

8 **DIANA NYAD** on reading about astrophysics, sports and Proust

12 **ROSEMARY KENNEDY** Meryl Gordon on the hidden daughter

16 **KIDS' BOOKS** Big frights, 'The Thing About Jellyfish' and Shostakovich

PLUS: Jewish delis, the history of refrigeration and Anthony Trollope

Book Review

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GARY PANTER

When the Lights Went Out

By Frank Rich

LOCATING THE BEST of times within the worst of times is no mean trick, especially in a historical novel where the history is recent enough that many readers remember firsthand just how bad those times were. That's the delicate and ultimately moving balancing act that Garth Risk Hallberg

pulls off in "City on Fire," his Dickens-size descent into New York City circa 1976-77. Surveying a landscape that stretches from the smoldering South Bronx to the rubble-strewn vacant lots of Hell's Kitchen to the spaced-out melee of Alphabet City, Hallberg doesn't shortchange the era's squalor. The thickets of graffiti are omnipresent; the detritus of drugs is underfoot; "Ford to City:

CITY ON FIRE

By Garth Risk Hallberg

Illustrated. 911 pp.

Alfred A. Knopf. \$30.

Drop Dead" is on the front page. Yet humanity keeps bubbling up amid the ruins.

"Budget cuts and crime and unemployment had brutalized the city, and you could feel on the street this sense of soured anarchy, of failed utopia," one of his characters reminisces some years later. "But as sad as it was, it was in many

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22

When the Lights Went Out

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

ways the ideal playground for ninth graders with preoccupied families and fake IDs. You could go hear the early rap records or the late New Wave ones or the thing disco was becoming at unlicensed clubs where black and brown and white and gay and straight still mixed openly.” Hallberg’s cross section of New Yorkers runs the gamut in generation, class, race and sexuality, but the city is at once playground and hellhole for most of them. The muchness of its muchness, defined by the boundary-breaking artistic revolution raging downtown no less than the fires raging some 150 blocks to the north, is pulsing through this book’s pages as insistently as its Patti Smith/Donna Summer playlist.

Whatever their age, more than a few of the major characters of “City on Fire” are lost kids in flight from their parents. The most lost, and surely the most magnetic, is William Stuart Althorp Hamilton-Sweeney III, the wastrel heir of “those Hamilton-Sweeneys,” a family whose ruthlessly maintained wealth and power are apotheosized in a Midtown office tower bearing its name. A boarding school washout, William had earned notoriety as Billy Three-Sticks, the frontman for an early punk band, Ex Post Facto, that produced a single legendary album. As we first meet him at age 33, at the tail end of the Bicentennial, he is juggling a heroin addiction, a stormy domestic relationship with a 24-year-old male lover and an obsession with making a Great American Painting. When a young woman comes upon William’s unfinished magnum opus in his clandestine Bronx studio, she is astonished to find that it’s nothing less than an attempt “to recreate the face of the entire city” on canvas. “She couldn’t tell if it was good, exactly,” Hallberg writes, “but no one could say it wasn’t ambitious.”

The question of whether “City on Fire” is good does not lend itself to a glib answer. But no one can say it isn’t ambitious, and exceptionally so for a first novel. Hallberg devotes more than 900 pages to his own effort to recreate the face of an entire city in all its confounding complexity, complete with collagelike inserts replicating a coffee-stained manuscript by one character and the dense East Village zines of another. His talent is as conspicuous as the book’s heft. There’s rarely a less than finely honed sentence or a moment when you don’t feel that a sophisticated intelligence is at work. Hallberg expertly manages the gear-shifting of multiple narratives and time frames (some back stories date to 1960) while keeping his present-tense New York in sharp relief.

Even so, there are some real lulls along

the way; not all of the characters earn the swaths of pages they receive. There are also passages of true beauty, none more so than the nearly 150-page climax, where “City on Fire” plunges into the Great New York Blackout of July 1977 on a scale worthy of “Cecil B. DeMille, or that Soviet version of ‘War and Peace’” (as one witness observes of the outage). It’s a tour de force of narrative crosscutting and chiaroscuro



Garth Risk Hallberg

scene-painting reminiscent of the infernal Hollywood riot, the figurative “Burning of Los Angeles,” that caps Nathanael West’s “The Day of the Locust.” But unlike the embittered serfs of West’s Depression-era Hollywood, the lost souls of Hallberg’s bankrupt New York rise above the chaos, arson and looting, as if a short-circuited urban jungle could cast a transformative spell akin to Shakespeare’s Forest of Arden. Intentionally or not, Hallberg’s generous vision of the blackout feels like a premonition of Sept. 11, when another cross section of New Yorkers behaved in unexpected ways as their city threatened to go down.

He achieves that generosity without sentimentalizing or sanitizing the underlying reality. As subsequent history tells us, and as Hallberg underscores in his own denouement, the New York of “City on Fire” is fated to remain rigidly divided by class, ruled by big money and impervious to lasting reform. While Hallberg’s blackout may recall Don DeLillo’s deployment of the 1965 blackout in his sweeping historical phantasmagoria “Underworld,” his book has more in common with Tom Wolfe’s more didactic “Bonfire of the Vanities,” set a decade after “City on Fire.” Hallberg shares much of Wolfe’s pessimism about

the immutability of the pecking order in a modern metropolis where every downturn, however ominous, is inevitably followed by another Gilded Age in which the old order reasserts itself. Not for nothing do Wolfe and Hallberg both provide deliciously malignant set pieces portraying upper-crust soirees as vulgar variations on “The Masque of the Red Death.” In their late-20th-century Gotham, the developers

The city is at once playground and hellhole for Hallberg’s cross section of New Yorkers.

always win, papering over the city’s latest scar tissue under the guise of urban renewal. Even AIDS can be commoditized by the cultural marketplace. Like Wolfe, Hallberg does offer some underclass challengers to the status quo — post-1960s white radicals in lieu of the black activists of “Bonfire.” Under the sway of a fatuous nihilist known as Nicky Chaos, punksters from Billy Three-Sticks’s old circle have formed an anarchist cell with terrorist aspirations, the Post-Humanist Phalanx, in an East Third Street squat. But they are doomed to be outwitted and co-opted by the very forces they hope to overthrow. As one of their generational peers wisecracks, “The reason we can say anything we want in America is that we know it makes no difference.”

Beyond the echo in their titles and the overlap in their dyspeptic worldviews, there is an aesthetic kinship between “City on Fire” and “Bonfire.” As Wolfe announced his intention to revive the epic 19th-century social novel — in his case by injecting his journalistic inves-

tigations of the Way We Live Now into a fictional framework — so Hallberg seems inclined to play Dickens to Wolfe’s Trollope by building his own “Bleak House.” William’s lover, Mercer Goodman, an African-American refugee from the Georgia provinces, has come to Manhattan to teach sophomore English to the preppies at the Wenceslas-Mockingbird School for Girls while taking a stab at a Great American Novel rivaling William’s art project. When, in one of many bouts of procrastination, he daydreams about sitting for a Paris Review interview, his imaginary interlocutor notes that he is bucking his generation’s “minimalist” vogue in fiction. Mercer pleads guilty: “I wanted to explore again the old idea that the novel might, you know, teach us about something. About everything.”

Hallberg is the natural novelist that Wolfe was not. Nearly 30 years on, what remains indelible in “Bonfire” is its Hogarthian depiction of the pandemonium of racial polarization, the dead-on skewering of Wall Street’s “masters of the universe” and their women’s auxiliary, the “social X-rays,” as well as the undying caricature of a nominally disguised Al Sharpton. The Wolfe characters who lack a roman à clef provenance, the more generic figures in his page-turning plot, have washed away with time. By contrast, Hallberg often dispenses with the dictates of journalism to burrow into the psychic and familial underpinnings of his characters in a Franzenesque, if not Dickensian, manner. (Humor is generally not part of Hallberg’s arsenal, in this book at least.) Though “City on Fire” draws on journalistic accounts — Jonathan Mahler’s “Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx Is Burning” is among the acknowledged sources — Hallberg does not feel any obligation to revisit the Koch-Cuomo-Abzug mayoralty race or the equally heated adventures of the Reggie Jackson Yankees. Son of Sam gets a name check but is shoved into the shadows so that “City on Fire” can construct its own fictional plot out of the unsolved New Year’s Eve shooting of a New York University freshman in Central Park by a rumored “Kneesocks Killer.” The marathon vigil at the comatose girl’s bedside at Beth Israel becomes the flickering star around which most of the major characters orbit.

AND WHY NOT? By sticking to his own literary terms, Hallberg delivers a fresh vision of New York that is more dreamscape than reportage. (Or perhaps cinemascapes: The characters have seen “The French Connection” and “Taxi Driver,” and at times seem to be re-enacting chunks of them.) And as gorgeously realized as the backdrops are, there are also some characters who, like William, can hold their own against it all — most notably, Charlie Weisbarger, a nerdy asthmatic with messianic ambitions, and Samantha Cicciaro, a budding Bohemi-

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PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK VESSEY

an artiste, 17-year-olds from middle-class Long Island who have stolen away to the big city to reinvent themselves, with both tragic and heroic results.

Nonetheless, “City on Fire” is burdened with its own share of characters who either conform to type or are undernourished. William’s sister, Regan, a smart Vassar girl of the pre-Friedan era who settled for less in marriage and in career, seems a hand-me-down from “The Group” and its progeny (including “Mad Men”); her faithless husband, Keith Lamplighter, a slick money manager who places a bad bet on municipal bonds and an even worse one on an extramarital affair, is cut from the same Brooks Brothers cloth as Wolfe’s Wall Street bond salesman, Sherman McCoy. Among the other stock figures are a

zeitgeist-seeking New Journalist with a professional résumé that mirrors Wolfe’s (but whose writing style is a pastiche of Gay Talese and J. Anthony Lukas); a seen-it-all New York police detective taking on one last big case before retirement; and William’s mentor in culture and homosexuality, a drawing-teacher-turned-art-dealer named Bruno Augenblick who looks “like a less jolly Michel Foucault” but sounds like Mel Brooks’s Roger De Bris if he’d ended up selling paintings in SoHo. (“As ever, William, your way of seeing the world is sui generis,” Bruno purrs to his young protégé.) None of these characters ever say a line of dialogue you don’t expect them to say. And much as Hallberg tries to mix up his melting pot, his black, Jewish and Vietnamese-American characters more often than not

seem lightly sketched from the outside in.

These cogs do gum up the works. So, occasionally, does the more showy writing. To take one small but representative

Intentionally or not, Hallberg’s vision of the blackout feels like a premonition of 9/11.

example, when Hallberg writes that “the click of the conductor’s ticket punch” is “a tiny, elegant noise, like a beak stabbing at a tree,” you find yourself appreciating the craft even as you question its relevance to any task at hand. An editor should have saved Hallberg from such advertisements for himself, as well as from his tendency to

hammer in motifs, notably those involving fire and fireworks, and his overuse of chance discoveries of buried evidence to keep the Central Park murder case on a low boil. Someone should have caught the occasional factual errors (the location of Needle Park) and linguistic anachronisms (“wintry mix”).

But this is a first novel, after all, and there is much to savor, and much that lingers, for those who stick with it. In the end it is the largeness of Hallberg’s spirit rather than the size of his sometimes patchy canvas that matters most anyway. “City on Fire” may not be as good as it is ambitious, but in the tradition of other precocious New York debuts since time immemorial, it is radiant with the possibility that its author will do something great. □

Rogue’s Gallery

A serial killer attempts to mount an exhibition on the theme of violent death.

By KEN KALFUS

IN TIM PARKS’S three decades as a resident of Italy, he has turned his keen, sometimes acidic, observations of that country into a pile of books, including literary novels and memoirs. A series of related crime novels has added some height, if not elevation, to the stack. Compared with his other works, they can be considered simple entertainments — colorful, often amusing, intermittently suspenseful and ultimately unambitious.

PAINTING DEATH

By Tim Parks

339 pp. Arcade Publishing. \$24.99.

The star of these novels is the British-born Morris Duckworth, now a prosperous middle-aged Veronese businessman with an appalling history. He came to Verona in his 20s, trying to scrape by as an English tutor, as told in “Juggling the Stars,” first published in the United States in 1993. After a plot to kidnap his girlfriend, Mimi, soured, Morris was compelled to kill her. In the second novel, “Mimi’s Ghost,” he married Mimi’s sister, who proved unfaithful and then dead. Other murders of expedience followed. “Painting Death,” the third in the series, now opens with Morris as the director of

KEN KALFUS’S latest book is “Coup de Foudre: A Novella and Stories.”



KAYE BLEGVAD

the wine company owned by the same unlucky, unsuspecting local family. He has married the last surviving sister. He also has a young mistress.

The vain and pompous Morris suffers no remorse over the murders in his past, though he displaces his guilt in a peculiar way, conjuring the shades of his victims as friendly, non-recriminating ghosts. Mimi speaks to Morris through a copy of Fra Lippi’s “La Vergine Incoronata,” which hangs in his sumptuous palazzo. She’s as loving as she ever was before that unfortunate business with the glass paperweight against the side of her head, and she’s generous with advice about his temporal affairs.

Another bit of displacement drives the story of “Painting Death.” Morris, who now considers himself an art expert, proposes to the director of Verona’s Castelvecchio Museum an exhibition on the theme of murder, with “the finest representations of violent death.” He will fund it himself and write the tabloidy, nonacademic captions. Under his guidance, the museum will borrow works from institutions around Italy and the world: Titian’s “Cain and Abel,” Delacroix’s “Death of Sardanapalus,” Pietro Testa’s “Massacre of the Innocents.” Through these paintings, Morris argues, “a terrible brutality is made briefly beautiful, *seeable*, in order that we may be reminded

of what, in essence, we all are: *savages*.”

Both Morris and Parks may be excessively enamored of the idea and especially of the prospect that museums will part with these works. Given that so much of Western art involves mayhem of one kind or another, a show on the subject seems at least superfluous. In any event, more murders ensue.

Parks uses the museum intrigue to draw, as he has done in his more serious efforts, a vivid, impressionistic portrait of contemporary Italy, not entirely in flattering tones. Verona comes off as a city gripped by political and ecclesiastical corruption, ruined by touristic kitsch, patrolled by incompetent policemen and threatened by immigrant hordes. Emphasizing the people of Middle Eastern origin who are increasingly conspicuous in Italy, Parks leans heavily on ethnic and other group characterizations. Morris’s mistress is an “Arab girl” (specifically a Libyan). The “dusky mistress” with her “hooked nose” cooks “Arab soups and stews.” Her brother is a would-be jihadist. Another individual is introduced as having a “very Jewish face.” Morris uncovers a cabal of predictably sadomasochistic gay men. Another gay character is a pedophile.

This is a tricky business. Parks presumably intends Morris to be a lovably odious man, but there’s a difference between asking the reader to be entertained by a character who makes gross categorical discriminations and asking the reader to believe in a world that’s so casually defined by those discriminations. □