
Pro Rege

Volume 43 | Number 3

Article 10

March 2015

Up the Hill (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Schaap, Howard (2015) "Up the Hill (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 43: No. 3, 42 - 44.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol43/iss3/10

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tact” (55). While he appreciates technology, he does not worship it as some seem to do. Technicism, the faith and trust in the power of technology, is marked by three key beliefs: that the progress of technology cannot be stopped, that technological progress will improve the conditions of humankind, and if problems develop, technology will solve them. He calls this a religion, albeit a false one because it replaces God. He is concerned that technology may appear to take on a life of its own if we do not develop a comprehensive view of what we construct: “we may shape our machines, but they will also shape us” (61).

Although some may view all technology as a result of the fall (e.g., Jacques Ellul), Schuurman claims that “[t]echnology and rational methods are part of the structure of creation; however, they can be absolutized or misdirected” (65). We must consider both structure and direction as we work with any technology: “ignoring normative principles goes against the fabric of creation and entails negative consequences” (65). Schuurman further argues that when technology is driven narrowly by monetary or economic considerations, “a technical worldview directs things toward efficiency at the expense of many other considerations” (66).

His fourth chapter, on redemption and responsible computer technology, helps us see that “salvation is comprehensive in scope; it is about more than personal salvation. . . . [Christ] comes to make his blessings flow, as far as the curse is found” (72). Schuurman struggles with the question of just what a Christian does in computer technology compared to a non-Christian. Using the insights of several Reformational thinkers, he explains that the starting place is shalom—the way things are supposed to be. From this

point, he rejects technicism and attempts to develop normative principles for technology. Computer scientists cannot operate in a vacuum; they need to seek guidance from other experts. For example, designing computers to help automobile traffic flow requires including a traffic expert cooperating with computer scientists and engineers. Therefore, the overarching normative principle, he says, is one of love. By going back to the modal aspects he discussed earlier, he demonstrates how these aspects are integrated in computer technology—including historical, cultural, social, aesthetic, and juridical norms. In discussing each of these norms, he uses examples that demonstrate the power of these norms and what happens when they are violated. Computer technology should promote the creational norms.

In examining the future of computer technology, Schuurman avoids both a utopian view that technology will solve all our problems and a view of despair that technology will threaten to make humans an endangered species. Instead, he sees technology as part of God’s good creation: “We must discern the good structures of creation without being lured by some of its misdirections” (117). He points to Christ’s return when he, not technology, will heal the nations. He shows how we might think about what technology can do in the new creation when harmful technology will be transformed to conform with God’s original intention for creation.

Finally, he notes that both worldview and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ are essential in shaping computer technology. In doing so, he says, “we need to be new creation signposts, people whose hearts and lives seek to be faithful to God” (124).

Schaap, James Calvin. *Up the Hill*. Moorhead, MN: New Rivers Press, 2014. 119 pp. ISBN: 978-0-89823-325-4. Reviewed by Howard Schaap, Assistant Professor of English, Dordt College.

Anyone familiar with James Calvin Schaap’s fiction should find the premise behind his latest collection of short stories, *Up the Hill*, quite a departure. Actually, there’s only one major change in *Up the Hill* that Schaap makes from his usual style, but for an author who believes in realistic fiction as much as he does, that shift is all the more major: *Up the Hill* is told from a point of view beyond the grave. That’s right. In *Up the Hill*, the stories are told by a small-town newspaper editor, himself a dead, ghostly resident of the cemetery “up the hill,” who tells stories about his cemetery neighbors and especially the newly dead, as they take up residence in an afterlife that has heaven-

ly flavor but an earthly setting. Viewed through the lens of literary realism—Schaap’s forte—this move to a sort of magic realism seems downright shocking. Through another lens, though, *Up the Hill* fits perfectly in with the work that Schaap has been doing for a long time: telling the stories of small-town characters in the tradition of Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*. In *Up the Hill*, Schaap’s Winesburg is Highland, Iowa, only projected into the afterlife where Schaap has found new inspiration to explore the lives of small-town Dutch America.

Perhaps the thing I enjoyed most about *Up the Hill* is how playful it is—or how playful it *can* be,

since it asks us to suspend disbelief right from the get-go. The characters “up the hill” in Highland cemetery find themselves in a furthered stage of the “already but not yet”: they can come and go as they please on Earth and continue to experience life without the drawbacks—the physical and emotional pain, as well as narrow-mindedness and short-sightedness—of bodily life. Throughout the stories, Schaap’s narrator, the lifelong editor of a local newspaper, gives us glimpses of what redeemed life like this might mean. “Try to imagine a world in which the practice of piety is always real,” the narrator tells us in the collection’s second story, “The Unveiled.” “It’s quite heavenly” (24). There’s also a sharper edge to the humor, as in the story “The Lost Sheep.” “There are no women preachers up here,” says the narrator to a new member of the dead undead. “In heaven?” comes the response, and then the punchline: “In Highland. Heaven may well be full of them” (94).

Much of the playfulness is situational. In the title story, “Up the Hill,” we get to follow trucker Casey Aardapple, taken from this life too soon by icy roads and still pining over his wife who, in the land of the living, is being wooed by another widower local to Highland, Mel Merced. Aardapple and an assortment of ghosts gather as the living couple parks on a minimum maintenance road, and the already ironic situation is ripe for disaster. Schaap resolves the situation in the perfect dusk of an Iowa evening. After he hears of his wife’s continued love for him, Aardapple’s final action and the narrator’s accompanying spin is pure fun. Aardapple walks into the cornfield and howls like a coyote, while the narrator inverts the ending of the well-known fantasy story about Iowa, *Field of Dreams*: “Casey walked out . . . of that field like Shoeless Joe,” he tells us, “walked out like a dead man alive to a new life, a smile on his broad Dutch face, as if to say that this isn’t Iowa at all, but heaven” (21).

Another story in which Schaap has fun with these ghosts, which he likens more closely to angels, is “An Intervention for Miss Pris,” in which Schaap reprises an old Lake Michigan ghost story that some readers will recognize from Schaap’s 1999 novel *Romey’s Place*. This time, the bully that uses the story to frighten an innocent gets his own treatment from Calvinist zombies in return, and the story of the Red Road continues to unfold.

The real root of the playfulness in *Up the Hill* lies in theology, especially in the question, “What if?” Schaap’s work follows N.T. Wright’s assertion that we don’t precisely know what happens to us af-

ter death and before Christ’s return. *Up the Hill* is an experiment in that vein, but it also asks harder theological questions. In the book’s second selection, “The Unveiled,” the narrator tells the story of Scotty, a thirteen-year-old who takes his own life after getting bullied. Standing in the afterlife, Scotty receives comfort from an unlikely source, his own Great Grandmother, and he also wrestles with what his decision might mean for those he left behind. He even dares to hope that what he has done will turn to some good for the people he left behind. This is precisely what happens as we watch with a host of the Highland saints as Scotty’s scoundrel father is restored to the church once and for all. In “Where the Tree Falls,” meanwhile, the challenge is cultural, as a Highland crew gather for a “deliverance”—the death bed gathering of the saints to welcome their own into a new sort of life—among the Yankton Sioux. A central part of that deliverance features the man reclaiming his native tongue and seeing his ancestors. “The Night of a Thousand Tears,” meanwhile, takes on one of small town America’s thornier contemporary problems: homosexuality.

Central to the book, too, is real suffering and doubt. There’s the story of Vivian Grevengoed, the daughter that was the product of an illicit affair of a town father with live-in help. Vivian returns to Highland cemetery on a whim and prayer; it was her last wish for her ashes to be placed there to spite those who wanted her and her mother swept under the rug, yet it was a deathbed prayer that led her, like the thief on the cross, to a gracious end among the saints at Highland. In “The Lost Sheep,” Vivian begins to wrestle through a wider forgiveness and acceptance of grace, even after death.

Then, there’s the book’s final story, “Yet We Can’t Not,” which tells the story of Lammert De Lange and his experience years earlier in World War II. After clearing away the bodies of friends and relatives that had drowned with the Allies’ destruction of the dikes, Lammert thinks about the gospel: “What kind of idiot believes such nonsense?” Indeed, the narrator turns his camera around Highland and finds story after story of suffering—the narrator himself, we find, was a victim of polio, in a wheelchair much of his life. Yet belief persists in “my only comfort”; the citizens of Highland are there because they “can’t not” believe.

Several of the stories feature events that happened in the Netherlands in World War II. This allows the narrator to give a sort of ultimate—if wonderfully old-school—vision of worship. “Have you ever really

heard a Genevan psalm?” the narrator asks in “The Music of the Spheres.” “I’m sorry . . . but the melody is not for your world at all” (34). In “The Unveiled,” too, the narrator brings in the language of an old formula for restoration from the *Order of Worship for the Reformed Churches in the US*, beautiful language that is no longer found in most Reformed-church worship services: “Therefore,” the minister reads, “the Church always hopes for the conversion of the backslidden sinner and keeps her bosom open to receive the penitent.” The narrator then reflects, “It seemed to me that the church keeping ‘her bosom open’ couldn’t be sung with the beat that comes from the drum set beside the piano, but DeGraaf [the minister] didn’t run away from that language, either” (26).

But even if you’re not into Genevan Psalms, you still might find yourself in the book. If any of your ancestry comes from small Midwestern town, you’ll find your place in it. “Deliverance” takes up a very local conflict, a land dispute among heirs. In “The Night of a Thousand Tears,” an “old bearded man praying over a chunk of bread” is Eric Enstrom’s famous photograph *Grace* that I recognize from my grandparents’ home. And a dead-on description of a common sight in the Midwest—“a flat head tack on the paneling behind the chair where Clarence always sits holds a fly swatter from the local Co-op atop the bank calendar, thick with scenes from the Canadian Rockies”—surely fits half of the kitchens I’ve been in in my life.

But one of the most interesting perspectives of *Up the Hill* is on writing itself. “January Thaw” focuses on a dilemma that has perplexed writers forever: the temptation to look in on the lives of others and to use, even exploit, those lives for one’s own writerly purposes. The central characters in this story are the most famous author from Siouxland and the woman whose life he used in a book that got the author ba-

sically run out of town. The author is based in part on one of Schaap’s mentors, Fredrick Manfred. In “January Thaw,” Schaap once again melds the season and the afterlife to imagine how the two—artist and subject—are connected in a way they never thought they would be. “They are lovers in a sense they never dreamed,” our narrator tells us (54).

While “January Thaw” is perhaps one of the more difficult *Up the Hill* stories because of the backstory—the writer has written explicitly about the subject, but we largely have to imagine the nature of the offense and the deep hurt left in the community—it is perhaps the most instructive as to what Schaap does as a writer. Similar to the writer in the story, Schaap, too, often takes the stories of real people and fashions them into art. However, rather than laying down everything at the foot of the art, which seems to be the author’s crime in “January Thaw,” Schaap is careful with how he treats his characters—and thereby with how he respects the community out of which those characters arise.

For this reason, too, *Up the Hill* is quite interesting, for the way it writes about the sins of Siouxland communities—the hypocrisy, the greed, the sexual misconduct—without exploiting those communities for the sake of art. As always in Schaap’s fiction, the stories in *Up the Hill* are stories that can actually be of service to our communities—and to a wider audience—if we will let them show us ourselves and what we might be. Ultimately, what *Up the Hill* offers is insight into life and life after death in a way that shows the work of grace upon our lives from a longer view, from the other side.

That’s another way that *Up the Hill* fits in Schaap’s work. This isn’t the first time he’s written about crossing over. In *Up the Hill*, he is once again crossing borders and rivers and oceans with his writing, not just between Iowa and Holland but between heaven and earth—crossing the very River Jordan itself.