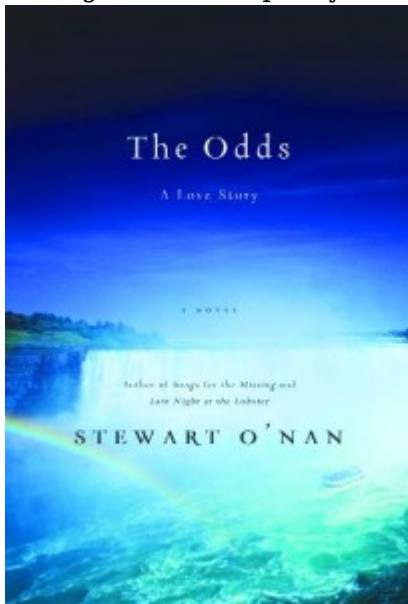


O’Nan’s ‘The Odds’ Rolls Double or Nothing

Two books take place simultaneously within the slim confines of Stewart O’Nan’s new novel *The Odds*. One tells the story of a failed marriage, its two unhappy principals not filled with hate for each other, but worn down by their own and their partner’s mistakes and weaknesses. The other explores how desperation can drive people to take enormous chances, discovering in themselves the possibility of courage and the capacity to reject what fate seems determined to do to them.



Art and Marion Fowler are running away, fleeing, we are told in the book’s opening lines, to Canada. Art has lost his job, their house is being foreclosed upon, and the denial of their dire circumstances in which they have lived will no longer support the weight of reality. But they aren’t heading north to disappear. Instead, Art has converted most of their remaining assets to cash in order to gamble it all on the roulette tables of a casino at Niagara Falls in a desperate attempt to win back what they’ve lost.

But they’ve lost a lot more than money. Marion is still deeply wounded by Art’s infidelity, an affair that took place decades before and for which Art has been doing penance ever since. O’Nan deftly weaves the present and the past together, slowly revealing Art’s motivations and bottomless guilt, and over the chapters that move back and forward in time he paints a pointillist picture of not just Art’s indiscretion, but of their entire married life. Art loves his wife deeply, yet he was capable of betraying her, and O’Nan doesn’t try to resolve this apparent paradox because he knows there is no resolution beyond the fact that Art is flawed, complex and not completely self-aware or totally in control. In other words, he’s human.

Whether this means he ought to be forgiven is Marion’s decision, and O’Nan sees her as the most tragic and sympathetic character in the text. She is still angry, and probably always will be, but is hardly guiltless herself. The divorce they are planning is ostensibly for financial reasons, but Marion sees it also as a final cutting of the cord, a way to get on with her life. Yet despite everything she still loves her husband, and she is tired of her anger and her suspicion even as she sees forgiving him and letting go of her pain as a personal failure. This pain is not all there is to Marion, but it is so deeply entrenched in her psyche that she runs the risk of allowing it to define her. The relationship between these two very real people, their intimate knowledge of each other’s quirks, preferences, weaknesses and strengths is

shown skillfully in the fluid shifts in tone and mood that O’Nan effects through the slightest turn of a word or phrase in what anyone watching from the outside would see as a totally innocent conversation.

All this is set against the backdrop of Niagara Falls and Art’s crazy plan. A love letter to the Falls this book certainly is not, and O’Nan (I cannot help but suspect for comic relief) seems almost gleeful as he skewers the kitschy tourist traps and even kitschier tourists Niagara has fattened itself on for a hundred years. Bringing Marion back to the site of their honeymoon, Art hopes to rekindle the dying embers of their marriage. He perseveres despite the thousand little inconveniences and small failures that tend to plague budget tourists: the lost reservation, the bad dinner that results in stomach upset, the too-long line for the much-anticipated attraction. A heart concert at the casino, complete with drugs, sex and the spectacle of middle-aged baby boomers rocking arthritically to the soundtrack of their lost youth is the saddest and funniest episode of the text, and it shows vividly one of O’Nan’s minor but complementary points: traveling is fun, but it is also a good course in dealing with disappointment.

The disappointments Art and Marion experience on this trip, while always minor, reflect metaphorically the slow, small, disappointing dissolution of their life together, a life Art and perhaps unconsciously even Marion wishes they could resurrect. The odds are against them, and they know it. But they try and, win or lose, in trying they achieve a kind of success. So does *The Odds*.

‘Lost Saints of Tennessee’ Find Redemption

There’s an iron fist inside the velvet glove that is Amy Franklin-Willis’ new novel, *The Lost Saints of Tennessee*, a story that, though it strays into sentimentality now and again, nevertheless depicts the small everyday challenges, successes and failures that define most lives with both empathy and unblinking realism.



Ezekiel Cooper, 40, divorced, owner of much unfulfilled potential as a scholarship winner who dropped out of college to help care for his mentally disabled twin brother Carter, is contemplating suicide when we meet him. Since he narrates most of the book, it’s unsurprising that he can’t quite finish the job. His drive towards self destruction is only partially motivated by his grief, undiminished despite the ten years between the text’s present, 1985, and Carter’s death. Zeke, as he is known to everyone, is drowning in his own mediocrity and squandered opportunities, and the heavy stone of his lost twin is just one of the many weights dragging him down.

Franklin-Willis writes Zeke with impressive frankness and willingness to embrace the true-but-difficult-to-reconcile-in-fiction fact that there are rarely perfect explanations for why people do the things they do. If Zeke were the only focus of the story, the book would be shorter, lighter and less interesting. But Franklin-Willis explores three generations of Coopers in an attempt to show not just a slice of life, but the whole pie.

Franklin-Willis’ apparent belief that an alternative voice needs to be heard in order for the Coopers to be fully understood explains why Zeke’s mother Lillian narrates a section of the text, though it doesn’t

mitigate the jarring nature of this shift in point of view. A strong woman, it is unsurprising that she should take over the novel for a time. She tells the wrenching tale her teenage pregnancy and motherhood, a life for which she did not plan and which slowly drains her of her native vitality, as well as robbing her of the opportunity to develop her impressive singing talent. Giving birth to and caring for not just twins, but three other children in the rural South breaks and remolds Lillian, and her voice as she recounts her life is the voice of many women who want to ask if it is right or fair that they should lose who they are and what they desire for themselves when they have children. The text wisely offers no answer, and Lillian's anguish over trying to reclaim an identity of her own conveys the sense that her history, while not quite a nightmare from which is trying to wake, is representative of a lot of young women. She's a Shakespeare's sister who doesn't end up dead and does what she can to make the best life she can for herself, but along the way she makes plenty of mistakes — as does everyone in the book. Spouses get cheated on, children get hurt and don't get better. Death comes too early, and sometimes too late. In no place and at no time, the text is saying, can you find unsullied peace. Even the Edenic Virginia farm of Zeke's wealthy elderly cousins, Georgia and Osbourne Lacey, where Zeke recuperates from his descent into the abyss, is visited by both literal and figurative stormy weather. This idyllic place is shadowed by the slow-motion horror of Osbourne's advancing Alzheimer's Disease

By the time we get to what's going on with Zeke's fifteen-year-old daughter Honora, we might feel that Franklin-Willis is laying the tragedy on a bit thick. But therein lies the delicate balancing act the book has set up for itself. *Lost Saints* aims to be an accurate depiction of real life, and real life never stops dishing out both the good and the bad. Fiction, on the other hand, can do whatever it wants. The desired effect here seems to be to show that no matter who you are or where you go, you cannot escape the unpredictable and constant sharp turns of fortune life doles out. People get sick, they die, they find love and lose it and find it again in the same place and in unexpected places at the same time, and the timing is never quite right, because the definition of 'quite right' depends upon each individual's emotional and psychological state, a thing for which real life couldn't care less.

Zeke's coming to consciousness of these immutable conditions is as close as the book comes to a point. His rise from suicidal loser to more mature man trying to navigate the treacherous jungle of caring for himself and sacrificing for his loved ones, a trip that is by no means finished just because the novel ends, strikes an authentic note, as does Franklin-Willis conception of family dynamics, with all their shifting loyalties, pettiness, and moments of selfless grace. "You laugh until you cry/You cry until you laugh/And everyone must breath/Until their dying breath" goes a line from an old Regina Spektor song, and there is no more apt summation than this of *The Lost Saints of Tennessee*.

'Stranger's Child' Estranges Interest

Boredom, identical in effect, is the offspring of a million causes. I can happily watch the moon rise over the beach, changing colors as it climbs higher into the sky, while another person would consider walking into the water and never walking out again a much more pleasant alternative activity. I thought about this as I plodded through Alan Hollinghurst's new novel *The Stranger's Child*, a beautifully written book that at times bored me to distraction, yet managed to hold my interest in the vain hope that something, anything interesting might happen.



The story traces the fortunes of two British families, the upper-class Valances and the middle-class-but-aspiring-to-higher-ground Sawles, from just before World War I through the late 1990s. Cecil Valance, the flamboyant elder son and heir to the Valance fortune, is a dandified omni-sexual poet who will die in the war and whose poem 'Two Acres' takes its name from the modest estate of the Sawle family. Cecil writes the poem for sixteen-year-old Daphne Sawle in the summer of 1913, and following his passing this verse will be immortalized, anthologized, memorized by generations of schoolchildren, and provide the rickety axle upon which the wheel of the novel turns. The rather torrid affair Cecil carries on with George Sawle, a friend of his from college, remains secret for the better part of the twentieth century, and this is probably a good thing, because he may or may not be the father of George Sawle's younger sister Daphne's first child, Corinna.

If the bulk of the text was devoted to how Cecil's secret has affected his legacy and the way his contribution to English letters, particularly war poetry, has been received, it might be a more focused and interesting book. But Hollinghurst chooses instead to direct his attention to the evolution of the stigma attached to same-sex relationships in England, and to the slow decay of both the gilded world Cecil and the Sawles came from and the physical and material dissolution of the people who occupied it.

During Cecil's life, and for a long time afterwards, it was a crime to engage in homosexuality in England, a crime for which Oscar Wilde was only the most famous perpetrator to be imprisoned. Hollinghurst spends a lot of time making sure that the reader understands that Cecil's sexuality, as well as the tendencies of those who become intrigued by him, are only a minor part of the overall story of this minor poet who died before he could have flowered into something more substantial than the obscure footnote to literary history he became.

And therein lies the great drawback of the story. Hollinghurst has done too good a job of rendering his main character and any drama that might have obtained in unearthing the full truth about him obscure. Time tends to make utterly invisible today's dramas and catastrophes, and in telling the story of Cecil Valance and the people he influenced, Hollinghurst hammers this point mercilessly. It is impossible not to feel empathy for the individual characters, particularly Daphne Sawle, who marries Cecil's odious brother Dudley before moving on to two subsequent and, hopefully, more fulfilling matches. Daphne, a sprightly, alcoholic bon vivant whose downward trajectory in life is as sad as her own irrepressible spirit is inspiring, is the most human of all the people here, and Hollinghurst's cartography of her journey from lively adolescent to elderly woman is touching and superbly rendered.

The rest of the cast are for the most part reprehensibly predatory, regardless of their distance from Cecil and Daphne. Consumed to various degrees as they are by advancing either their careers or their personal obsessions via an explication, public or private, of Cecil's story, they use whatever tenuous connection they have to the pre-war world and its denizens only to advance their own agendas.

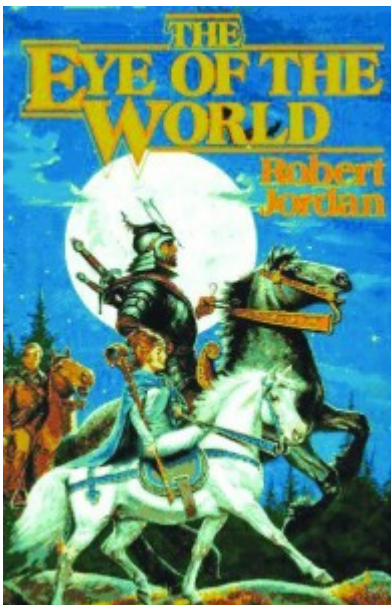
Another kind of explication is happening, subtly, via this line of narrative: the sewage pit of celebrity stalking. There is something vaguely parasitic about almost everyone here, as they blunder on through the books they write about Cecil and the interviews they conduct as they try to invest themselves with some significance by digging up as much dirt as they can about a poet who was killed in war they never saw and the woman he may or may not have fathered a child with.

But Hollinghurst will not give in to the temptation that must have presented itself multiple times throughout the composition of this book; he will not let the novel devolve into a literary detective story. There will be no stunning revelations, no surprise endings, no fantastic reveals that turn the lives of the families here upside down, only the constant reemphasis of the grim truth everyone with a brain that has passed through adolescence already knows; nothing we hold dear and nothing we think is important and nothing we would sacrifice almost everything for really matters that much in the long view.

There's an old Charlie Brown cartoon whose punch line reads "Five hundred years from now, who's going to know the difference?" *The Stranger's Child* is nearly four hundred fifty pages of the same message. Exquisitely written and promising, but finally tedious and disappointing.

Offer Editor the Antidote? Maybe

I don't make New Year's resolutions, because I despise the inevitable disappointment I feel when I break them slightly more than I enjoy the wicked thrill of violating even self-imposed laws. This doesn't mean, however, that I don't indulge myself, at least vicariously, by suggesting resolutions that would better both those who ought to make them and everyone within their sphere of influence.



For reasons I have yet to work out, friends and family tend not to take these helpful recommendations in the spirit of self-improvement in which they are intended; not-so-subtle hints about precisely where I can stick my proposals flow with the eggnog, and I've learned to keep my mouth shut after ducking

enough hurled cups of Holiday cheer.

So this year, I will reserve my advice for those who truly need it, and who are least likely to come after me with a hot bowl of figgy pudding in one hand and a sharpened sprig of holly in the other. I'm talking about those responsible for the book world: writers, publishers, and the various hangers-on who derive a parasitic existence from these worthy hosts. Book reviewers being the obvious exception, as we are a rare breed whose ways are little understood and whose habits are strange.

To begin with an eye toward November, when we will conclude the quadrennial exercise in waste, false hope, lies and futility otherwise known as a Presidential election, let it be resolved that any candidate for President who writes a book will be required to recite from their own work, from memory, and answer questions put to them about its contents. Any inability to do this proficiently will result in that candidate's immediate withdrawal from the race.

Secondly, lawyers who have tried and lost conspicuously public cases are barred from retrying those cases in the form of books. If you were too stupid or incompetent to secure either a conviction or acquittal when it mattered, at the trial, then why should anyone bother to read what you have to say about it? My rules, as the late, great George Carlin said, I make 'em up.

Peter Jackson must apologize publicly every year on September 22nd for what he did to The Lord of the Rings. That one is a bit personal, since I have been a devoted LOTR geek since age nine and, while I appreciated the majestic sweep and thrilling action of his films, I cannot abide the many blasphemous changes and elisions he perpetrated. And the damn movies were still too long! Other LOTR aficionados will understand why September 22nd is the chosen date for this necessary penance.

Any established author who writes his books 'with' another author — I'm talking to you James Patterson, Tom Clancy, Clive Cussler and quite a few others I could name — must immediately reverse the royalty structure breakdown, so that the person that did most of the grunt work on the text receives their due. You know, the little thing called writing gets the majority of the money. Write your own damn books, people!

No one is allowed to appropriate a dead author's name in order to continue that author's work. A dispensation will be granted on a one-time-only basis for the Wheel of Time series, but that's it. Unless the writer who is too lazy to come up with his own characters and stories agrees that, prior to publication of a new book using someone else's characters, they will kill themselves. I know that sounds kind of harsh, but I don't make up these rules, despite what you may have read above.

No more books turning classic characters or historical figures into zombie hunters, vampire slayers, werewolf neuterers, or any other such nonsense.

David Mitchell, Salman Rushdie, and Louis DeBernieres will be required to publish new, full-length novels every two years, minimum. There are very few writers working in English who consistently produce A+ material, and these three are among them.

People who star in reality television shows are not allowed to write books. I use the words 'people' and 'write' in the preceding sentence at least as loosely as the word 'reality.' It's bad enough that these doughy bags of fetid narcissism masquerading as human beings pollute the general zeitgeist via TV. Do we really need to see their faces in bookstores too?

Anyone pretentious enough to use the word zeitgeist in print will have his laptop confiscated.

Uh-oh.

The halftime show at the Super Bowl will be the Nobel Prize for Literature awards ceremony. No possibility of wardrobe malfunctions here. The prizes for peace, physics, chemistry and whatever other insignificant garbage they award those things for can be shown between innings of the MLB All-Star game.

And finally, I know I said that I would refrain from making any resolutions about my own behavior, but I will resolve here to at least one positive (more or less) action. I promise to continue administering the antidote to the undetectable poison I slipped into my editor's drink during a barbecue at his house a few summers ago, following his inexplicable and unforgivable act of cutting an entire sentence from a review I had filed.

Sleep tight. You're safe. For now.