

## Novel Explores the Active Role of the Past in Our Present

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The past is seduction and entrapment. The past is salvation and enlightenment. Author Robert Crooke develops both themes in his recently published novel, "Sunrise," set in Montauk.

It is a story of flight and return, of confronting the past in order to live honestly in the present. Mr. Crooke's main characters learn, in the course of the narrative, that if there is to be a viable future, it must emerge from facing—and, if possible, forgiving—past failures and betrayals.

These elementary principles are used to frame the story of three interconnected lives. Mr. Crooke's narrator/protagonist is Stephen Dahl, a writer who returns to Montauk after an absence of nearly 30 years for the funeral of his former best friend. Stephen has been living the life of a moderately successful novelist in Paris, where he also teaches American literature. He experienced the shock of 9/11 in the company of sympathetic students and colleagues, but did not feel impelled to return to America immediately.

Two years later, as the American government launches its invasion of Iraq and turns increasingly paranoid at home, Europeans' sympathy has turned to impatience. When his literary agent suggests they meet in New York, Stephen is glad to accept.

A few days into his visit, he learns by telephone that his old college friend, Tom Westlake, has died. The news comes from Tom's widow, Alexis, who was Stephen's lover during that long-ago summer in Montauk—a summer that Stephen cannot help but relive now. Alexis asks Stephen to come to the funeral, and to stay with her in the expansive beach house they all shared three decades ago.

Somewhat warily, Stephen drives from Manhattan to Montauk in a rented car, through a landscape changed for the worse by rapid urban development. In Montauk itself, familiar landmarks reassure him—the LUNCH lobster shack on the Napeague strip; the Shagwong Tavern in the village; the unique old Fisher Building.

The beach house on the bluffs—it could be one of the Stanford White "cottages"—appears little changed as well. Stephen realizes instantly that the ghosts of the past will not remain quiescent, and that an old reality, his love for Alexis, is very much alive.

Mr. Crooke uses flashback chapters alternating with present-day action to describe how his characters have—and have not—moved and changed since the fall of 1968. Who was Tom Westlake, the magnetic personality at the center of the turbulent events that would drive Stephen to leave the country? There are glimpses of "The Great Gatsby" in Tom Westlake, but they are by way of homage, not imitation.

F. Scott Fitzgerald is a writer admired by Mr. Crooke, as the novel's opening paragraph makes clear. Tom Westlake is successful at an early age, controlling, generous and charming, but he can be dishonest and cruel. There are discrepancies in his life story; he appears to have invented himself. Even his name may not be his own.

During the summer in the late 1960s that is the core of the story, Stephen works for Tom Westlake businesses in Montauk. Originally hired as a publicist for Tom's real estate firm, Stephen is shunted aside and needs to take the only available job as a bartender in a nightclub Tom owns with a partner. It is a disastrous environment for someone who already has an alcohol problem. Under growing emotional pressure and in the heady atmosphere of drug and sex parties, Stephen slides uncontrollably into alcoholism.

Alexis Jordan, a talented painter and photographer, is Stephen's new girlfriend when he moves to Montauk and begins working for the Westlake interests. She disapproves of his drinking and even predicts it will eventually drive her away. By the end of the traumatic summer, her gloomy forecast comes true. Alexis has thrown over Stephen and agreed to marry Tom. There has been a fatal car accident. The actual responsibility for it and other tragic events will not be revealed until the end of the novel.

Mr. Crooke's plot is well-crafted and suspenseful. His prose style is uncluttered and unpretentious, yet he evokes sympathy for his conflicted characters. All three main personalities are multi-dimensional. Tom Westlake is capable of great altruism, yet Stephen later sees him as a destroyer. Alexis has traits of selfishness—"freedom" is her stated goal—but also great loyalty. Stephen's journey into self-knowledge and sobriety is told in a moving, never sentimentalized manner.

In the words of both Alexis and Stephen, life and art contain "hope and disappointment." The future can come into focus only by understanding both. The author draws a parallel between Stephen's need to face decisions that cannot be undone and the nation's need, post 9/11, to look to its moral conscience. Mr. Crooke's talent and skill invite the reader to think about larger issues while enjoying a good story.

The novel's title—"Sunrise"—is the name of a principal highway on Long Island, and a metaphor for new beginnings, new lives. Mr. Crooke, who now lives in Connecticut, began his career as a sports reporter for the Long Island Press, and served as North American press spokesman for the Reuters international news agency.

Given the author's knowledge of the territory, it would have been nice if the book jacket photo showed one of Montauk's characteristic stone breakwaters instead of an unfamiliar pier with a pavilion at its sea-end. There are no such dislocations in the text. All through the novel, Mr. Crooke portrays the East End with all of its heartrending contradictions: natural beauty tainted by urban sprawl; glorious sunrises over motel parking lots littered with beer cans.