

Escape From Gotham

by Edward B. Anderson

What I Think I Did:

A Season of Survival in Two Acts

by Larry Woiwode

New York: Basic Books; 312 pp., \$25.00



When novelist Larry Woiwode moved to a house and a little piece of land just off State Highway 21 in the loneliest corner of North Dakota, he left behind the world of New York and the *New Yorker* for a part of America which, if it conjures any image in the coastal mind, is that of “flyover” land. Woiwode’s time in North Dakota has been spent mostly on the business of living, but he has done some good writing as well. His most recent book, *What I Think I Did*, is an unusual memoir for which his last work, *Acts*, seems to have been an exploration of sorts. The book is part chronicle of a winter on his 300-acre ranch and farm (or “garden-patch” as his neighbors with more typically Western land-holdings call it), and part literary memoir. The narrative shifts back and forth between memories of Woiwode’s college days and early years writing for the *New Yorker*, and scenes from the gritty day-to-day business of keeping livestock and family warm and fed during the long 1997 spring blizzard that will remain a vivid memory throughout the northern high plains for decades to come.

Woiwode has decided to heat his house and office-shed with a new wood-burning furnace that he has shipped in from more wooded parts. What might seem like an inexplicable decision to those who have seen western North Dakota has actually a bit more method than madness to it, for Woiwode has noticed the rows of dying shelterbelts and windbreaks planted over the decades by farmers. Trees, like all other living things, have natural lifespans; he plans to “cremate” those that have passed on, squeezing one more bit of sustenance out

of the bleak high plains in the best tradition of his predecessors.

Facing falling, blowing, and deeply drifting snow rather than the typically cold but dry western Dakota winter, Woiwode finds himself troubleshooting the new furnace under trying conditions. He tells the story of each soldering, each leaking valve, and each buried pipeline, interspersing these with remembrances of his childhood and youth. As he begins to run out of wood to burn, everything becomes fair game in the struggle for warmth: junk, old furniture, boxes of books, dead chickens. Woiwode feeds the tangible mementos of his memories into the furnace the way that he has fed the raw material of memories into his fiction.

In the second half of the book, the North Dakota winter episodes become increasingly sparse as the author writes at length about his years in New York, his early stories, his first novel, and his encounters with such writers as Borges, Welty, Updike, Mailer, and Cheever. These intriguing events are stated simply, without a hint of embellishment. One of the most interesting episodes has to do with his friendship with a young unknown named Robert De Niro whom Woiwode met at the end of his brief acting career. In a succinct assessment of De Niro as character actor and friend, Woiwode describes him as “a chameleon that is trustworthy.”

The title of his new book being a retrospective turn on that of his first novel, *What I’m Going to Do, I Think*, one wonders if Woiwode intends this latest literary production to be his last. Those who make their way through his novels to the memoir will find not only the accomplished novelist, but also the artist determined to live a life in addition to writing about it. Here is a man who reached a place in the New York literary world that many would-be writers would lie, cheat, and steal for. Yet he relinquished it, largely to give his children the gift of growing up near a ghost town in windswept western Dakota riding horses, running chainsaws, shooting pistols, and raising Rambouillets. As Woiwode turns again and again from his family’s life on their farm to matter-of-fact narratives about the life of drugs, venereal diseases,

violence, rape, and fear in 1960’s New York, the value of this gift becomes plain. Ironically, Woiwode is still something of an outsider in spite of his North Dakota birth, a person the locals feel they need to look out for a little: sometimes affectionately, often uncomprehendingly, occasionally resentfully. His nearly adult children, on the other hand, move with ease through the winter, across the distances, within the community, and in their work. And the father depends on them.

One thing cannot go without mention. Woiwode pays a debt of gratitude to his friend, mentor, and editor at the *New Yorker*, William Maxwell, who often kept Woiwode sane, fed, and focused in a cold and lonely New York, while helping the younger man find his voice, his mind, and his story. More to the point, Maxwell helped Woiwode find them in time for the author to write the books he had to write and still live the life that writing those books made it possible for him to live. One senses that, without Maxwell, Woiwode might have written similar books and gone where he was going as a writer, but by a longer, more twisted path, one littered with more personal wreckage. Given the egotistical and insecure nature of most contemporary artists, who can give credit only when it can be served up as career-enhancing name-dropping, Woiwode’s quiet, clear tribute is all the more remarkable.

His prose, at its best both spare and satiating, is nearly always at its best. Early in his career, Woiwode says, he had a glimpse of what he is after: “a prose trim enough to follow the swiftest physical action with ease, yet with enough substance to pull a passage below the page into a dimension a character might assume . . . and the ability, now and then, to spring into stratospheric reaches of far-flung thought.” With a passing memory of his mother’s mother “wobbling up in focus” and then appearing “in sunlit brilliance” as he worked at his desk in Manhattan, the author knew he had a story:

I will write about her the way I’ve always felt I should write, as if my life depends on getting it right. Enough of fractured time and the grotesque and multiple viewpoints

and trying what Beckett and Babel and Kafka have done as only they can do . . . just get down clear the slant of light on a woman who influenced me more than any of those writers.

The result was his first *New Yorker* story, the first of the stream of stories that led ineluctably to his novels.

To those who have read Woiwode's haunting masterpiece, *Beyond the Bedroom Wall* (and to have read the first pages is to have surrendered to the entirety), *What I Think I Did* allows a glimpse into what that effort meant. To call the book an account of what it means for a child to lose his mother is to trivialize it. To call it anything else is to trivialize what it means for a child to lose his mother. Like the east and west watersheds of the Continental Divide, for Woiwode there is a Before and an After. By returning to North Dakota, he has, in a way, re-

turned to his mother and to the roots and the community her distant memory embodied for him:

When my mother died the years in North Dakota tumbled into [a] trunk, because we had moved to Illinois the summer before, and her death was like a guillotine across them. They went falling in folds into their place in the trunk and its lid slammed shut. Her grave was a chasm, the spot where the guillotine struck, and when I tried to get to the other side by every imaginative leap I could devise, it didn't matter if I missed by a mile or an inch, a miss sent me into a dark darker than dreams.

For those who have made the journey with Woiwode through his novels, *What I Think I Did* will deepen their appreciation of his accomplishment in traversing

the ridges and sloughs of deep memory to write books like *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*. Woiwode might say he could do no other—but that's not quite true, and we know it.

Edward B. Anderson writes from
Edmond, Oklahoma.

On Her Way by Jane Greer

Pursuit and Persuasion
by Sally S. Wright

Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers;
354 pp., \$10.99



This is the third and newest book in Sally Wright's well-received "Ben Reese Mystery Series." The first two—*Pride and Predator* and *Publish and Perish*—drew rave reviews from the *Washington Times*, *National Review*, *Publishers Weekly*, and the redoubtable Ralph McInerney.

The new book's premise is intriguing. It's 1961. Elderly Scottish professor Georgina Fletcher leaves an Oxford pub with a tall, argumentative American. He puts something into her purse and stomps off. She reads it, goes back to her room, and writes a letter that she asks a friend to mail secretly should she, Georgina, die. The letter requests a private investigation into her death. The next day, Georgina dies at breakfast.

The letter is addressed to a young American, Ellen Winter, who takes it seriously. Ellen has the double good luck of being Georgina's heir and an apprentice to Dr. Ben Reese, the quiet, handsome, manly (I'm thinking Rod Taylor in *Hotel*), widowed archivist at Alderton University in Ohio. Reese, an amateur detective, just happens to be in Scotland. Ellen contacts him, and the two set about fulfilling Georgina's request.

Wright is thorough in her research and clearly familiar with Scotland. (The second book in this series is set there, too.) As Ben and Ellen engineer conversations with a large group of suspects, we learn a great deal about Scottish landscape, history, food, and culture, as well as the Scottish impression of Americans in 1961. Descriptions of Georgina's cen-

Oxymoron

for Henry Vaughan

by Constance Rowell Mastores

I would like to believe in the everyness of things. In the universe and fiery stars. In the warp-worlds. In the greater possibility of that impossibility. In the huge seductiveness burning outside my window. Every night it winks at me. Every night, at odds, I stare at it and write strange sentences on yellow tablets that create their own kind of haphazard universe upon the table. I read them like a Rorschach test. I see windmills. I tilt at them. I tilt at the universe burning outside my window, dare it to make me believe, to walk right up to me and announce itself—shake me by the shoulder. *There is in God, some say, a deep, but dazzling darkness.*