

REVIEWS

Watchman Tell Us of the Night (1987)



A. B. Paulson

(c.1945-)

“Any writer who has the nerve to step to a lectern and play a hymn on a credit card-sized electronic keyboard deserves to have his book read, right? PSU English professor A. B. Paulson drew at least one reader into his novel with just such a whimsical performance at the English Department’s Burnam-Clarke-Ford lecture this spring. To be fair, thought, his subsequent readings from the book were the real bait.

The hymn Paulson played was ‘Watchman Tell Us of the Night,’ also the title of his recently published first novel. In the book, housewife, organist and closet poet Lindsay Wyatt Smith has a near-mystical experience while singing this hymn one Easter Sunday, a few days after being found by her parents-in-law in a compromising situation with her dishwasher repairman. It is a turning point for Lindsay, who has been rather busy breaking ‘the threads that tie her to a dusty doll’s world of obligation and dues.’

With televised world events as an ominous backdrop, Lindsay’s wrenching but comic awakening takes place in the suburbs, where ‘nothing is supposed to happen.... That’s the point, isn’t it?’ She stirs from years of mental slumber with help from a minimalist artist named Garth Erickson, whom she meets in a shopping mall while trying to resuscitate an old man having a narcoleptic episode. Garth, whose current creations are cryptic, Haiku-like messages placed among the newspaper’s classified ads, and Lindsay become a mutual but distant obsession, while events order themselves absurdly for their coming-together.

In a final scene of high farce, a confessional meeting between husband and wife and their lovers turns spontaneously into a rollicking party involving the couple’s Zen-inspired 8-year-old son, the repairman (again), a private investigator, a ‘ghost’ who has been watching Lindsay’s house for years, Lindsay’s uncle who always drops in around the summer solstice, a cab driver, and eventually the whole neighborhood.

Stumbling through their banal world, the artifacts and rituals of which Paulson describes as if seeing them for the first time, are very real characters, gently drawn, and sympathetic. Paulson combines broad, slapstick comedy and quieter moments of poignant humor with a solid but never overbearing measure of social commentary to create a book that offers meaning as well as mirth.”

“Slapstick in the Suburbs”
PSU Magazine (1987)

“This first novel is an overly elaborate comedy of manners, part bedroom farce, part thriller. Set in a suburb of Boston called Heathersford, *Watchman Tell Us of the Night* begins in 1981. A housewife, Lindsay Wyatt Smith, is daydreaming, recalling recent disasters—the 1977 collision of two jets on a runway in the Canary Islands, the 1978 mass suicide at Jonestown, the 1979 nuclear accident at Three Mile Island and the morning, in 1977, when two men in ski masks broke into her house.

Lindsay is a disappointed baby boomer, a bored suburbanite in her 30’s who has discovered that her life is an extended cliché. She has one child, two cars, a mortgage and an obtuse husband who sleeps with his secretary when he isn’t supervising the sales representatives for an aluminum-siding company. And though Lindsay calls herself a poet at cocktail parties, her real concerns are usually more mundane. Often she slips off to the shopping mall in the middle of the day.

As it turned out, the masked intruders had the wrong house and left without incident. But since that brush with terrorism, Lindsay has gained an urgent obsession with sex. That she has made the connection between violence and sex is hardly the point, however. This is simply a contrivance A. B. Paulson uses to prod his protagonist out of her domestic doldrums.

What happens can be guessed easily by those readers even vaguely familiar with such tales of suburban infidelity. At the mall, Lindsay meets a minimalist artist named Garth Erickson. The perfect foil to her sexist husband, Garth seems to have been lifted out of a survey of what the average suburbanite would expect an artist to be. He lives in a loft, drives a 1957 Plymouth Belvedere, makes art ‘stripped clean of personal references’ and has a spacey woman friend who spouts astrology and sleeps around. All too predictably, he provides Lindsay with the sense of liberation she so desperately seems to need.

This would be the end of a typical bored-suburban-housewife-meets-bohemian story, but Mr. Paulson spices up the novel with a string of peripheral characters and asides. There are walk-on appearances by a nerdy television evangelist, a narcoleptic senior citizen, a glib dishwasher repairman, a bungling wiretapper and a hulky car mechanic. Mr. Paulson further complicates the plot with a World War II espionage scene, the eerie monologues of a gun-packing psychopath and the story of Garth’s ne’er-do-well relatives.

Some of the book’s scenes are successful, but too often they are just superfluous padding or dramatic props to keep the plot turning. It’s as if Mr. Paulson does not really trust his main characters to hold the reader’s attention. Instead of giving them inner dimension, he distracts us with artifice—a grab bag of caricatures and comic effects. The result is a novel with too many shifts in tone. In one of the book’s more sober moments, the paranoid psychopath emerges from the wings to take Lindsay hostage. Almost the entire cast of minor characters has also appeared at her house, and the scene swiftly degenerates into a parlor game, suburban slapstick more akin to a television situation comedy than to the wry social sendup Mr. Paulson seems to have intended.

Watchman Tell Us of the Night is not without its amusing moments. Mr. Paulson, who teaches writing and American literature at Portland State University in Oregon, writes punchy dialogue, and there are times when his sense of the absurd is quirky enough to carry individual scenes. But, on the whole, the novel suffers from trying to be too many things.”

Andrea Barnet
“The Lover She Met at the Mall”
The New York Times Book Review (1987)