

‘The Boatmaker,’ by John Benditt

By Sarah Ferguson, March 27, 2015

Spare and solemn as a parable, John Benditt’s powerful first novel begins simply, with a man and a woman and a child in a little wooden house on remote, windswept Small Island. The man is feverish, dreaming of himself as a boy, walking toward a towering oak tree, its leaves rustling in the breeze. “Everything else is quiet; no insects or birds are singing. It’s high summer, the time of afternoon when the sun stands still and everything hushes. Even the sea.” If “The Boatmaker” were a film, Sven Nykvist would be its only possible cinematographer.

A skilled carpenter, the protagonist wakes from his fever dream determined to build a boat and set sail first for Big Island and then for the Mainland beyond. He is a loner, a heavy drinker, a seeker of sorts. What follows is a gradual widening of this intense and complicated Everyman’s experience, away from his rustic life on Small Island, closer and closer to a greater understanding of the civilized world and his place in it. In crystal-clear prose, Benditt traces the boat builder’s extraordinary journey as he comes face to face with racial intolerance, religious fanaticism, betrayal and the cynicism and confusion of modern life.

Moving through his experiences as if propelled by some primordial force, the boat builder “seems to believe words are precious, to be doled out a little at a time. Perhaps he believes each man is given only a certain number for a lifetime and, when he speaks the allotted number, must die.” After he is hospitalized following a brutal beating, his young nurse amuses herself by seeing “how many words she can get out of him in one visit.”

The absence of all but the most essential, concrete details gives the boat maker’s story a universal, fablelike quality. The setting is clearly Scandinavia in a time of trams and horse-drawn wagons, a place where landladies are seldom seen without a cigarette and a copy of Kierkegaard. The persecution of European Jews is evoked in the charismatic priests and grumbling anti-Semitic workers who feed off one another’s dark convictions; pogroms and class warfare threaten to erupt at any moment.

It is a measure of Benditt’s skill that no matter how unexpected the course of events, each plot twist seems somehow preordained. His sentences accumulate with a calm and unmistakable authority, as if all this has happened before and is just now coming to light. Above all, there is a reverence for the mysterious inner workings of the universe: wheels within wheels, a cosmic gyroscope.

And so the days tick by, small shavings of eternity, as the boat builder grapples with his demons and progresses slowly but surely in his search for higher meaning and purpose. According to the mystical laws that govern his world, everyone and everything, from the boards in the woodworking shop to the plants in the garden, has its own distinct nature and its own particular part to play. If we watch and listen and act carefully — without talking too much! —

perhaps we too can discover who we truly are and exactly how we fit into the grand scheme of things.

Sarah Ferguson has written for The Guardian, Elle, Vogue and New York magazine, among other publications.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/29/books/review/the-boatmaker-by-john-benditt.html?searchResultPosition=1>