ForeWord Reviews

HISTORICAL

The Emancipation of Giles Corey
Michael Sortomme
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The Emancipation of Giles Corey: the title alone evokes themes of slavery and freedom. More specifically, it conjures a ghost from that dark chapter of Puritan history in which witches swayed from the gallows. The book was included in short list of finalists for the Montaigne Award this spring, recognizing independent books with thought-provoking titles. It also received the Indie Excellence Award for Best Historical Fiction.

An artist and self-proclaimed "spirit walker," Michael Sortomme presents an ambitious first novel that is part history, part fiction, and mostly spiritual journey into the realm of the paranormal. Get ready for a dizzying walk through the past via the reincarnation (the book is dedicated to psychiatrist Ian Stevenson) of key historical figures involved in the events that culminated in the 1692 Salem Witch Trials. These figures–Giles Corey, Mary Warren, John Marston, and Rebecca Nurse–are linked through karma to the novel's central characters, who practice under Sophie St. Cloud, an "Indigenous Shamanic Practitioner" traveling to Salem to restore karma along the "American Camino." St. Cloud's Camino seems linked to the Christian tradition at times, where spiritual pilgrims follow centuries-old routes on a long walk to absolve themselves of sin.

Original artwork, including drawings and maps penned by Sortomme, depict the spirit walkers' journeys through Salem to free the victims of the witch trials from such mundane eternal activities as guarding their own graves (Mary Warren) or lying crushed under heavy stones (Giles Corey). The Spiritual Pilgrims (the author capitalizes terms of the paranormal; a typographical style conjuring the Olde English?) share a more selfish motivation as well: they seek to clear the karmic energy that entwines each of them (through past-life recall) to these tortured figures from Salem.

Although historically accurate (thanks to the author's impeccable research), the novel has problems. The perspective is skewed and the audience marginalized by too much telling. As a reader, I wanted to feel like a part of the ritual, not be told how to execute it. The book can also read like a therapy session at times, with Sophie as the overly self-indulgent patient: "I have

never had a friend my own age who consistently cared about my personal well-being." This type of self-examination would come across better as exposition, not dialogue.

Sortomme, educated in archeology and modern literature, had a thirty-year career in shamanic practices prior to embarking on her work as an author. She now writes and paints in Oregon's Pinot noir country "under a 150-year old Larch tree." She is at work on a second novel that again features Sophie. If the narrative can be improved, the second book will no doubt offer another unique perspective on the history of Magick and the Old Ways as Sortomme deftly examines this often taboo part of American History.

Kai White