

Book

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A dark mystery, a gruesome crime, a relentless chase — “Free Men” holds all those elements, but it largely holds them in abeyance. The action is essentially freeze-framed so that we can see what would have been missed if the plot had galloped past in a fit of murder and retribution.

Each of the criminals speaks to us directly in separate chapters that take us back into their lives before they met one another. Bob, an escaped slave, describes the rising frustration that motivated him to leave his wife and children for a chance at freedom. Cat, a white man, reveals the grueling string of deaths that addled his mind. And Istilicha, the Indian, lays out the internecine plot that finally drove him from his own tribe.

This cycle of monologues is a demanding narrative strategy that requires creating not only distinct ethnic voices but voices from a world more

than 200 years before our own. Henry James warned about the challenge of representing what he called “the old consciousness, the soul, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals in whose minds half the things that make ours, that make the modern world were non-existent.” To my ear, Smith’s success on this score is uneven. Bob, for instance, is endearing and sympathetic and claims, “I was the ordinary of slaves,” but his speech frequently rings with a kind of well-educated, modern-day eloquence that sounds anachronistic.

“When I thought about a little person coming into this world who would see things as I saw them, who would crouch in a pen looking at the far fields for a glint of his mother, it grew in my head that this life was not just a single thing, mine alone, but was a big circle that rolled over on itself again and again, that what struck me with pain would strike my child too, that this was not a life but a system, and for the first time my boyish grief took on the

color of rage. I didn’t just want my people back; I wanted out.”

That’s hardly the “ordinary” prose — for an 18th-century slave or even for a contemporary novelist. But the loveliness and stylistic sophistication of such passages inadvertently mute the brutality of slavery with its concomitant conditions of illiteracy and intellectual starvation.

Smith is more convincing when she speaks through Cat, the man ruined by grief. He introduces himself by telling us, “My father was the first woman I knew. His hands split the knots in my hair, folded me on a straw bed, spooned me soup. Belted me, caned me, hid me. He never touched me but to hit me. I was not afraid of him in any way but this. He slept by the day fire and cut sticks at night into beasts. Twisted things, not cows or lambs. Vermin. When he had enough, he’d bury them by the walnut.”

Now that — that blend of innocence and macabre, pocked with weird gaps of logic — sounds entirely believable.

As Cat winds through the tragedies that stripped away his happiness and then his sanity, his story resonates with authenticity that makes him seem at once removed from us and linked to us.

But the most captivating voice belongs to a Frenchman named Louis Le Clerc Milfort, who works as a tracker and freelance deputy of justice. He’s abandoned a spoiled marriage in France and, like a woodland de Tocqueville, he’s come to America “to catalog the divergences of man” in this brave new world, a place free from the fetid strictures of the past. “I left friends behind in Paris who dissect amphibians and sketch leaves,” he says, “but I hope to earn my place in the burgeoning science by classifying human action, to construct not a hierarchy but rather a forecast for future generations.” When he hears of the robbery-murder, he volunteers to track down the criminals for the Muscogee chief, but he has a larger interest. How, he wonders, “did a white man meet a black man meet an Indian?” To

him, this odd trio represents “a rare encapsulation of the types of man, a scale model of American brutality and independence.”

Le Clerc’s search feels at once like a project of 18th century anthropology and a timeless reflection on our national character. As he pursues these three guilt-ridden murderers, he’s determined “to prove that there was a sub-layer to humanity that was common across the classes, and that no matter the station one was born to, some universal concern made one recognizable as a man as opposed to any other beast.” But that quasi-scientific interest — “hunting the human temperament,” as he says — makes Le Clerc reluctant to capture these men and thereby bring his clandestine observations to an end. “In any country in the world they could not subject together, yet here they were, wandering in a polite clump through woods that belonged apparently to no one, ignoring all the reasons to strike out on their own, to take the money and fall back into their segregated homes.”

Movie

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The protagonist, clad in pressed L.L. Bean flannels and Hunter boots, defends herself from herself as she protects her husband’s memory in a cozy lodge with a crackling fire. It’s a kind of fortress, both a repository for his working memorabilia and a sanctuary for her memories and feelings. The town itself is part of the supporting cast that nurtures her. The outsider played by Jason Sudeikis chips away at her icy shell in his quest to write his own biography of the suffering artist just as spring comes into focus.

Dialogue sparkles. For instance “See you in Vacationland.” “I will bring my swim trunks,” had the crowd at the Portland Museum of Art chuckling. “Tumbledown” is available on iTunes right, but seeing it on the big screen with fellow Mainers who laughed at the right parts and clapped and cheered at the end makes “Tumbledown” a uniquely Maine experience. This is not Hollywood’s Maine. It’s as independent as the state it salutes.

“Tumbledown” screens at Frontier in Brunswick and the Portland Museum of Art this weekend.

Music

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“My music teacher saw me and asked if I wanted to take vocal lessons,” he said. Since then, his teacher, Bobbi Lane of Bar Harbor, also has taught him to play guitar and piano.

“Tyler’s the guy who, when he goes to class, he does what the teacher says,” Lane said. “He comes back every week with the home-

work done perfectly.”

Ty no longer takes music lessons of any kind, however, because Lane “let him go,” she said.

“He doesn’t need me anymore,” she said, adding he calls if he has a problem or question.

Ty didn’t win the vocal contest he entered when he was 12, but that’s OK. He really prefers performing and hasn’t competed since, he said.

Competing “takes the fun out of it,” Ty said.

He likes to perform pop

and alternative rock music and likes the feel of the band Imagine Dragons.

The teen practices an hour to an hour and a half a day.

“His high school is having a hard time with him [because] they want him to go to college,” his mother said. “But he’s going to try to push the music.”

“Perfect,” said Lane when she heard about Ty’s plans. “Do it.”

Otherwise, she said, he might get stuck doing something he doesn’t like just to

pay the bills.

Lane, who has performed and recorded music herself, said she was “on the road” at age 16.

“I can’t imagine not having done that,” she said.

Ty already has been performing live shows at places such as Mainely Meat in Ellsworth, the Pickled Wrinkle in Birch Harbor and the Sea Dog Brewing Co. in Bangor.

Upcoming performances are scheduled for 7 p.m. Feb. 20 at The Grand in Ellsworth, 5 p.m. Feb. 21 at

CODA Restaurant in Southwest Harbor, where he will open up for the Crown Vics, and 7-9 p.m. April 27 at the Cherryfield Alumni Building.

Painter

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“I started with Hobby Lobby canvases, and now I’m building and stretching my own. As the daughter of an artist, that’s what I did as a teenager to make money — I built my dad’s canvases.”

She has been reacquainted with an old friend, in a way, and as she continues to paint, her relationship with her father, who inspired her to begin, has blossomed.

“I’m able to relate to my dad in a way that I hadn’t been before,” Fiack said. “I never understood why he never wanted to leave the house until I started painting. ... It’s been fun to work with him and gain from his knowledge. Who could have a better mentor than that?”

But her journey hasn’t ended yet. She continues to paint. Completed works of art sit throughout her home, waiting for new owners to scoop them up.

As she has taken to social media to share her work,

she has found other artists challenging themselves to do the same thing: create. She has watched her own friends find the inspiration to rekindle their creativity, and she has been inspired by her own daughters, who are artistic themselves.

“I take a lot of inspiration from my youngest child. She approaches everything with no fear. She just picks up color and creates,” Fiack said.

“I think about that when I’m approaching my canvas: I want to be free and fearless when I paint,” she said.

Now that Andy Warhol quote in her father’s studio hangs in her own home as well. She uses it as a reminder to keep on painting.

“Let go of the fear and just create,” she said.

An artist’s reception will take place from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, March 2, at the Rock and Art Shop at 36 Central St. in Bangor. A selection of Fiack’s 100 paintings will be on display at the Rock and Art Shop from Feb. 29 to March 14.



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