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Book Talk

City on Fire by Garth Risk Hallberg

Alfred A. Knopf, 2015

Reviewed by Ken Wilkins

I see you

Let's get it out of the way early: this is a long book, but do not let that put you off. Garth Risk Hallberg, who grew up in Greenville, NC, and attended Parrott Academy, has penned an extraordinary novel. It has a complex plot, characters that are three-dimensional and more, symbolism, mystery and themes addressed with a depth that astounds. It may be difficult to imagine reading a book of nearly 1,000 pages, but this is one that tempts the reader to dive in for a second look.

The story is set mostly in 1976 and 1977 in Manhattan. This was a time before AIDS and when punk had replaced the hippie movement (but kept the drugs) as a method of rebellion by young folks. Hallberg, who as best I can tell was not even alive then, puts us precisely there. *City on Fire* is about many things: the wealthy Hamilton-Sweeney family, the punk scene, a murder mystery, connections and the blackout of 1977. It cannot be pigeon-holed into some specific category.

I jokingly referred to it once as a detective novel. There is indeed a murder and a detective who becomes obsessed with the case, but *City on Fire* is much more than that story, although the murder plays a central role in connecting all the characters and plots.

The subplots involve Regan (née Hamilton-Sweeney) and Keith Lamplighter and the breakup of their marriage. The machinations of Regan's uncle by marriage provide the underpinnings of evil that seem to move everything in the family, but beneath all their troubles, it is obvious that Regan and Keith love each other very much.

Another story line tells of Samantha Cicciaro and Charlie Weisbarger, a pair of teenagers from Long Island, longing to be of the city and its punk rock scene. Said scene includes much R-rated material, and Sam and Charlie both partake, as do many other characters. Charlie ends up grounded, and they lose each other, but here again it is obvious that they love each other, even though neither realizes it.

Then there are William Hamilton-Sweeney III (Regan's estranged brother) and his boyfriend, Mercer Goodman, who is black, fresh from Atlanta, Georgia, a teacher and an aspiring writer. William, known as Billy Three Sticks when he was the front man of a defunct punk band called Ex-Post Facto, is a heroin addict and an artist. These two also love each other.

In the background most of the time is Amory Gould, brother of the second wife of the head of the Hamilton-Sweeney empire. This modern-day Machiavelli has manipulated his sister into her marriage and inserted himself into the company, with more ambitious plans underway.

With all this, we have a novel that would keep an English class busy for at least one semester. *City on Fire* was greatly anticipated, and its publication by Knopf came after a bidding war that ended at a \$2 million advance. This is one thing, however, that lives up to its hype.

A brief review cannot do justice to this long, complex, marvelous novel. Garth Risk Hallberg, who fled the South for New York, in *City on Fire* has revealed his Southern roots. This book focuses on place and relationships, but race and even religion figure prominently. These are the hallmarks of Southern fiction. His characters could live anywhere, and their motivations are universal. The essential message of the book is found in its final two sentences: "I see you. You are not alone."

