

## *Wilderness House Literary Review 2/2*

### **The Rose Café: Love and War in Corsica**

By John Hanson Mitchell

Shoemaker & Hoard, \$25.00, 243 pages

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Review by Steve Glines

John Hanson Mitchell is a man on a permanent quest.

Go out to the wilderness and find out what you are made of. There is always seminal event that forms the body of a great man (or woman's) character. For men it has often meant going off to war where the soul is stripped of the possessions of youth and reformed on the anvil of Thor. For most of us this transformation, if we have it at all, takes the form of a quest and there is a time-honored tradition of quest literature dating to antiquity.

For urbanized Americans youth this quest often involves Europe or another exotic location and if you are lucky, both. My daughter's quest was orchestrated by her college, about the only thing about the place for which I am grateful. She was dropped in Aix en Provence in France with 24 classmates and instructed to walk, which they did for 4 months, camping by the side of the road as they went. She left America an angry, lost teenager and returned a driven adult determined to find her place in the universe. After 2 months on the road she called me from Syracuse in Sicily to announce her epiphany: She could be 30 and wish she had her architects license or she could be 30 and have her architects license but she was going to be 30 anyway. She came home and made the deans list.

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My own quest took me to Nova Scotia and Newfoundland Canada where I hiked and hitchhiked for almost five months after High School. I slept in a fish-packing shed on the northern tip of Cape Breton Island where I cleaned fish and shoveled ice for a month for beer and food. When I grew restless I moved on to Newfoundland.

The harbor a small fishing port named Fortune was filled with half a dozen tramp steamers, Liberty Ships, left over from WWII. In the bar of the only restaurant in Fortune I met the captain of a ship that continuously made the circuit from Fortune to Iceland, Ireland, England, France, Africa, Bermuda, New York City, Halifax and back to Fortune. His ship and its predecessors had been making the run, with obvious interruptions, for almost 100 years. It was a three-month journey. I needed a passport. Did I know how to cook? Would I like the adventure? It paid Canadian minimum wage. It has bothered me ever since that I said no.

Later I was hitchhiking to another small port to catch a boat ride back to civilization. It was 9 pm. I looked at the map and realized my destination for the night was 25 miles down the dirt road in front of me. I walked all night through the fog, my flashlight useful only for illuminating the edge of the ditch. About 4 am the fog lifted and the first hint of daylight appeared in the sky. I walked up a steep hill, a switchback, climbing out of a deep dark valley. As I walked over the crest I saw the most beautiful sight I have ever seen: a ship, perhaps 300 feet long, with multi-colored lights draped from bow to stern, passing up through the rigging of the tramps crane and mast. The town itself was smaller, just ten or fifteen small pastel colored shacks. I walked onboard, found myself a bench and went to sleep. An hour after the boat left port the bursar found me. I paid for a ticket to Port-aux-Basque and went back to sleep.

For the next two days we drifted along the south shore of Newfoundland stopping at one village after another. At one village I got off to explore while the ship exchanged cargo.

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An entire town had moved from one side of a river to another to accommodate a larger pier. I asked a local what the cost of a house was there. He blinked at me in disbelief then said, "We have lots of houses here, pick one. We'll outfit it for ya!" A foghorn lament announced the departure of the tramp so I hopped back onboard and watched the little village that would have welcomed me slide slowly into the mist. So many "what ifs."

John Hanson Mitchell's new book "The Rose Café" is the tale of a quest. He is a young student studying in Paris in the early 1960's. He is bored and uninspired, in other words, a typical French student filled with ennui. He is both unable and uninterested in writing although he carries an empty notebook with him wherever he goes. A chance offer takes him to Corsica where he ingratiated himself with the owner of "The Rose Café" who offers him a job for the season cleaning fish and sweeping up for room and board. What follows is a wonderfully charming account of the local characters. Mitchell's ability to delve into the characters of the local town is reminiscent of Dickens. The collection of characters is wonderful and we get a small town full: There is Le Baron, the aristocratic patron with a very shady background, the agonizingly French tease Marie and classic French lovers Jean-Paul and Micheline to name just a few.

Mitchell has always been adept at describing Place. His "Ceremonial Time" covers the details of one square mile of land in Littleton Massachusetts where living characters provide an anthropomorphic dimension to the geography. With "Living at the End of Time" he explores both eccentric people and the detail of his environment in a Waldenesque shack. We dig deeper into the quest experience with "Walking Towards Walden: A Pilgrimage in Search of Place" where "Place" still takes prominence. In Mitchell's book "Looking for Mr. Gilbert: The Reimagined Life of an African American" we finally see what he can do with character development. Place is replaced by Character.

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“The Rose Café” is the crescendo of Mitchell’s quest. While we get his usual treatment of the geography in intimate detail where necessary, it never overwhelms the characters that bring light to the scenery. The description of a dilapidated farmhouse surrounded by semi-wild donkeys is just enough to illuminate the eccentricities of the farmer/donkey herder who tells us fantastical stories about the locals. We get to know the people of Corsica and the arid scrub they inhabit through Mitchell’s eyes.

At the end of the tourist season Mitchell leaves Corsica and returns to school. In a final brilliant tease, Mitchell’s last sentence says more about Corsica, its society and his characters than all the rest of the book. It’s marvelous and you’ll put the book down after a good knee-slapping laugh.

When Mitchell left Corsica he began to write. His quest had only begun and we hope will never be over. A very charming book recommended to all.

Steve Glines/ Ibbetson Update/ April 2007