

Echo Park

Reviewed by J.D. Tynan

You know when you pick up a tome by Macauley you'll be with him awhile. And even some of the arcane mysteries, purporting to be light entertainment, can be thick with the underbrush of subterfuge. But it's a real surprise when a book starts off with a bit of Los Angeles history and suddenly you're stuck. As stuck as Brier Fox was to the Tar Baby and the harder you struggles, the stucker you becomes.

Well, I've been stuck for some time with the fabulous characters of *Echo Park*. Just their names seem to produce a dense fog of sultry perfume that envelops this reader: Neurotica Jones, Charo McGinnis, Fabulosa, the Pastime Jocks and the Reverend Paradise Lotus Lulu Bliss. Without a bite of a mushroom or "the pills Mother gives you" I feel I am floating out of my mundane universe into some tangential experience. "Right now, Echo Park's only temple, never pretentious but mindful of its fame and always a lady, stands alone just hoping someone will come along and toss in a dollar bill." I kept tripping over lines such as that and wondering, did I miss the translation?

No, there is no translation. The language is exotic and transportive. I was at fault for not giving in to its music and magic. Once I did I was moved through the looking glass, but not to where up was down and space had no relevance or everything was a mad chess game. I was moved to another world like a harem where it was useless to question the rules of existence. Best to play along, for example, with people dying left and right—but this is not a murder-mystery. People are buried in the back yard, but it could just as well have been petunias. The characters drive this novel, not the genre.

In this world a Little General (who thinks he's Pancho Villa) stables his horse in the basement, coyotes are fed and respected, a telescope speaks and parlor guests "... glanced at the lumpy maroon velvet couch, a drop-leaf teacart, Tijuana Tiffany, a brass spittoon filled with dried cattails. They frowned at Van Briggie vases." Don't you just love it? And this book is dense with these colorful descriptions as the reader is taken into the real Echo Park, around the corner from Aimee MacPherson's Temple and above Chavez Ravine. I must admit the journey was fascinating.

When I came to California I was quickly aware that nothing of my East Coast schooling or life had taught me an iota of local history. I raced to read *California Gold* by John Jakes and each of the eras mentioned therein pushed me to read further about the missions, the rancheros, the Gold Rush, the Railroads, and the water wars. About that time, Armistead Maupin gained some celebrity for his wacky denizens of 28 Barbary Lane in San Francisco. His *Tales of the City* had recently been collected into Volume One from their origins as serialized columns in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Mr. Maupin made San Francisco real for me with the old money of Pacific Palisades, the Midwestern transfers seeking "where it's at," and the flower children "coming out" not only from the closet but also from all the ties that bound them. I have reread all three volumes of *Tales of the City* two or three times—whenever I need an infusion of characters who win me with believability and charm, not matter how removed their lives are from mine. I believe Steve Scott has done the same for me with *Echo Park*. What I can't understand is how this book has not been faithfully transformed into a mini-series, movie, or both. Where is HBO, Miramax, or Sony Classics? But I digress.

Mr. Scott's book is treasure just as it is for those who love language, especially when language is pushed beyond our expectations. "... I'm in time to watch night-sorcery fade, new colors yawn, wide-awake shadows start their poke-along stretch," or "Candlelight's for those pouty flavors that only bloom to skittish lightning hugs and a rising moon." Not all of the language intoxicates. Some of it brutalizes, not as a bully might, to demean. No. As a city might, as sirens tell of horrors cheek by jowl to splendor. Scott tells of the city we make with our daily choices. Sometimes it's pretty gaunt. And it amuses me to note that civility, meaning good manners or graciousness, comes from the same Latin root as city. In other words, at one time those making a city or city dwellers were thought to have better manners and style than the bucolics in the "uncivilized" areas. Go figure.

Anyway, Mr. Scott has written a fabulous tale, sort of a diary of his village. Sometimes the structure loses out to the language or the characters. Sometimes the little introductory quotes leave the average reader as befogged as before. If the diary style or the personal observation style persisted, I would have found the going easier. Then I think that such consistency may have been of the foolish variety and therefore a hobgoblin. *¿Quim sabe?* as Charo would have said. So, find out the lovely way. Read *Echo Park*.

J.D. Tynan is a nomadic Irishman, recently using San Diego as a base for his ramblings.