

Review of *Decline of Fishes*

By Richard W. Amero

Decline of Fishes, a novel by Peter Anastas (Back Shore Books, 2010) is a short and easy-to-read novel. Despite its short length, the novel has many “I said this before” sections. Anastas uses real names for people and places. In those instances where he does not, he may have been guided by his wish to neutralize some of the fury his incendiary opinions were sure to arouse among residents of Gloucester, Mass., his hometown and long-lived city.

The novel focuses on an attempt by developers from outside Gloucester, to develop a vacant parcel on the downtown waterfront that had been formerly occupied by Davis Brothers Fisheries. Here fish was unloaded at an adjoining wharf and moved inside a large main building. The fish was then gutted, sliced and canned, after which it was sent to markets throughout the United States. (In the interest of disclosure, this reviewer worked at Davis Brothers on summer jobs in 1948-49.)

Developers had in mind a “mall,” that would contain boutiques, souvenir shops, and restaurants catering to tourists. This would mean that the quaint little shops would be open from May through September and would be closed for the rest of the year. The prospect of putting an underground garage at this particular place was so ludicrous. I doubt that anyone would consider it seriously, though Anastas claims it was part and parcel of the land sharks’ dream. While I question the use of the word “mall,” for this small place, the use of waterfront property for small faddish shops and restaurants is not unusual. Anastas cites the waterfront at Newport, Rhode Island as a warning of what Gloucester could become. He might as easily have cited Rockport, Gloucester’s northeast neighbor on the island of Cape Ann.

The overall tenor of the novel is pessimistic and, at places, cynical. Jock’s description of the dire prospects in store for Gloucester in a concluding chapter reminded me of the tormenting forecasts of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoyevsky’s “The Brothers Karamazov”. In view of what has happened to the real-estate market in a recessionary economy in the United States with the enormous number of people who bought homes without the means to pay for them who are now unemployed, I find Anastas’ pessimism to be on target.

As if fake nautical boutiques were not enough, Anastas sees the developers’ manipulations as a strategy for putting condominiums on Gloucester’s waterfront. He claims accurately that these massive dull structures would destroy what remains of the fishing industry along with the man-made and natural appeal of Gloucester.

Many amateur artists come to Gloucester to paint scenes of fishing boats and fishermen. There may come a time when people are paid to pose dressed in oilskins next to fishing boats at the side of wharves to appease the desires of metropolitan people for simpler times.

However, much he may argue against what is coming, Anastas gloomy predictions are inevitable. It is not, however, tourists, Anastas should be afraid of; rather it is the people in

Boston who move to towns within commuting distance of the city where they work.. These are the suburban and rootless people in Ipswich who appear in novels by John Updike.

As with so much of Updike, there is an adultery section in *Decline of Fishes*, which, is the most predictable part of the book. Anastas claims in an early chapter that he, or his puppet Jason, was inspired by the writings of D. H. Lawrence and Wallace Stevens. Lawrence was surely in Anastas' mind when he described the erotic lovemaking between a married woman (Allison) and an unattached and brooding writer (Jason) whose wife and children had left him; the wife for a student who was 20 years younger.

Anastas' mention of the poet Wallace Stevens was boggling at first, for Stevens is anything but erotic. I believe the Stevens' influence comes in when Anastas, or Jason, talks about the sense of power the ability to create gave him. This is the Stevens of "The Idea of Order at Key West."

Stevens may also have a bearing on Anastas use of the word "community." He claims he has found "community" in Florence, Italy, in some small cities in Maine and in a Navajo settlement in Arizona and then claims he finds this same sense of "community" in Gloucester. The community Anastas finds in Gloucester is only there because he put it there. This sense of subjective reality is generic to Wallace Stevens. It is the reason why so many readers are fascinated by his poems even when they find them "odd."

I read *Decline of Fishes* with an imaginary thermometer. In doing so I found the most heated passages to be those describing the photographs of Sully Cameron. Many of these photographs were of the idiotic and barbaric behavior of soldiers during the Vietnam War; others were of young heroin addicts in the Portuguese section of Gloucester. There was an enormity and graphicness about these photos and the words used to describe them that made me feel that nothing more need be said.

But Anastas went on to describe "the lost generation" in Gloucester that Sully Cameron had already photographed. Lori, a reporter on the "Gloucester Daily Times", tried to show how the writing of Paul Goodman in "Growing Up Absurd." anticipated the "alienation" of so many young Portuguese men and women in Gloucester. Her description was both didactic and self-fulfilling. While I concur that there may be a problem with Portuguese youth in Gloucester that is peculiar to them, I think the origin is in the environment in which they live. They are the offal of poverty and ignorance. I am sure many young people in Gloucester and elsewhere have fallen into this chasm. I am also sure many of them have overcome disadvantages and have become teachers, athletes, and officers in the United States military.

I am not sure why Davis Brothers Cannery ceased to be, but I suspect it was due to the fact the business could no longer sustain itself. This was true also of Slade Gorton's in East Gloucester where I, along with many high school students, worked in 1942, at the request of Gorton's and the United States Army,

I did not care for the way in which supposedly elite people in Gloucester used four letter scatological and sexual words on cue. Nor did I like the reference to homosexuals as f----- or the

implication that they had ruined Cape Cod and would ruin Gloucester if they moved in. In San Francisco gays were accused of ruining the city through “gentrification” which, paradoxically, meant preserving the many gingerbread Victorians that were untouched by the great fire of 1906.

I am thankful that I no longer experience the body-and mind-numbing winters in Gloucester, but I do not look down on Gloucester people. I treasure every moment I have with them at high school reunions and on the streets, where I have found many of them to be remarkably social.. There is much beauty and intelligence in Gloucester. It is also well to remember that there was and is a proletarian basis that comes from hard work, money earned and wife and family won.

Anastas admires the Sicilians who comprise most of Gloucester’s Italian immigrants. I have a high regard for the children of these fishermen with whom I studied and played in grammar and high schools. I hate to see their neighborhoods and culture disappearing and I believe some portion of it never will. In my day young girls were always dressed in black, as someone was always dying in their families., If the girls didn’t get married by twenty-one they were sent to convents, which sounded to me like imposed slavery.

I suspect there will always be something to admire in Gloucester. Charles Olson, a poet Anastas knew far better than I, had moments when he despaired of Gloucester but he also felt its inner energies and spirit. Like the paintings by John Sloan and Edward Hopper, Olson composed an epic poem praising the seascapes and landscapes of Gloucester and the people whose livelihood came from them Olson and his fellow poet Vincent Ferrini gave voice to the working people of Gloucester as they knew them and as they wanted them to be. So also does Peter Anastas.

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