

## *A Tale of Gleeeful Improbability*

*Down There by the Train*, Kate Sterns. Knopf Canada, 2001.

The tall tale has a long and venerable history. It is arguably the granddaddy of all literatures, borne of long nights spent huddled around a community campfire. The necessity of staying awake under the threat of attack was perhaps an early inspiration behind the art of oral storytelling. In order to capture and retain the attention of their weary audience, storytellers threw caution and credibility to the wind, populating their tales with beings somewhat removed from reality and embellishing their stories with fantastic or horrific incident. Latter day practitioners of the tall tale in written form — a hundred years ago it was Mark Twain, today we have Garrison Keillor and our own Stuart McLean — revel in the oral aspects of their work, its broad comedy, its performability as theatre.

Kate Sterns is another writer who boldly and bravely tosses caution to the wind. Her new novel, *Down There by the Train*, is billed as a “gothic romance,” but to my mind it shares more with the genre of the tall story or tale, definitions of which emphasize exaggerated characterization and improbability of event. The novel certainly contains “gothic” elements, among them intimations of witchcraft, the influence the dead wield over the living, and the general weirdness of almost everything that takes place. But gleeeful improbability is what *Down There by the Train* is really all about; it owes much more to Twain than it does to Mary Shelley or any of the Brontës.

This third-person narrative is told largely from the point of view of Levon Hawke, a young man who, as we learn in the opening scene, has just been released from prison. The narrative impetus derives from the fact that in order to receive an early parole, Levon must accept his cousin Simon's offer of a job in a bakery. We meet Levon as he is making his way to the unnamed island where Simon resides and where the bakery is located, and where Levon must live in order to satisfy the terms of his parole.

But Levon is more than simply a man trying to reintegrate himself into society after a spell behind bars. He is haunted by the past, obsessed with the death of his sister Alice, for which he feels responsible though the incident that claimed her life was in every respect an accident, and consumed by the teachings of the seventeenth-century physician William Harvey, the subject of his abandoned Master's thesis. Alice and Harvey are the twin refrains to which his thoughts ceaselessly return. Harvey's anatomical metaphors dominate Levon's view of the world, and much of his time is spent within the carapace of guilt he has constructed for himself as a result of Alice's death. The book's early scenes depict Levon as a lost soul, and we realize that his social reintegration depends upon a spiritual reintegration taking place. Only after this occurs will he be able to move on with his life.

Having missed the only boat to the island, Levon decides to walk across the ice. His instructions come from Sweeney of Sweeney's Diner, but en route he becomes disoriented in the diminishing light of evening and then falls and lies stunned on the ice for an unspecified time. When he finally gets moving again, the need for shelter is paramount in his mind, and when at last he reaches the island and comes across a house in the woods, he goes inside. This is where he meets Obdulia Limb, a young woman nursing an obsessive yearning for her mother, Hereward, whose suicide by hanging ten years earlier has rendered her an emotional cripple.

In subsequent chapters Levon encounters a series of oddball characters: Berthe, who is obsessed with bicycles; Simon, whose great ambition is to convincingly sculpt the human form out of bread dough; and Elias, the evil-tempered father of Obdulia and now the husband of Berthe. These are the people amongst whom Levon must live and work as he attempts to heal the wounds that have caused him such pain.

The story that Sterns sets into motion eschews a conventional plotline and seems to have more to do with giving each of these characters a chance to take centre stage and spout personal and local history along with the odd bit of home-spun wisdom. The scheme that Simon has in mind to lift Obdulia out of her funk is outrageously improbable and leads Levon and his cohorts into one incredible situation after another. Eventually, after a number of comic encounters, the promised romance springs up between Levon and Obdulia. Through it all Sterns has great fun, spinning a web of clever wordplay and inventing episodes remarkable as much for their unrestrained verve as for their calculated absurdity.

However, I'm not sure that the reader shares in the fun as much as the author might like to believe. As one wacky scene follows another, with no attempt to generate suspense or dramatic tension, the effect is numbing. The writing strains after comic effect, sometimes succeeding but just as often falling flat. The book is filled with tangential set-pieces that do little to move the story forward. Emotional depth is sacrificed for characterizations that are so broadly comic that they approach caricature. The reader is never called upon to make an emotional investment in the lives of these people, with the result that we don't really care about them or what happens to them. Levon is the most human of the bunch, but the author's attempt to endow him with an array of feelings that would inspire sympathy seems little more than artifice. His memory of Alice's death consumes him so thoroughly that we begin to wonder exactly what kind of relationship he had with his sister. The implication is that they shared some sort of exclusive bond and spent all their time confiding in and caring for one another, but outside of a meaningful context the relationship remains sketchy.

There is a problem with the writing as well. The fly-leaf promises "metaphorical brilliance" and to be sure there are metaphors packed onto every page. Subtlety is not what Sterns is after, and I can respect this, but again and again the writing calls attention to itself and far too often inhibits the reader's enjoyment of the story. Lines like "His tongue lay absolutely still in the grave of his mouth," and "Trapped between a rock and a hard place, Levon opted for the path of least resistance" make for a gruelling reading experience. Occasionally a metaphor fails to cohere logically, as in "At family gatherings, her reputation for righteousness preceded her as the iceberg had the Titanic," which had me scratching my head wondering how an iceberg could precede a ship, and then trying to guess what the author was getting at.

Kate Sterns is obviously a talented writer, but in this instance I feel she has been let down not only by her own unruly imagination but also by her editors, who perhaps should have been more vigilant in their efforts to rein in her flights of fancy. I have no doubt that Sterns is capable of writing a witty and absorbing story. Unfortunately, *Down There by the Train* isn't it.

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