

Book Review

'Flying to Nowhere' is full of destination



By JAMES SUROWIECKI
Sports Editor

The novella is a vanishing breed in today's literature. The tightly crafted and lean, short novel can no longer be found on the same shelves as the overweight sprawling epics which take up hundreds of flaccid pages. And it is clear that quantity is no guarantee of quality.

The case is overstated, of course. The caliber of an author's work cannot be measured by the number of pages he uses to tell his story. There is something immensely satisfying about a work in which nothing is wasted, in which the overpowering sense is of taut precision. Such a work is John Fuller's stunning *Flying to Nowhere*.

On its face, "Flying to Nowhere" is a mystery, set on a desolate island

who journey to the well to be cured. To this island comes Vane, a clergyman sent by the bishop, and his young aide Geoffrey. They arrive to solve the puzzle of what has happened to the pilgrims, who seem to have vanished without a trace. Vane soon realizes that the monastery, under the aegis of its abbot, has abandoned its original purpose, has been turned away from the pilgrims and in toward itself. No pilgrims have journeyed to the island in quite some time.

As Vane and the abbot come into conflict, subtly and quietly, and while Vane searches for the missing bodies of the pilgrims beneath the well, the story shifts from earthly mystery to mystical allegory. The concrete questions lose meaning as the distinctions between life and death become clouded, shifting beneath the veil of the power of the well.

But more than life or death, body and soul assume importance. The abbot, alone in his laboratory, dissects corpses, tenderly cataloging each organ in his quest for "the private chamber of the ruling spirit" that place in the body where the soul resides.

For the abbot, agnostic heresy would have no meaning. His heresy rests in his equation of the spiritual and the material world. It is not a Manichaeian conception of the light battling with the omnipresent darkness, nor even a Pauline vision of the spirit struggling in vain against the demands of the flesh. Rather, the abbot is concerned with this life alone, with the soul as a companion to the body. The resurrection he desires is in this world, not another.

The metaphor of flight becomes more potent as the story becomes more involved. For the girls who work on the island's one farm, flight is a matter of sensual liberation, of transcending this existence.

Thus, in one of the book's most beautiful passages, the girl Gweno describes a vision she has. "I'm wrapped in a leaf and hanging from a tree on a thread, turning very slow. . . It's beautiful and there's the breath of the wind turning me slightly. . . Now the leaf is drying and crackling. It's crumbling

away. . . It's leaving me pure and new and now I've died and got wings and I'm flying away. . . I'm just flying to nowhere. I'm becoming myself."

For the abbot, though, the desire to fly is something to be abhorred, to be conquered. To lie with a woman is an attempt to fly, as is drunkenness. The desire to fly "is a false desire of parting from the earth, our soil and nature, and the bed of our corruption. A man cannot put himself above the soil of his germination and generation, no more than can a stone."

Fuller paints the abbot as unable to grasp the contradiction of the earth as the ground of our existence, but also as a den of iniquity. For if it is so, his attempts to resurrect the flesh represent nothing more than a recreation of a being which must not rise beyond its earthly bonds. Even more, in his existence there is no love and no delight in pleasure, for to allow such to enter his life would be an attempt at flight. And so his inquiries into the power of the well become even more disturbing.

The dichotomy can be seen more clearly in the two different versions of the legend of the well's origin. As Gweno tells it, the Saint came to the island from the sea and was tired and thirsty. He found a little bird in a nest, a bird that was parched even more than he was. So the Saint stamped on a rock, broke open a spring and let the bird drink from it until it flew away.

But as the abbot tells it, Saint Lleuddad found himself thirsty to the point of death, saw a bird flying through the clouds and wished he could be a bird. That wish did not cure his thirst, and as he stopped wishing to be a bird, the bird fell to the ground. A spring from which Lleuddad could drink bubbled up from the place where the bird fell.

In the former myth, it is the Saint who saves the bird and in so doing encourages flight. In the latter, the fall of the bird — the death of flight saves the Saint.

The combination of monastery and mystery inevitably conjures up allusions to Umberto Eco's "The Name of the Rose," and there are similarities between the two works.

But Fuller's work is more philosophical than theological, and the allegory here is infinitely more powerful than the mystery. The grander difference is that Eco's novel was in some sense about books and the power that ideas can carry with them. At the same time, there was a marvelous sense of life in the monastery, a sense which Fuller does not attempt to convey.

Fuller seems more concerned with the questions of body and soul, with the confusion of the boundaries between them. "Flying to Nowhere" is brilliantly crafted, each chapter exquisitely drawn with precise care. It is also devastatingly provocative, raising fundamental questions about the nature of life. And in so doing, it reaches beyond the bonds of the earth, attempting, fittingly enough, to fly.

off the coast of Wales. The island is home to a miraculous well, a fount of waters with revitalizing powers. It is also home to a monastery established to guide and house the pilgrims

Music

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both say they have been awed by the CD's reproduction capabilities. Gilpin says that he was at a friends house listening to (Pink Floyd's) The Wall on CD and was instantly converted to the new technology. Gilpin's growing disc catalog bridges musical genres including records from upright classical statesmen like Stravinsky to the down and dirty proto-punk sounds of The Ramones.

The relatively high price of discs has pushed Gilpin to make sacrifices just as Walker does. Plasma donations feed his bankbook and fuel his collection. Gilpin says this personal investment is well worth the pleasure associated with a crisp, durable reproduction of his favorite music.

The advent of digital technology has not pushed all connoisseurs to forsake more dated or less fashionable musical mediums. Mike Soehnlein, a prospective MBA student from Raleigh, is still an outspoken proponent of reel-to-reel tape systems.

While overseas years ago, Soehnlein picked up a reel-to-reel system in a Honk Kong bargain shop. His system has been upgraded and replaced since then to include three separate tape decks - one which is

compatible with old eight-tracks — and at least 150 recorded reels of tape.

Since reel-to-reel tapes may run from four to 14 hours, the amount of music Soehnlein has recorded requires him to keep a detailed notebook of individual entries to keep all of his tapes organized. Soehnlein has enlisted the aid of a friend to computerize his collection.

One tape Soehnlein is particularly proud of is a survey of "golden oldies" from the 50s, 60s and early 70s. The track boasts of over 300 titles and takes up about 14 hours of tape time. Having purchased each song originally as a 45 rpm single, he estimates the monetary value of the tape at close to \$600.

Collectors are perhaps just part of the recently resurgent musical industry. The new Beatles' CD's set a record upon their release by generating more money for the industry in one day than in any single day before. The primary reason for that financial success probably had as much to do with the high price of the four CD package as the Beatles' continual appeal. And days like that record-breaking one may keep the industry rich and thriving, and collectors such as Walker and Gilpin, as they say, broke but contented.

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