

Review · Peggy Gifford

Making Believe by John Leggett. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 295 pp. \$16.95 cloth.

Of the mysteries that recur throughout world religions, one of the most interesting is the paradox of the prophet — that person whose vision differs so radically from the society in which he was raised that his mere presence threatens a status quo. And yet he is never completely banished. It is as if someone has bent to the collective human ear and whispered, ‘Maybe he is right.’

So our prophets live in caves at the edge of town, or in hospitals in the center of town, observed and tolerated from a distance, until they do something that is clearly right. Like perform a miracle, or pull a masterpiece from a puddle of paper. Then we all relax a little and have a banquet in their honor or give them a plaque and begin, in general, to expect great things of them. Virtue, for example, moral perfection for another.

Making Believe is the story of Royal Train, a man whose temperament and vision may or may not turn out to be prophet material, and his controversial rise from parish priest to bishop in the Episcopal Church.

Narrated by Ethan Soames, a close friend and fellow priest, the account begins in 1959 when the two meet as students at seminary where Train’s presence is a chronic source of disruption.

The groans at the back of the room stirred Roy’s enthusiasm. “Well, why not?” he asked, “What’s wrong with a super God, a confident, better-tempered one? Why not a wholly profane world, from which our only hope of escape is through the single spark we carry on the pinnacle of our soul? I can believe that because I’ve got one.”

By 1960 the church fathers reluctantly grant him a parish, albeit a dying one. The following year, while his wife Joan gives birth to their first child, Train is jailed in Alabama for his role in organizing freedom rides. As a result, his picture makes *Newsweek*, and his ever-conservative congregation requests his resignation. But by the early 70s Train’s reputation as peace activist and leader of social reform is too public and too helpful to the

church as a whole to ignore. He rises despite himself and despite the public scandal that surrounds his personal life.

Making Believe is the story of a prophet and the would-be prophets who surround him, those who yearn to walk at the exalted altitude of a Royal Train, those who perhaps glimpsed the view from there once, in the third grade, when their paper was chosen to be read aloud, and who yearn to go back, but lack the vision or the courage.

What happens to them is the second story, the story within the story, that Ethan tells about himself when he talks about Royal Train:

We must all come to terms with our own inadequacies, the nose too big, the heart too small, the ear unsure of pitch. And how easily that stifling disappointment turns to jealousy. *Schadenfreude* is how German musicians say it, a corrosion of the heart that makes it sting for someone else's achievement and rejoice in someone else's misfortune. . . . There are generous ones who can turn their misfortune into charity, failed poets who man the artistic soup kitchens of the world. They are saints and they are few. But there is a third, a middle way, which seems to be mine. Transference. It is how I explain the relationship that grew between myself and Roy Train.

In the tradition of *The Great Gatsby* and *A Separate Peace*, the narrative structure of *Making Believe* offers an inside story, an intimate glimpse into the world of an exceptional man through the eyes of a narrator who shares our curiosity and admiration, who asks the same human questions we tend to ask of and about those who seem to be superhuman. Which is not to suggest that Ethan's account is homogenized with hero worship. Ethan has other interests and they include Royal's wife Joan, an interest he can neither give up nor ever quite forgive himself for. Nor, and pointedly so, does Royal Train's life read like a chapter from *The Lives of the Saints*. He is an unfaithful husband—many times over—a negligent father and a heavy drinker. But his faults do not interest him. He does not apologize for them. He does not even try to hide them. As Bishop of Iowa, he lives publicly with a woman half his age, a scandal which eventually leads to morals charges by the House of Bishops.

John Leggett, whose strong work in biography (*Ross and Tom*) meets nicely in this novel with his concerns as a writer of fiction, understands

that the story of a great man must also be the story of a great man's weaknesses. This is precisely Train's point when, on the verge of being censured, he clarifies the content of one of his sermons to a reporter.

"No, no, I asked if they could not have faith in an earthly Jesus who used doors and had sexual longings like the rest of us. *I didn't say that about heavy kissing . . .*" He laughed, took a gulp from his glass. "The point is His being human, His being of *this* world, the one we know with all its real, human problems . . ."

The events in Royal Train's life are loosely based on Bishop James Pike whose candid questioning of accepted doctrine within the Episcopal Church eventually led to his infamous censure by the House of Bishops in 1966. Like Bishop Pike, Train's politicism is too complex to be confined to the social trespasses of a particular age. His refusal to separate politics from church matters and his insistence that the origin and selection of accepted doctrine is based on politically expedient decisions, are the sweeping concerns of the novel.

"The Trinitarian concept is not holy scripture," Train points out, in replying to charges of heresy. "It was arrived at in the fourth century by two hundred and fifty bishops who were trying to settle a dispute between Arius and Alexander . . . and neither Jesus nor the apostles ever heard of it."

Although he does not share in Pike's celebrated obsession with psychic phenomena which, for Pike, combined a quest for his deceased son and a burning inability to believe any longer in the veracity of the doctrine of the resurrection, Train is compelled by the mystery and message of the gnostic gospels and to that end journeys to Egypt and Nag Hammadi to find the place where they lay hidden for nearly 2,000 years. He is accompanied by his new bride, a woman twenty years his junior.

We err against ourselves when we expect perfection, whether moral or otherwise, of our visionaries, we sever the humanity they share with us and so lose the possibility of ever joining them. The farther we place them from us the more comfortable we are in not striving to find the spark that is unique to us, that might light our own name from a mountain top. Perhaps that is what separates the prophets, the Royal Trains, from the Ethan Soames of the world. The prophet acknowledges his weaknesses, 'You

don't have to be an all-round holy man, to be holy.' He does not chastise himself endlessly for them, rather he invests his energy in his strengths, giving them the opportunity to ignite and burn.

The sin that obsesses Roy is not adultery, it is cover-up, censorship. The political message of *Making Believe* is also the spiritual message: we sin, when as historians, as priests, as human beings, we deceive ourselves and others about what has taken place. "There is a Jesus curse," Train tells Ethan near the end of the novel, "and it falls on those who stand between God's knowledge and man's. It's what makes the priesthood such a dangerous profession."