

CAUTION: *Men in Trees*

CAUTION: Men in Trees. By Darrell Spencer. (University of Georgia Press, Athens and London, 2000).

Reviewed by Phyllis Barber, novelist and author of *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*, winner of the Associated Writing Programs Award for Creative Nonfiction in 1991.

CAUTION: MEN IN TREES. Hmmmm, one might say. Are these men swaying from limb to limb like the perennial hero, Tarzan? Are these men going out on a limb or barking up the wrong tree? Are they roped to the trunk of the tree to hold them safe in a world subject to wind and weather? What have we here? Simians in their element? Men at risk? Wiry young boys working for a tree removal company? In Darrell Spencer's writing, one can never tell.

"Caution: Men in Trees," the title story in the collection, is narrated by a character named Bobby "Best Buy" (BB) Brooks, a man who owns an outdoor advertising company in Las Vegas. He's just turned fifty and doesn't believe in Superman, the Lone Ranger or Bugsy Siegel anymore, even though he wants to. And Bobby suspects that while Polly, his wife, seems to be in agreement with him and says things like "they've killed off the real Superman. The Lone Ranger's on kiddie shows, fat and lumpy in dippy Kmart reading glasses" (p. 92), she still can be conned by the hope of heroes. Throughout the story, Polly, her daughter Alice

who happens to be deaf, and the grandkids are lined up on the family room sofa, entranced with the video, *Bugsy Siegel*, while Bobby's father, Lewis, is telling Bobby of his real-life encounter with Siegel. The "real Siegel" had put a gun to Lewis's head. The "real Siegel" came to Vegas with a wife and children, mob money, a certain degree of mystery, but absolutely no glamour. For sure, no visions, as Hollywood hyped. But, Polly interrupts her video-watching and their conversation to insist, "The man's handsome as a movie star." "The man," Bobby counters, "is rotting in a grave, is full of bullet holes" (p. 91). Polly pretends to swoon and returns to the more exotic world of *The Movies* with its larger than life heroes.

No surprise, Bobby is disillusioned with his own life. He has to deal with people like Archie Cohen, a minor thug/casino owner who "lives with a surgeon's precision the advertisement of his life" and who doesn't like the way Bobby's sign company has misspelled the word "Intertainment" on his rented billboard. In addition to this irritation, Bobby's daughter is deaf. Bobby's father, in his seventies, "gathers together the bits and pieces of his threadbare yet still lethal body and heads for Caesar's Palace on The Strip" (p. 90) to hobnob with the "old crowd" yet again. And Bobby is aging. Wondering what happened:

What Bobby saw in the mirror was not funny. He was one of those

linen dinner napkins folded in the fancy restaurant way, then unfolded, and no way did Bobby know how to get it back the way it was. He felt like one of Polly's sad-sack Americans listening to an old song he loved, but some New Age star was singing it differently, more slowly, and Bobby was for the first time actually hearing the words, and they were dumb words, real dumb" (p. 94).

Dissatisfied, Bobby is having an affair with a deaf woman. "Deaf daughter, deaf girlfriend. . . . What would a shrink say?" (p. 104). When he asks himself what he wants from her, he realizes he wants her world rather than the one in which he lives: "When June talks, when her hands cut and paste, the world is cinematic. It's dance and music, and he walks into it. He's been invited to the party. Her hands are smart. They're hands he imagines a potter would have."

In the end, after a second run-in with Cohen, Bobby tries to shimmy up one of the steel girders that support the billboard sporting Cohen's casino ad. When he realizes he's climbing like a tadpole, not like one of the young, virile construction workers he's witnessed doing the same thing, and that he'll never make it to the fifteen-foot mark where steel bars are welded to the girder to make a ladder, he knows he's hanging on to the girder for his actual life. A man in a tree of sorts. Holding to the trunk of the tree without the rope. A tree without branches, no less. A man marooned.

My initial interest in *CAUTION: Men in Trees* comes from recently being asked by a midwest university to write an external review of Darrell Spencer's work. During the busy Christmas season, I read a Darrell Spencer bedtime

story every night. *A Woman Packing a Pistol, Our Secret's Out, So You Got Next to the Hammer* (a novella), and *Caution: Men in Trees*, the 1999 winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. (Do these sound like bedtime stories?) I had more than a passing interest in reading the new and re-reading the old as Darrell and I both grew up in Las Vegas, went to Las Vegas High School within four years of each other (he was in my younger brother's class), attended the Las Vegas Fifth and Sixth wards respectively in the same building. We both studied with Francois Camoin at the University of Utah, lived in Utah where we wrote and taught writing (Darrell a BYU professor), taught together in the Vermont College MFA in Writing Program (non-residency), and then moved to the midwest. (We also both have sheep dogs.)

I always find it fascinating to see the arc of a writer-in-progress, especially the arc of someone I know. The younger Darrell seemed influenced/enchanted with the minimalist approach—the in-thing with aspiring writers in the academy at the time. While the early stories showed promise and a great facility with language, I found myself drawn to the maturation in *Caution: Men in Trees* where the stories have more meat on their bones and seem to trust themselves more. It reminded me of the older Artur Rubinstein, who, when he lifted his arms above the keyboard, did so in a manner that suggested he'd been there a million times before, that he was confident of what he was about to do and that he understood the magic of music wasn't in the pyrotechniques or the "Aren't I Amazing" School of Pianists vein. In the current spectrum of Darrell Spencer's body of work, there is a movement from self-consciousness and

linguistic pyrotechniques to a more refined mastery of prose.

Spencer's writing is too evasive, too humorous, too painful, too paradoxical, and too tightly written to package it in any particular way. The writing flirts with philosophy and kicks it in the knees at the same time ("It's a Lot Scariier If You Take Jesus Out"). It has its own brand of Flannery O'Connor weirdness/saving graces in the multifaceted prisms of the major characters, notably the alcoholic Uncle Stuck in "Please to Forgive Sloppiness." He often uses characters whose lives seem innocent enough, and yet there's a lurking, pacing, high-strung violence around them which could rage through the front door at any time and decimate those innocent lives ("Park Host," "There's Too Much News," and "Late-Night TV"). The most interesting aspect of this peripheral violence is that the reader isn't so sure what the "innocent" characters will do or how they'll react when and if that violence makes an appearance. There are no easy blacks and whites here; no cowboys and Indians; no cops and robbers—something I admire about the work.

Spencer is an excellent commentator on the pop-eyed condition of contemporary life, which, after all, is too diverse to reduce to any one explanation. Take the Columbine High School tragedy, for example. Commentators tried over and over again to explain that tragedy, but came up, in the end, with empty hands/empty platitudes. No one could or can say why, and Darrell Spencer doesn't say why either. He addresses disturbing themes in this book such as natural disasters and illnesses that don't seem possible in our highly-technological times, violence bred by the media and so-called harmless people who pack pistols.

"Late Night TV" deals with neighbors who've actually become characters from late night TV movies: "the ones full of desert and blowing sand and a sun that does nothing but scorch the earth. There are roaming tribes of people who don't wear anything but rags and who were once decent to each other. They drive vehicles held together by luck and need. Everything so bleak you get heartsick" (pp. 119-20). "Park Host" portrays a retired man and his wife who volunteer every summer as hosts for Canyon Glen Park east of Provo, Utah. Husband Red Cogsby volunteers as Santa Claus in Bountiful, Utah, at Christmas time. He even attended Tom Valent's famous Santa Claus School in Midland, Michigan, where he learned the basics: "Never Flirt, Never Drink, Never Smoke." Yet Red is obsessed with guns, with wearing a shoulder holster complete with Colt when he needs to make an impression on his job as park host. And in "Blood Work," one of his stories that mentions Mormonism directly, Spencer writes of Flora, the Mormon and believer in The Happy Family, who can't/won't see that her son has run away from her home of goodness and is in trouble up to his eyeballs. Spencer doesn't proffer any easy or pat answers, any "and they lived happily ever after" scenarios.

The poet Charles Wright said something to the effect that one should begin with a region, with a place, with a vantage point, from which one can begin to tell a story. Darrell Spencer uses the world in which he grew up and the places in which he resides to tell his stories. Much of his writing comes out of the Las Vegas experience with its casinos, trailer parks, golf courses, business offices in the towers of Circus Circus, etc. He also writes stories based in southern and central

Utah, and most recently, in his Midwest habitat. I especially appreciate his perspective of Las Vegas—that of an insider who knows the living, breathing world of southern Nevada (“except for the Strip, Las Vegas is as dark as any town at night,” p. 136), though he sees into the heart of any location where he’s lived, I think. Gets at the paradoxes. The territory between the cup and the lip.

Writers the world over have tried to write from their sociological fascination with Las Vegas, but not many comprehend the true nature of the beast. They approach it from a mythical, bigger-than-life vantage point, while, truth be known, Las Vegas may only be pretending to be Las Vegas. Spencer is privy to that little known fact. He writes about Sin City with proficiency, wry wit, and sleight of hand. A Twenty-One dealer at heart. Maybe growing up Mormon in Las Vegas has a way of making one into an oyster, one whose soft lining gets irritated by paradox until a strange pearl is formed. One can’t refuse to see the wider world growing up in that wind-blown city. It’s Sensurround in the Nude. Spencer is a pearl of a writer influenced by this global, as well as parochial, environment and by his involvement with Mormonism that plays at the edges, and on occasion to the left of center, of his work.

The epigraph to *Caution: Men in Trees* reads “Did you say Kryptonite?”

—Superman. There’s also a line from “Please to Forgive Sloppiness” in which the exasperated narrator says: “Where’s Superman? Where . . . is Superman?” These two quotes come as close to also anything that might represent what Spencer’s work is about. “About” is taboo in the world of post-modernism and deconstruction, but nothing ventured, nothing gained.

In addition to a wicked sense of humor and a keen eye, Darrell Spencer has a tender heart and finally, I suspect, a desire to fix everything and protect the innocent, even from their own Achilles’ heels. This is exemplified by the husband trying to shield his fragile wife, May, from the out-of-control Billy Fix in “There’s Too Much News,” and by Woods, the narrator in “It’s a Lot Scarier If You Take Jesus Out,” who bundles himself in an insufficient number of cotton shirts to keep out the pain of his girlfriend Jill’s suicide.

Most of us may be powerless to change much (including the real Superman), but it’s moving to watch someone wishing things could be different, even someone trying to make a difference. From “It’s a Lot Scarier If You Take Jesus Out”:

The sky is sinking, and I’m tall enough, if I could do what’s necessary to get off my butt and onto my feet, I could touch it. It’s low. Maybe I could keep it in its place (p. 172).