



APPRAISAL • AT • EDGEWOOD
(A CRITICAL FICTION)

One autumn day nearly thirty years ago, when I was quite young and newly established in the rare book business, I received a telephone call inquiring if I would perform an inventory and appraisal of the manuscripts and books of a recently deceased author. The voice on the telephone told me I had been recommended by a distant cousin. The author, whose talking animal stories published in daily newspapers made his name a household word for several decades, had died some months before; the heirs wished to donate the material to the University.

His daughter, on the telephone, accepted my cautious answer as a definite yes and asked if I would mind staying in the farm's guest cottage while I examined the papers. At the prospect of a week in the country, even on a working vacation, I dropped my show of reluctance and agreed to come early the next week. The address was the one-word name of the farm in a hamlet with more old Dutch



consonants than vowels; her directions relied solely on hills and stream-bends, swamps and old oak-trees (Gary Snyder would have approved) and brought me there after a pleasant drive through a part of the state that retains even now, my correspondents tell me, the feel of rural life. In those now distant times it was deepest countryside.

It was the author's daughter who welcomed me and whose energy warmed the rambling house. A troupe of adolescents seemed to storm through the house, three or four of them hers, I think. I would catch glimpses of her husband, a shy and placid man, as he made his way about the vast, shaggy property in which the house was set; a sister appeared occasionally at meals and seemed very attractive but distracted (I do not know if she even registered my presence). I met the widow once; she, like all the family, referred to him as Doc, and so I came to think of him. Several generations back, the builder of the house had been the senior partner in a triple-barrelled architectural firm (not the one whose life ended amid murder and scandal) who had presumably made piles of money back in the days before income tax. In short, a not uncommon American family whose chief worry might seem to be, Will I ever be as rich as my grandfather? The answer is almost invariably, No.¹

I spent a few idle moments in the black and dusty library during my first hours in the house,



before settling down to work in Doc's sunny upstairs workroom. One wall of glass-doored shelves was filled with late-Victorian editions of Paracelsus, Swedenborg, and George Mac Donald, rows of skinny vellum-backed volumes, and a choice clutch of inscribed early Yeats and Barrie with weird invocational messages to the architect that would probably have driven those authors' biographers mad. A rack of unopened copies of *Upstate Houses and Their Histories* and all six editions of the *Architecture of Country Houses* from the utilitarian first to the art nouveau mauve to the sixth, privately printed edition of 1910. One wall of the room that bore signs of actual use held everything from an early edition of Gibbon (lacking one volume) to scientific almanacs and recent novels.² One portfolio held photographs of foliage and architectural motifs made long ago by a reclusive uncle, elegantly composed images filled with intimations of something never quite defined, the same scent of lilac and dusty, just-out-of-reach ideas that permeated the shelves of poetry and fin-de-siècle mysticism. I never met the uncle, if indeed he was still living.

As I sat working at Doc's desk — and it really was work, despite the author's precise log and orderly filing system — it became clear to me that there was rather more to this extensive family and its neighborly relations than I had at first surmised.



In the space of ten days' hard work I created a chronological register of Doc's newspaper serials and a full checklist of the several dozen books collecting these stories. My compilations of raw data served as the basis for the formal bibliography prepared by University librarian John Aleister, who was for many years the driving force behind the West Wind Society³ devoted to Doc's work. (Indeed, though television curtailed Doc's customary markets, his posthumous career seems to be, if anything, even more successful.)

The first clues were in one of Doc's notebooks, though I was slow to interpret these and unwilling to accept what I found. It was his good humor and forthrightness that convinced me. Gradually at first, and then suddenly, with astonishment, I began to understand that all my earlier assumptions about time and nature were invalid. I learned to listen and observe in new ways: to see traces of that peculiar, infundibular geography⁴ in the meadows and woods surrounding the house; and, indeed, learned how to read signs and portents in a language that made the very notion of books seem absurd and valueless. Once I did this, about a week into my stay, the pattern of life at the big house took on a new significance.

I am no poker player, and could not long conceal my knowledge. Doc's daughter intuited that I was on the verge of completing my



designated task, but also that I was struggling with the new perspective I had gained.



The world has changed and I have changed since that afternoon but my sense of Doc's workroom is as strong today as my memory of his daughter's face in the dusk. My father never once told us in so many words, she said, but we all came to understand the source of his stories. I was four or five when I noticed, and did not know it was a skill not shared by all fathers until I was ten or eleven. I think my youngest has inherited his ability to She broke off, and then continued, not inquiring but asserting. There is a notebook that will have to be taken out of the collection, she said. We will keep that and the shelf of Doc's books for my son. His manuscripts and files of clippings will all go to the University. Can we rely on your discretion?⁵

What could I do but assent? I could see little point in attempting to convince the University librarian or anyone else that Doc understood the language of animals and that by reading his working notes I, too, had become an adept.

As if to seal our conversation, the next day at lunch, I met one of their city cousins who professed himself anxious to shed the inherited accumulations of stuff that filled his house. We've had good



advice and it's time for a change, he said. We've had these books for a long time, and I'm not going to read them. From here on, it's all in deeds, not words.⁶



His house turned out to be a warren of interconnected buildings covering most of a city block and in due course I bought his library. He was quite pleased with the transaction, and said he was ready for the downward spiral the city seemed to be entering. We still exchange letters every few months contingent upon the whims of the postal authorities of several countries. I soon sold the eighteenth-century books en bloc to a Midwestern university for enough to retire to the terraced village high in the mountains of India where I now sit, facing west into the setting sun. But that is another story.



NOTES

1. This question (and its answer), fundamental to a insight on twentieth-century American literature, springs from conversations with novelist Tom La Farge, clear-sighted analyst of the Magic of Class (see note 5 below). His books include *The Crimson Bears* (1993-1995) and *Zuntig* (2001).
2. *Little, Big*, pp. 31-37. References are to the first edition.
3. Crowley's nod to Thornton W. Burgess in *Little, Big* is charming and immediately apparent; his story of the North Wind has a Burgess flavor that is quite authentic.
4. *Little, Big*, p. 43.
5. Perhaps the most elusive of all the forms of magic that Crowley evokes is the Magic of Class, a practice that is all the more seductive and powerful (and fascinating) for being almost entirely unspoken.
6. For George Mouse's Act Theory and his experiments with fireworks, see *Little, Big*, pp. 418-419.

