

Gloucestermas, A Novel That Vexes But Leaves Readers Thinking

By Richard W. Amero

Gloucestermas (Fontis Press, Westborough, Mass.,) Jonathan Bayliss' culminating novel in his four-part series beginning with *Prologos*, *Gloucesterbook*, and *Gloucestertide*, was published in 2010, one year after Bayliss' death in 2009. Whether the novel was complete at the time of its publication is confusing as it bears the marks of unfinished composition, which either the author or the editor could have remedied. Characters that appear in previous novels appear in this novel or are referred to by name. As this is a late novel, it shows the effects of the author's declining libido. Taken as a whole it is a baffling mixture of autobiography and fiction, and is marked by an abundance of dimly defined characters and by haziness in plot development.

It is considered fashionable in some circles these days to consider random plot juxtapositions and contradictions in characterization to be the latest fad in experimental, sometimes called deconstructionist, fiction. As such the novel's disassembled and fragmented structure is supposed to be a harbinger of the novel as it is to be. If this be so, may the Deities help us for ramblings flow effortlessly from one character to another in what was in former times called "a stream of consciousness" but now might more appropriately be called "a stream of associations." Caleb, the protagonist, calls the peregrinetic musings Immediate Exclusive Consciousness (IEC).

By bringing so many of the characters in other parts of the series together in Dogtown (a pseudonym for Gloucester, Mass.) the plot strains credulity. It might be said that this isn't a realistic novel so the numerous interconnections, which frequently involve the exchange of husbands and wives, must be accepted on its own terms. It would not happen in a real world but in a work of fiction, fiction could be said by some (but not by me) to predominate.

As most of the characters are now quinquagenarians, sexagenarians, septuagenarians, and octogenarians, the Sumerian goddess of love Inana, has either abandoned her votaries or has acquired a new set, leaving the old to flounder in abstractions having to do with politics (Protesticans vs., Catholicrats), with the vagaries of art, and with manifestations of anthropology, geology, mathematics, metaphysics, mythology, and theology.

One of the more distressing parts of the novel is the way all the main characters seem to talk and think in the same language. Perhaps it is lingua franca in Gloucester that all seagulls are called "angels," but, in my youth, my peers had other less complimentary names. Characters are mostly matrons, which means they are outsiders who have come to settle in Dogwood because it radiates an uncontrollable magnetism. In one place, it is stated that natives go as far away from their collapsing town as they can, with Southern California in general and Hume (read the University of California at Berkeley) in particular functioning as a one-way street.

While the ruminations of the main characters, including an omniscient narrator, occupy most of the book, there is a curious kind of in-breeding among leads as their ruminations usually center around the same subject, such as the search for a father for Caleb Karcist on the part of his

friends. Caleb, for his part, is mildly amused. Roughly the book breaks down into two orbits, the first concerns Mary Tremont (also known as Moira Trevisa), Caleb's mother. Around the celebration of Dogwood's annual Petrine (read Roman Catholic) celebration, Moira, as she was then known, had sex with three distinguished gentlemen who were respectively a successful acquirer of stocks who happens to be a Jew; a young officer in the U.S. Navy who is a blonde Celtic navy architect; and a soon-to-be ordained Tudor (read Episcopalian) priest who is something of a "holy ghost" with radical ideas about changing ecclesiastical rituals.

Why this question of fatherhood should be of such concern to Tess Opsimath is a mystery, but, suffice it to say, she likes to solve the scandals of an associate who was born a bastard. For myself I regard Tessa as a tiresome busybody. At any rate she was a disciple of Auto Drang (Otto Rank) a prominent psychoanalyst and is, therefore, adept at probing hidden secrets. Tessa believes in "free will," and, supposedly, so did her mentor Auto Drang. "Free will" is a hidden motif in the novel that surfaces from time to time. Readers are advised to be on the alert for those occasions when it pokes its nose through the canvas.

Aside from Caleb, an introspective and scrawny bachelor with a penchant for geometric symbols, who is engaged in completing a dramatic version of the Sumerian tale of Gilgamesh, the two main characters that take up the bulk of the novel are Fayaway [Morgan] Gabriel and Finn Macdane. Their common topic of conversation in their pillow talk is Caleb. Midway in the novel all three of Caleb's possible fathers die and the story line shifts to Caleb's position as an assistant to the mayor of Dogwood. Caleb has evolved a theory of organization he calls Synectic Method of Diagnostic Correlation (SMDT). By applying this theory to the solution of practical problems he has become an efficiency expert who can expedite work, reduce expenditures, and get rid of surplus employees. Business machines made by OHM (IBM) make it possible for Caleb to demonstrate how his theory can be used to simplify actions. As the novel takes place during the years Roland Raygun (Ronald Reagan) was president, an era in which personal selfishness overcame aspirations for "the common good" Caleb does not grasp the importance of personal computers which were to make OHM punch cards obsolete. Not surprisingly Caleb's reorganization schemes are not regarded with joy by corporate vice presidents or by legislators whose political futures are tied to special interests.

Gloucestermas is not for everyone. Since I am a transported native of Gloucester, Mass. I am able to locate most of the sites Bayliss describes, though in some cases I think he puts separate scenes into one place. A map of Dogtown would do much to clear up the confusion. I found the artificial names to be unnecessary though Bayliss may have thought his cognomens were cute, significant, or just inside jokes. His description of the inner harbor and the shoreline of Gloucester's downtown as seen from the Crow (Eastern) Point breakwater does not correspond to anything I saw from the same place, though Bayliss, as all-knowing narrator, says he used binoculars. At one point before his accidental death by a kilroy (in this case a refrigeration trailer), Ibi Roy, a mythological dog in earlier books, charges a sign with a picture of a cat on it. I find this to be unbelievable.

Bayliss has a curious way of trying to link Wellingborough Redburn (Herman Melville) to the narrative which I find difficult to accept. Most of this linkage is through the reminiscences or experience of anyone of the interchangeable characters. I prefer to call Liam Yeats by his real

name. For most of the novel, William Butler Yeats was used as a prop without reference to his works; however, in a penultimate chapter an attempt is made to show how Yeats' use of geometric symbols was not as abstruse or as profound as those Caleb uses. (Three cheers then for the "Isorectotetrahedron" (IRTH) and the double-headed axe, which date from Sumerian times and, as far as I can see, appear to have the same functions as a scepter and mace.) As poetry, what Yeats did with his tower symbol, nature images, and personal conflicts, and with the attitudes of the oppressed people in Ireland were on a plane higher than the more prosaic Bayliss ever reaches. When he was not trying to be the conveyor of Universal Systems or a sub-optimizer of optimum ideas, I am sure Bayliss, or his fictional alter ego Caleb, was aware of this.) Another writer Bayliss makes much use of without explaining why is George Borrow, a justly-neglected 19th century writer of short stories and translator of the English Bible, who along with Bayliss was of the Tudor (Episcopalian) persuasion and had a fondness for real gypsies (a name Bayliss attaches to free-loving female waifs.)

Bayliss abandons his staggering vocabulary, mostly made up of sesquipedalians of his own coinage, and his equally staggering collections of lists as he gets deeper into his novel. Could it be that these stylistic extravagances became as boring to the author as they eventually became to his readers?

As a Gloucester native, I appreciated Bayliss' description of the changing tides as they affected the creek on the south side of Little Harbor (Good Harbor) Beach but I am not sure the description would mean much to outsiders, particularly to those who could not picture the scene he describes it in detail. As incoming and outgoing tides changed the contours of the land and the transparency of the water, so the many shifts in the novel changed the outlines of the plot. In this sense, if one is looking for metaphors the creek and its waters could serve as a metaphor for the fluid nature of the novel, perhaps, not as explicit as the madeleine in Proust, but a metaphor nonetheless.

If the epic of *Gilgamesh* appeals to readers, I would recommend reading it as a whole rather than in the dispersed sections in the novel. Caleb uses the original as a source but adds ideas that came later in the history of civilization. His updated version is acceptable because it deals revealingly with the world in which many of us find ourselves, without all those bothersome gods who require perpetual sacrifice. If there is a parallel between this lesser and the greater story of Caleb perhaps it can be found in librarian Gloria Cotton's observation that Caleb is Gilgamesh and Ibi Roy, his Viking Shepherd dog, is Engidu, the wild man Gilgamesh subdued and, came to love. After Engidu died Gilgamesh set off on his quest for immortality, only to find that his only immortality would be in the guise of legend.

I think that if the reader has the stamina to get to the end of *Gloucestermas*, Bayliss' pondurables, no matter how many avatars he uses to illustrate them, trouble most of humanity. (Is life more than "birth, copulation and death"?) I suspect Bayliss solution is a kind of oscillating pessimism, well to the shoreward side of despondency. He has no faith in God, yet God or Gods exist. He is comfortable being a Tudor (Episcopalian) because he likes liturgy, but he concedes liturgy has its roots in primitive rituals, dances and choral recitatives. I think, like bigoted George Borrow, he finds Roman Catholicism to be distasteful because of its "priest-craft" and he excludes traces of it in his novel, going so far as to place his characters in Mother's

(Rocky) Neck when the greater number of tourists and Petrine residents in Dogwood are celebrating their quasi-religious festivities on Sacrum Square, the town landing, on the other side of the inner harbor.

Despite occasional touches of brilliance as in the playful analogy of a schooner to a battleship; in the casual exchange of pleasantries between Caleb and Lillian Cloud-Argo, his lady love of yesteryear, at the Starboard Gangway (Studio) without a kiss for Old Times' sake; in the vivid but all too brief description of the wrecking of the poorly-maintained 56-year old schooner *Gloucesterman* and the drowning of its helmsman Finn Macdane; and in the surprisingly lively dialogue between Caleb and Thalia, his godmother's daughter, in the final chapter.

Gloucestermas is a circumlocutious and repetitious book that ends on a note of middle-age florescence. Caleb is 46 and Thalia is 45; not quite the mature fascination of Antony at 51 and Cleopatra at 39, but close enough.

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