
BOOKNOTES

THE MAN WHO FELL IN LOVE WITH THE MOON

By Tom Spanbauer
Atlantic Monthly Press, 1991
384 pages, \$21.95

“STUNNING!” FROM PUBLISHERS Press echoed my opinion at 3 A.M. when I finally closed the covers of *The Man Who Fell In Love With The Moon*.

Stunning, that is, for those who can keep their hands and feet inside the roller coaster while their assumptions of ordinary life are whirled upside down and inside out. The ride is probably bumpiest for Mormon readers, since in this western tale, set in a whorehouse in the town of Excellent, Idaho, the law-and-order, clean and wholesome Mormons wear the black hats.

“Depraved” might be the first judgment the reader draws upon learning that the protagonist is a halfbreed child prostitute dubbed descriptively, Out-In-The-Shed. Yet who can resist the opening line, “If you’re the devil then it’s not me telling the story.” “Earthy and haunting,” one reviewer wrote of the metaphysics that unfold from that first line. Exactly.

Intrigued by the killdeer game that the child learns from the birds who fake broken wings in order to protect their nests, the reader keeps turning pages. And the pages become magical as Shed roams town and wilderness practicing invisibility and searching to know the meaning of his Indian name, Duivichi-Un-Dua, not even sure if it is Shoshone or Bannock. He searches, also, for his true father and finds, in addition, his true mother. Throughout runs a dizzying theme of incest, for sex is the currency between the main characters and connects male with male and female with female, as well as female with male as Shed grows up.

What might prove most unexpected is the spiritual dimension of the book—not spiritual in the usual Mormon sense but in the shamanistic and Indian sense. Everything from the landmark Not-Really-A-Mountain to the demoralized Indians, newly confined to reservations, has a spiritual form. This story pushes at the extremes of spiritual journeying and dirt-poor physical existence. And it connects the extremes as sexual experience and spiritual experience merge, as ordinary people display surprising dimensions, and as

Shed discovers new levels of understanding.

Even the polarities between the Mormons determined to wipe out the whorehouse and the whorehouse residents and customers who declare a counter-war on the Mormons tend to merge. Shed’s search is ultimately for family as well as self, and he finds father, mother, sister, brothers, before losing them in the escalating violence. Part of what he wants, then, is essentially what the Mormons try to enclose with their fences, painted houses, and laws—security, love, peace. But he also wants to know himself, and hence the journey.

By the book’s end, how simple to acknowledge that Shed—half woman, half man, half Indian, half white—is a prime character to open a world in which everything becomes one. This, in turn, suggests that the complexities in each of us hold wonders as well as monsters.

—LINDA SILLITOE

WORDS OF POWER

By Northrop Frye
Viking/Penguin, 1990
\$24.95, 342 pages

THOUGH THE SUBTITLE of this book reads, “Being a Second Study of ‘The Bible and Literature,’” it is nevertheless a sequel to Northrop Frye’s earlier book on the Bible, *The Great Code*, originally published in 1983 and reissued in a second edition in 1990.

Frye, who passed away in January 1991, steered literary criticism in a new direction. A popular professor of English at the University of Toronto, Frye’s book, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*, almost singlehandedly rescued that mystical, English poet from obscurity, and likewise, *Anatomy of Criticism* revolutionized English literary criticism. But Professor Frye was also an ordained minister of the United Church of Canada. He loved the Bible and these two works reflect this love.

However, *Words of Power* might startle the orthodox. As Frye says in *The Great Code*, these books are not studies of the Bible as literature, but a study of how the Bible’s literary nature forms a core part of its very message. *Words of Power* is definitely not a work of theological exegesis; it is a study of the divine footprint, so to speak, not of the divine foot itself. Whereas *The Great Code*

treats the Bible as a self-contained myth, *Words of Power* claims that the Bible is the central myth of Western civilization.

Words of Power is difficult to read. Sprinkling *Words of Power* with untranslated quotes, Frye delves into the very nature of language and thought in ways that place great demands on the reader. The rewards, however, are concomitant. For instance, in a passage with great meaning for Latter-day Saints, Frye illustrates how religions set up a great body of laws, regulations, and ritual; he claims that true spiritual growth occurs only when members transcend these legalities in a three-step process of the imaginative, the erotic, and the ecstatic. Imaginative is the process by which we realize that “reality” becomes part of the illusion of memory, whereas the illusion of imagination becomes part of our reality. The erotic process involves the transcendence of identity and difference—identity is love and difference is beauty. The ecstatic process creates a sense of presence, a sense uniting ourselves with something else. This is conversion in Alma’s sense, conversion on the individual level and the attainment of Zion on the community level.

One of Frye’s great accomplishments is the rescue of *mythos* from the intellectual scapheap of modern civilization. Rather than treating myth as a simplification of a story, Frye shows that myth embodies the highest truths. Myth is the very soul of a society, “an interconnected body of significant stories that a society needs to know.”

—MARC A. SCHINDLER



SPANISH FOR TRAVELERS

We are in Spanish for Travelers.

—¿Dónde cambian dinero?

—¿Aceptan ustedes cheques de viajero?

But that is not what I want.

¡That is not what I want!

Give me the city of night

la ciudad de la noche,

the breathing of distant water

la respiración de un agua remota.

An idiot child of the arid mountain

una niña idiota de la sierra árida,

I go forward slowly

avanzo lentamente

gathering songs.

—ROSEMARY KLEIN