

Sherbrookes

Nicholas Delbanco

Dalkey Archive Press (August 2011)

Softcover \$19.95 (800pp)

978-1-56478-587-9

An ancestral home that is both haven and cage becomes the focal point for this searching exploration of adultery's place in marital landscapes. Echoing *Ethan Frome*, *Vinegar Hill*, and even *The Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, *Sherbrookes* transcends the suffering such novels depict to suggest that even death and despair can birth new life.

The "Big House" was built by "Peacock" Sherbrooke, who only returned to Vermont in time to die in his self-congratulatory edifice. Inspired perhaps by this knowledge, *Sherbrookes'* present owner, Judah, lures his estranged wife, Maggie, home on the pretext that his death is imminent. When he finally dies six months later, they have made their peace, her infidelities forgiven, his need for control lessened. Ian, their son, arrives too late and is thus disinherited. As the returned prodigal son, Ian atones for his absence by protecting his father's holdings from developers who want to build a mall and a highway exit ramp.

After Judah's death, Maggie discovers she is pregnant, but simple math reveals that Judah is not the father. She remains silent, though visibly pregnant, and isolates herself behind the family's historic reclusiveness. Ian is sanguine despite his mother's secrecy; he, too, is embroiled in an adulterous romance and, without guilt, realizes that he now inhabits the role of the interlopers his father so resented. Hattie, Judah's octogenarian spinster sister, has always lived in the Big House. Convinced that Ian is Maggie's child's father, she imagines deformed sub-humans of Sherbrooke blood. When she learns that the father is neither Sherbrooke father nor son, the thought of a bastard inheriting the family mantle undoes her far more than the thought of incest could: "She would shout till breath was done how the Sherbrookes were dishonored by that widow-whore."

Letters from Peacock Sherbrooke and his daughter, Anna-Marie, who eloped and became a Mormon, are deftly woven into the narrative, as is a diary kept by Judah's father. These elegantly phrased artifacts reveal an idiosyncratic slice of Americana that colors the Sherbrooke epic and extends its panoramic reach. When a stranger claims descent from Peacock's dissolute son and seeks money from Judah's father, the question of his lineage becomes contrapuntal (counterpoint) to the impending birth Hattie so dreads.

With a masterful flurry of flashbacks and memories, the plot twists sinuously towards its conclusion. Long loops of memory invite readers in, and the wait for closure is well worth it. The present volume revises a trilogy that Delbanco originally published as three books: *Possession*, *Sherbrookes*, and *Stillness*. This revision three decades later, he writes, repairs the flaws of inexperience while retaining the story's original lyricism, beauty, and grace.

ELIZABETH BREAU (September / October 2011)

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