

## REVIEW OF BROKEN TRIP

Broken Trip (Glad Day Books, 2004) by Peter Anastas consists of ten short stories that are tied together because they interact with the professional activities of Tony Russo, a welfare consultant who provides his clients with shelter, food, medical treatment, and pats of encouragement. Reading the book is something like drinking a martini. At first one feels the astringent taste and then the BANG hits you. Not all the stories have the same punch, but as a group they pack a stunning wallop. There is so much agony, suffering and loss among some of the characters that they reminded me of sinners in Dante's Inferno, whose obsessions were similarly painful and everlasting. Perhaps a saving factor in this collection of down-and-out stories is that they end, as poet George Oppen puts it at the beginning of the book, in a place where all human emotions ultimately founder.

While the book has a Gloucester setting and most of the characters are involved with the demise of the fishing industry there is more to the book than Gloucester for its basic theme is poverty of body and mind, a poverty that reaches across America and the world. Some of the people depicted are as horrible as human beings can get, short of Buchenwald. While not an intellectual novel on the surface at least (remember the delayed reaction) nurses Amanda and Rochelle, in "The Psych Unit," represent opposite points of view regarding the question: Is it mind or is it environment that dictates human behavior? Since so many of the damned are dope addicts, the answer would seem to be environment and the treatment DETOX. Yet, by itself, the treatment doesn't work. so the force of consciousness has to be brought into play That is why nurse Rochelle grieves over the suicide of Terrence, a junkie, who demonstrated insight but could not control his destructive urges.

The most interesting character in the book for me is Larry, Rochelle's understanding husband. For all his good will, Tony functions as a device. It is through him that the stories are told in a concise reportorial manner that shifts from inner thoughts to outer taunting dialogue. Tony may understand the world, but Larry sustains his wife Rochelle, who has had to cope with abuse from her dope-afflicted mother and Roy, her mother's lover, and her murder of Roy. Why does Roy act as he does? Why do most dope addicts act as they do?

The Gloucester emphasis appears most prominently in "Skag" (heroin). Here the most unlikely of trios go out to sea in-a once-in-a- lifetime trip to catch cod on the Stellwagen Bank. The miracle is that they succeed. There is a whisp of

Hemingway's "Old Man and the Sea" in this section, but the whisp soon merges into a story, of victory not over the sea but over self. All three of the men --- Shitter, Frankie and Jimmy, but principally last-minute replacement captain Jimmy achieve a victory, that is more substantial than Terrence's defeatist view of himself. Like the hired man in Robert Frost's great poem, Jimmy prepares to die with the sense that at sea he has at last conquered --- or forgotten --- his demons. Perhaps here is the answer to why men, from time immemorial, have gone down to the sea in ships. In doing so they escape from the exactions and turmoils of land for work that is so bracing, energetic and dangerous that they forget themselves, This is the HIGH addicts don't have and the reason they go to sea instead of to the lab.

There are many surprises in Anastas' book. His criticism of the Department of Public Welfare, now changed to Department of Transitional Assistance, is justified at least for people who accept the burden of being their brother's keeper. It is not Gloucester alone that produces a class of half-civilized or worse people. Anastas doesn't dwell on the people in the barrooms and on the belt lines in fish factories; but these nameless people are as lonely, bored and unhappy as the principals and spend too much of their time sniping about the actions of their neighbors.

One of the bigger surprises is that the drugs that infest Gloucester and, for that matter all of the Massachusetts North Shore, do not come from the fishing boats – though some do--- but from dealers in Boston. The book does not propose a cure for addiction, unless it be through methadone, therapy and analysis. Except perhaps for Tolstoy there is no reason why a writer of a naturalistic work of fiction should try to solve all the world's problems.

Finally, "Has Gloucester changed and not for the better?" The "Broken Trip" is when a boat returns without fish. Anastas does not give alternatives; but certainly the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century fishing town of Gloucester has changed. As counselor Julie in "Getting Straight" says to Jade who claims she never gave her long live-in companion "Doc" love. "Love is a lot of things." By the same token some portion of the degraded, desperate and deranged underclass in Gloucester may, like Rochelle, arise from the wallow, the filth and the stench As Dante has written after the Inferno is Purgatory. For most of us Paradise is out of reach.

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