



Delphic Oracle, USA

Steven Mayfield

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In the delightful multigenerational novel Delphic Oracle, USA, a town is put on the map by renegades in the 1920s and flourishes for their descendants.

Checked portraits of the residents of a Nebraska town fill Steven Mayfield's rambunctious historical novel *Delphic Oracle, USA*.

Delphic Oracle, Nebraska, is a small town that's populated by a colorful cast. Their private foibles become public knowledge: one experiences wanderlust, and others bet on when he will return; another has a mishap while replacing a car battery that draws a crowd; a besotted man visits different religious denominations. Meanwhile, the town's raconteur priest, Peter, works by day and feels imprisoned at night. And Peter's great-grandmother Willa reminisces about Maggie and July, who were lovers in the 1920s, when Delphic Oracle was known as Miagrammesto Station: Maggie was beautiful and smart, if prone to swooning and visions; July was a swindler from out of town who spied the chance to claim that Maggie was the next Oracle of Delphi. Captivated by her charms, he styled himself as Maggie's interpreter and convinced gullible people of the veracity of her supposed predictions. And when their relationship was tested by the resurgence of his questionable past, it inspired him to pull together all of his best sleight-of-hand tricks.

Made up of extended anecdotes that delight in gentle ribbing, the novel moves between the present and the past. It fleshes out Delphic Oracle in terms of its small businesses and residents—a mix of busybodies, do-gooders, Catholics, and Methodists. Their shenanigans are often gentle, with hints of dark menace: there's a cameo appearance by Al Capone and his henchmen.

Peter and Willa narrate, both employing tall-tale flourishes and conveying the comforts and frustrations that arise when everyone knows about everyone else's histories—and won't let them forget. They have a shared knack for homing in on eccentric details; for opining; and for finding silver linings, even in the midst of revelations that throw other people for a loop. Their tales at first appear to be isolated—but then a skeleton turns up in the present, wearing a 1920s suit, and a sense of intrigue is introduced. After this, the ties between Peter's and Willa's stories are strengthened too. Still, at times Peter is too discursive a guide: he attends a summer baseball game and muses over a brave woman's missed opportunity for happiness, but neither scene does much for the novel as a whole. Amid the novel's twists and mischief, it is Maggie and July's devoted relationship that results in the novel's greatest rewards.

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KAREN RIGBY (September 27, 2022)

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