

## Crooke's Latest Effort

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By Jack Coraggio

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BRIDGEWATER—When author Robert Crooke talks about his newest work of fiction, “The Earth and Its Sorrows,” he perhaps unwittingly distances himself from the role of story creator. Instead, he alludes to a self-appointed position of story reporter, a sleuth who sniffs out the details from his characters and then writes them down in a novel format.

As he indicated, this process of writing revealed many literary surprises, ones that maybe took even him a moment to understand. But in the end, he found the book to be an allegory for the shared human condition, the struggles of it, in a manner that has transcendentalism meet tragedy.



Robert Crooke, at home in Bridgewater. Photo by Walter Kidd.

“Something about the story that wanted to be told in this book lent itself more to a fable, a symbolic fable or parable,” described Mr. Crooke, who lives in Bridgewater. “It’s a fable about the nature of human existence,

tragedy, love, how do we deal with tragedy, the passing of time, the meaning of the passing of time.

A more detailed synopsis would show that “The Earth and Its Sorrows” is about Ted Devaney, who, a couple of years after the death of his son, attempts to sell his family’s old summer cottage in the mid-Hudson Valley region of New York. When a feeling of presence overwhelms him, Ted decides to reside in the cabin a few days. Days become weeks as he reconnects with old friends, flames and, eventually, his trouble-plagued brother who comes to join him. There, in that cabin, Ted learns of life’s indelible connections.

But even as he details the plot, and how it unfolds over 184 pages, Mr. Crooke makes repeated reference to “the story that wanted to be told,” just as he did when describing the theme of the story.

It’s an interesting approach, as it indicates that he was less a storyteller and more a conduit in the overall process. These characters that he created exist in their own world, their conflicts and struggles and successes as well. It’s all just a matter of extracting it and recording it.

In doing so, Mr. Crooke discovered more than just a tale of one’s personal reflection and internal skirmishes, but a story that juxtaposes the transcendental thought against the anti-transcendental school of writing.

“If a certain style of novel or group of writers and novelists came to me, it was the mid-19th century transcendentalists, like Emerson and Thoreau,” said Mr. Crooke, citing the spiritual state propelled by one’s own intuition, or Ted’s intuition, a process embraced by the aforementioned writers.

But maybe that’s not it.

“Or novelists like Hawthorne and Melville, the anti-transcendentalists,” Mr. Crooke continued. “These are the ones not too convinced by the sweet innocence of nature.”

Because tragedy and sorrow are essential parts of life, they tap into the emotions that make us human, which is why so many others can empathize with one person's experiences. If a man's son dies, as Ted's son does, it's a tragedy felt by all.

"He feels unique in his tragedy, perhaps this one separates him from mankind," the author said of his main character. "But tragedy unites us; he references that but in a way that says he does not believe it."

The book is already creating a buzz. Kirkus Discoveries said "Crooke is a skilled prose stylist, describing the places and faces of the Hudson Valley with ease and painting a well-rounded and sympathetic protagonist." This is the third novel for Mr. Crooke, but his history of writing runs much longer, having once been a sports reporter and columnist for the Long Island Press and a North American press spokesperson for Reuters, an international news group. Semi-retired, he and his wife have been in Bridgewater since 1993.

His previous book, "Sunrise," earned great critical praise, called by Barbara Goldowsky of The Southampton Press "a journey into self-knowledge, told in a moving, never sentimentalized manner."

That book became something of homage to the F. Scott Fitzgerald classic "The Great Gatsby." Superficially, both are prototypical American tales that take place on Long Island's lavish East End. But under the surface, each deals with complex ethical and moral concerns of characters aiming for reconciliation during this country's more restless eras.

But even though he cites inspiration in other authors, his latest effort is built upon the spiritual and philosophical conflict between Calvinism and Transcendentalism, reflecting "the issues of goodness in man and divinity in nature, the importance of personal responsibility, and the limits of self-reliance."

*Mr. Crooke will give a reading and signing at the Hickory Stick Bookshop in Washington Depot at 2 p.m. on Sunday, Aug. 15.*