

“Brief Reviews”

Ascension

Steven Galloway

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by Jeff Bursey

Steven Galloway's second novel presents the misfortunes of the Magnificent Ursari Troupe, a Romany family of wire walkers. At the age of nine, Salvo, the main character, witnesses the murder of his parents when a non-Romany mob sets his home on fire. After escaping the village he ascends a church steeple and tears out his soul. With this purposeful action he leaves behind childhood and enters the harsh world of itinerant beggars, becoming a fearful man whose strength, in a reverse of Antaeus, manifests itself primarily in the air. When Salvo reunites with his elder brother András and younger sister Etel, they travel through Europe, the United States and Canada, gathering and shedding acquaintances, spouses and children. The family is placed in precise historical times: the end of the First World War, Germany in 1937, the United States before and during the Second World War as circuses peak in popularity.

How their story is told is more notable than the story itself. The opening chapter shows a flaw in Galloway's execution. As Salvo walks across a wire strung between the World Trade Center's Twin Towers, fourteen hundred feet above pavement, there should be some dramatic tension, but this is denied as he, and the narrative, wander from the immediate circumstances into background material or thoughts on rye whisky. In the rest of the novel Salvo emphasizes that when one is on the wire only the wire exists. His departure from his own discipline is never explained in the narrative, and this vitiates the portrait of a character whose domineering personality is fundamentally fascist.

Placed before readers are detailed accounts of what each Ursari does on the wire, and while this earnest fidelity is admirable, the physical grace of an athlete does not come across in the flat verbal photographs Galloway favours. In short exchanges, too, the language is drab:

“When Salvo informed Cole Fisher-Fielding of his decision not to use a net, his reaction was mixed. The pure circus enthusiast in him loved the idea. And he knew audiences would go for it. But the F-F was known as a safe circus; no one had ever died while performing in the Extravaganza. He expressed his safety concerns to deaf ears. In the end Cole relented.”

There are real concerns here, but wan verbs, stop-start sentences and clichés prevent their emergence. The big top is “packed to bursting,” hot teacups are cradled, audiences gasp, and people are “on the verge of tears.” Historically important events and potentially charged exchanges are presented in a language that is comfortably small and safe.

It might be argued that by using familiar expressions and simple sentences Galloway is placing *Ascension* on the level of folklore, fitting his literary effort in with the novel's

interspersed Romany tales. Certainly the Ursari attitude toward other people and life in general matches the myth-laden and desperate world summoned by the tales the boys heard from their father. However, it is more likely that Galloway has been hampered by a desire to stay close to his notebooks. Unlike his main character, he is earthbound, tethered to dry facts, with the result that the plot is predictable, the characters dispensable, and the prose a journalese that refuses poetry and insight, admits little humour, and never rises above the mundane. While Salvo juts a leg out or wobbles to sell his death-defying walks to the audience, regrettably there is no parallel bravado on the author's part, resulting in writing which is all net, no wire.

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