

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/4

Four Paperback Tearjerkers and a Guide for the Appreciation of Literature and other Arts

Reviews by Wendell Smith

The four tearjerkers:

The Dutch House, by Ann Patchett, Harper, New York, ISBN: 9780062963680

Bel Canto by Ann Patchett, Harper Collins, New York, 2001, ISBN: 9780060188733

A River Runs Through It by Norman MacLean, University of Chicago Press, ISBN: 9780226500669

Stoner by John Edward Williams, New York Review of Books Classics, ISBN: 9788893250627

The Guide: "It Happens," in Maximum Security Ward and other Poems by Ramon Guthrie ed. by Sally M. Gall, Persea Books, New York, ISBN: 9780892550807, p. 56

Ever so often a book reminds that a good cry can make the world, as ugly as it is, easier to drive through. Recently Ann Patchett's *The Dutch House* triggered this utility of tears to wash my windshield, cleanse my vision. Although it was published in 2019 and has been a trade paperback for over a year, I hope you won't find this review too tardy; I think, when you have been gob smacked, you need to share the cause no matter how delayed your acknowledgement might be.

As I considered what *The Dutch House* had done to me and why, three other novels, which had triggered similar responses, rose to the surface of my memory: Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*, Patchett's *Bel Canto* and John Edward Williams' *Stoner*. Then, while pondering these causes of lacrimation, it came to me: they all have villains with egos whose needs to win frustrate affection, cruelty. In *Bel Canto* it is the social/political expression of egoism, a conflict of ideologies that supplies the frustration. Oh! If the people who run our worlds would only leave things alone and let us love each other. Of course, that abstraction, love frustrated by egoism, which unites these novels, was not the reason for my weeping. If an abstraction could provoke an abreaction you would be reaching for a Kleenex right now as I reached for one toward the ends of these books. I reached because these writers had made "it happen," which is why I think they warrant comparison with the works Ramon Guthrie references in his poem, "It Happens," that begins:

*It happens
has no name
No word stands in its path delimits it
It happens when Goya paints
those gloves that pock-marked wondrous face
of the Marquesa de la Solana*

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/4

Guthrie continues for another 512 lines to end

*It happens
Oh I too
could sometimes shout or sing or sob
wild hosannas to Its name*

I am not interested in exploring this question "How did these authors make 'it happen'?" I can understand an academic interest in the mastery each demonstrates in plot, character development, dialogue, scenic detail, etc., but my interest is in the opportunity each provided me and, therefore, might provide us, to incise and drain some of our emotional abscesses, with an old fashioned Aristotelian purgation of pity and fear and god knows what else.

I will make one note on the difference in the way "It" happened in *The Dutch House*, the novel that provoked this musing that led to my recollection of the other three. That difference was a comic note, so that another release, laughter, seasoned my tears through its final chapter. At a gathering in the physical Dutch House some time after the heroine, Maeve, has died her brother, the narrator Daniel, listens to his grown daughter, May, who is named after the heroine, read:

The boxes of Maeve's books were still there ... the letters I had written to her when she was in college. May did an impromptu reading of one of them over dinner.

...Somehow May knew exactly what I had sounded like at eleven. "Last Saturday we made thirty-seven stops for rent and collected \$28.50 in quarters from the washing machines in the basements."

"Are you making this up?" I asked.

She waved the letter. "Swear to God you were really were that boring. It goes on for another page."

Moved by the amount of love contained in that "boring" I laughed, put the book down to wipe my eyes as my heart grew lighter then I picked it up and put it down and picked it up again.