

Between the Covers

The East Hampton Independent

By Joan Baum

June 25, 2008

Perhaps Robert Crooke has some ambivalence about reviews of his second novel *Sunrise* that suggest he's revisiting *The Great Gatsby*, though for sure, the book's cover invites the comparison, with its striking tri-tone shot of a long pier extending over water and ending at a light, and its opening scene, set in a literature class, where the discussion is about "Nick Carraway's final reverie over the green light on Daisy's dock."

As Crooke has said in interview, Fitzgerald's iconic novel, one of his favorites, may well have been in his subconscious before parallels of theme, setting and character began to emerge. But for sure Crooke will want to be taken on his own terms, and these manifestly and admirably do not owe their origin to Fitzgerald's '20s.

Crooke's setting is also much further east than *Gatsby's* Gold Coast, and for this reason alone, *Sunrise*, more timely than *Gatsby*, should enjoy a wide local readership (at least). Crooke knows the Hamptons and Montauk, but he's also done his library homework: for all the subliminal Fitzgerald influence, he has crafted his own compelling discovery story.

Sunrise resonates as a book about recent decades and particularly about the last few years. As the narrator Stephen Dahl notes early on about his students in Paris, where he has fled to write, "Somehow they understood that Fitzgerald had captured America in a moment's irreconcilable balance between disappointment and hope."

It becomes increasingly obvious in *Sunrise* that Crooke would like to prompt similar reflections about culture and politics in *America* after 9/11, especially as these affected and continue to affect those who grew up in the late '60s, many of whom defined themselves by the music of the time—lyrics appear extensively throughout the book, articulating characters' experience with love and loss.

Crooke's got an engrossing plot line, a narrative (with a shocking ending) that alternates between Stephen's present-day activities, once he's called back to the States by news of the death of a former long-time friend, and recollections that go back 30 years, when he met the oddly charming, self-inventing Jay Gatsby-like Tom Westlake in college.

Though at times too much diary-like detail seems to infuse itself into Stephen's remembered conversations, nostalgia trumping selectivity and the fact that toward the end, the novel references itself—Stephen has begun writing a book about his Montauk past to be called...*Sunrise*—autobiographical impulses do not an autobiography make. And if *Sunrise* seems to approximate memoir, the only valid concern for the reader should be the way in which Crooke organizes theme, character, setting and plot.

With the exception of a couple of didactic passages—screeds against current administration policies abroad and knocks at how “rational land-use arguments” on the East End have failed to prevent sleepy villages being turned into white plastic, chrome and glass dune blight—*Sunrise* sustains reader curiosity about how Stephen turned his life around.

Once a promising guy, but aimless alcoholic “out of control,” he manages eventually to affect “a course of quiet comfort and modest accomplishment.” Crooke also seeds his tale with hints of further dark revelations, even after major illusions are unveiled.

The overall theme is significant—the state of the country after 9/11, for individuals and for the nation. Considerations include thoughts about “the value of friends in a careless life,” art and celebrity, and, of course, for those who know and love the east End, particularly East Hampton, the challenge inherent in the critical observation that a still beautiful area, where once there was a “seamless blend of farmers, artists, and investment bankers,” has become “a jumble of tourists, Fifth Avenue stores, and traffic.”

In Fitzgerald's day, as Stephen observes, the conviction was “there was something more important than any single person,” and that “betraying the ideal, the community, was the worst of sins.” But for Stephen's generation,

the '60s, failure was “betraying yourself.” Though *Sunrise* does not say so overtly, it implies that a country’s past, like an individual’s past, may offer up values worth reconsidering.

His book is called *Sunrise*, Stephen says, because “The sun rises first on the East End.” But, Hemingway notwithstanding, the full phrase, from *Ecclesiastes*, may be what Stephen has more deeply in mind at the end of the novel as he gazes out at the sea at sunset—“The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to his place where he arose.”

Sunrise by Robert Crooke, iUniverse, 196 pp., \$14.95.