flaw, it's the constant thievery motif. Peter is a criminal, Pearly is a criminal, most of the people Peter meets are criminals or began as one. When he is deported by the Bay men from the Bayonne marshes to Manhattan Island as a young boy of 12, he meets an organ grinder who teaches him what money is.

"What's money?" asks Peter.

"Money is what you give the monkey or the monkey will pee on you," the organ grinder told him. Suddenly he could no longer live off the Bay's oysters and seafood as he did before, he needed to acquire money or get peed on by the monkey.

The author treats criminality as if it adds light to the city, when in truth it adds only darkness, as does every form of immorality. The polishing of the lights that criminals do is with dirty rags that obscure and obstruct the light; the red flashes they create are from burning down other people's property, and the lightning flashes are flashes from the muzzles of their murder weapons. In 1983 Helprin was creating celebrities out of criminals while it seems that the world today is creating criminals out of celebrities. Neither process brightens the world, but only darkens it with its immorality.

[page 20, italics added] Of course, it's bad to be a criminal. Everyone knows that, and can swear that it's true. Criminals mess up the world. But they are, as well, retainers of fluidity. In fact, one might make the case that New York would not have *shone* without its legions of contrary devils *polishing the lights of goodness* with their inexplicable opposition and resistance. It might even be said that criminals are a necessary component of the balanced equation which steadily and beautifully eats up all the time that is throw upon its steely back. They are the sugar and alcohol of a city, a *red flash* in the mosaic, *lightning* on a hot night. So was Pearly.

The last sentence in the paragraph after this one describes Pearly as "a bomb-thrower, a lunatic, a master criminal, a devil, the golden dog of the street." The use of the metaphor "golden dog" to describe this abject criminal amounts to a lionizing of his nefarious deeds. Perhaps it's necessary for the purposes of the novel, set as it is, in New York City; perhaps it's necessary for the purposes of the novel, set as it is, in Helprin's psyche. Late in the book he goes so far as to sanctify or deify thieves in this passage:

[page 588] When the dross of time had lifted, the pickpockets, confidence men, and thieves sometimes turned out to be the possessors of the gifted and magical faces that painters of the Renaissance used in portraying saints and angels.

Pearly loved silver and gold because "they shone and were pure." He was afflicted with a strange disease called "color gravity" in which the sun shining off a surface creating a golden light would stop him in his tracks. Which must have looked pretty funny when his hundred Short Tails with him were also frozen in their tracks waiting for Pearly to break out of his catatonic state. Sometimes they were kept busy directing traffic away from old frozen Pearly if he was in the middle of a busy street. To me, the funniest aspect was if a painter was painting a room with a golden paint, Pearly would freeze due to his color gravity syndrome. He might tell the painter, "Put more on — I like to see it when it goes on, when it's wet. There's an instant of glory." Then Pearly would pop outside and fight "as no man could, having drawn from the wells of color."

Helprin writes as if he had drawn from the wells of color and metaphor and inspiration. Here's a typical lyrical passage from the book.

[page 135] Mouquin's moved before Beverly's eyes in a vision suggesting nothing less than a new world, a mute and snowy Russian Easter compressed within the translucent chamber of an alabaster viewing egg, a sort of miniature paradise which, if entered, might be the scene of miracles. She thought, recklessly, that dancing at Mouquin's could drive out the disease, flood it with devastating light, and provide a curtain of time and beauty through which she might pass to another side where there was no such thing as fever, and where those who loved one another lived forever.

After Peter meets Beverly, she tells him cryptically, "I'm just like you — I come from another age. But there are many things that we must take care of now."

[page 173] If she were correct, it would explain why the world sometimes seemed to be a stage behind which was a strangely benevolent, superior, and indifferent power. The suffering of the innocent would be accounted for, if, in ages to come or ages that had been, the reasons for everything were revealed and balances were evened. It, would explain destiny, and coincidence, and his image of the city as if he had been looking from high above at a living creature with a pelt of dusky light. It would explain the things that called to Beverly from a far distance and a far time. It would suggest that Athansor, who could leap high into the air, was leaping toward something he already knew. It would explain the strong feeling Peter Lake had that every action in the world had eventual consequences and would never be forgotten, as if it were entered in a magnificent ledger of unimaginable complexity. He thought that it explain freedom, memory, transfiguration, and justice — though he did not know how.

The subject that Peter is broaching is that of karma, how one's actions from another age, another lifetime flow as strong feelings into this age, this lifetime; how every action has karmic consequences that must be balanced.

Any review of this book would be incomplete without a brief passage about the large white horse, Athansor, who could not only leap high in the air, but he would fly when called upon. When Hardesty and Virginia were about to die in icy water, the white horse pictured on the book cover saved them.

[page 499 - 500] An enormous white horse had come from nowhere, and pulled the mare forward with him as if she were entrapped in a magnetic field. The sleigh hopped onto the ice before Hardesty even knew what was happening, and then they started a wild race. Running in tandem with the stallion, the mare was able to pull the sleigh like a rocket. The Marrattas bent forward into the cold wind as the two horses, almost an illusion of white and black, attained unnatural speed. The steel runners glowed with heat and watered the track underneath. The horses were going so fast that they seemed close to shattering the sleigh, which vibrated and rattled until Abby was frightened out of her wits.

Then, without a signal, they turned left into the mountains, roaring past Fteley's and blowing the doors off their hinges as they went by, traveling up the high road as if they were hurtling down it, leaving great rooster tails and washes of loose snow as they rounded the high desolate corners of the mountain track.

They crested the highest divide, and flew down onto the endless plain of the Coheeries. Virginia was overjoyed to see in the distance a lighted string of tiny pearls — the villages along the lake, their fires and lamps burning in the very early morning just before the sun came up.

Their horses took to the plain and bounded ahead on the straight road. Surely, they thought, the white horse was an illusion of the cold and the swirling stars, because, when he parted from the mare, he banked up and to the left in a blaze of white. Even after he was gone, the mare kept up the race until sunrise, when she gently led the Marrattas across the rolling ocean of snowfields that bordered the lakeshore of the Coheeries.

Beautiful metaphors and similes fill Helprin's writing. Here are a few samples:

[page 174] All these things were shaken about within Peter like pots and pans banging about the side of a peddler's swaybacked horse.

The new year was rolling at them as wide and full as a tide racing up the bay, sweeping over old water in an endless coil of ermine cuff.

[page 177] When Beverly joined Peter Lake, it was as if her presence sent darts into Pearly's flesh, pacifying him with antivenom.

But now they were entombed in a nerve dream. A dentist could have worked his wily and expensive arts on them without eliciting the slightest protest.

[page 205] The shelf was filled with books that were hard to read, that could devastate and remake one's soul, and that, when they were finished, had a kick like a mule.

[page 208] A Dutch village arose along the lake. Iceboats raced from west to east and tacked back again, their voluminous sails like a hundred flowers gliding noiselessly across the ice.

[page 215] Skating at full speed, she turned to stop just before the dock, the silver blades of her skates sending up an abrupt shower of fresh-milled crystals that hung in the air and sparkled.

And this metaphor for New York City as God's crucible, one in which on 9/11 the twin towers were recently ground into rubble and dust for further alchemical metamorphosis.

[page 223 - 224] It did not draw people to it the way it did for nothing. It was God's crucible, and she was on her way into it.

Mark Helprin has, in his own words, "been to another world." Listen to him as he tells you his story. Perhaps you'll find, like a friend of mine who recommended this novel to me, that you won't want to get to the end of it either. Like a good movie, a good wine, or a good life, you want it to keep on keeping on.

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----- *Reader's Comment on Winter's Tale:* -----

From Sandy Sellers, recommending this Novel to me in an Email on January 24, 2003:

Bobby,

My best favorite reading for pleasure fiction book for this past decade is *Winter's Tale* by Mark Helprin. Life in a fictional, yet strangely familiar New York. Very reminiscent of Ayn Rand, though I can't articulate exactly why: more than just long...., heroic qualities portrayed...and I never wanted to come to the end of it.

So raise a glass...cheers

Sandy

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