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Liam's Going

Michael Joyce
McPherson and Company Publishers (August 2002)
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This novel isn't merely steeped in Hudson River Valley lore, it positively radiates with knowledge of and affection for the area. The action is set in what Manhattanites call "upstate," the author lives in New Hamburg and teaches in Poughkeepsie, and the publisher has offices in Kingston. Characters relate fascinating nuggets of local history, particularly from the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century days of Dutch trading on the river up to the Revolutionary War, like the tale of how traitor John Andre was betrayed by his shoes. In addition to being an eloquent meditation on memory and passion, the book is a sort of poets' guide to the area between Peeksill and Albany.

This contemporary novel focuses on a cultured and grounded family. Liam is a recent high school grad headed for a small, unidentified liberal arts college in the Hudson Valley, but this book is about his mother and father. Liam's poet mother Cathleen is driving him to freshman orientation, while attorney father Noah remains at home. The rite of passage provides an occasion for wistful remembrance—and both parents have unrevealed dalliances to ponder. The drive down the Hudson reminds Cathleen of her studies there, and of her postmarital summer fling with a well-read area rustic. Meanwhile, Noah visits a charming elderly female client and recalls his brief adolescent flirtation with a bewitching French poet.

The author has a MFA from the University of Iowa and is currently Associate Professor of English and Director of the Center for Electronic Learning and Teaching at Vassar College. His intimate understanding of the Hudson River Valley serves him extremely well. Cathleen tells Liam of local lore about the various locations they pass, and Joyce's evocative descriptions will jar the memory of anyone who has ever negotiated the Taconic State Parkway: "The road over Storm King was a hard one on account of both its beauty and its peril. A driver wanted to look out where the Hudson gaped below, yet traffic kept coming at you and meanwhile the shoulderless road wound relentlessly away."

Liam's Going consists largely of alternating interior monologues of Cathleen and Noah. Joyce's focus is squarely on measured emotion and the resonances of language, and his control and economy are frequently astonishing. His characterizations could use more bite; while exquisitely detailed, the novel is peopled more by types than by authentic individuals. It's the kind of book in which everyone (save the eponymous Liam) is capable of genuflecting in the presence of a fern or a heron. As befits a pensive and graceful narrative in which the married principals are still entirely in love with one another, there isn't very much at stake, but Joyce has the courage to wield overtly poetic language without flinching.

The purity and humility of Joyce's prose are exemplary, and the attentive reader is guaranteed several worthwhile epiphanies per chapter. For an audience tired of glib collegiate satires or spiky postmodern japes, this is a gentle, articulate story about recognizable adults coming to terms with new patterns in their lives.
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