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### Review Of "Sam Patch: Ballad Of A Jumping Man" By W. Getz

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*Sam Patch: Ballad of a Jumping Man.* William Getz.  
New York and Toronto: Franklin Watts, 1986. \$17.95. 361 pages.

It seems that he [Sam Patch] had some misgivings of his fate, for a pet bear, which he had always taken with him on his former break-neck adventures, and which had constantly leaped after him without injury, he on this occasion left behind, in the care of a friend, to whom he bequeathed him "in case of his not returning." We saw the bear, which is kept at the principal hotel; he is a noble creature, more completely tame than I ever saw any animal of the species.

Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832)

These days you won't know about Sam Patch, probably, without you have read a book by the name of *Paterson*, but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. William Carlos Williams, and he told the truth, mainly. There was some things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. Now there's another book come along that tells about Sam Patch, called *Sam Patch: Ballad of a Jumping Man*, by Mr. William Getz, who I reckon knows Mr. Williams' book. It looks like the only folks that may read this new book, though, are those ones that know the other one. That's too bad. Sam's not in the history books, mostly, and he sure isn't famous for sex or violence or positive thinking, the things that get people to buy hardbacks these days. But he's not bad at self-promotion, or at product endorsements, so maybe him and his story will eventually become popular again, as they was once.

If people do pick Mr. Getz's book up, they'll especially like it for its stretchers. For instance, the story's all told by a *bear*, Sam Patch's Bruin. That's a stretcher stretched enough to be a tall tale—about 7 feet tall, in fact, and furry. Another thing they will like is that Bruin and Sam are not too different from Huck Finn and Jim. They're on the run all the time, and they've got a mix of things honest and things underhanded about them that's very likeable. Plus there's melodrama and sentiment right out of Dickens or Bulwer-Lytton, and the heroes are surrounded by characters that can almost hold a candle to the King and the Duke and Uriah Heep for sheer bluster and orneriness. How many of those new novels can you say that about?

We follow Bruin through Jacksonian America, from his first encounter with Davy Crockett (he's the only bear ever to best him) to his eventual teaming up with Sam. Along the way we get glimpses of the interiors and goings on of many taverns (Bruin can drink as well as he tells a story), a travelling phrenological show, Jacksonian political rallies, Paterson, Boston, Washington, D.C., and the New York City underworld dominated by the Short Tail Gang and their rivals, the evil Dead Rabbits led by one Flavius Raskin. The bear casts a wondering but also skeptical eye on all of this.

Here are the opening sentences of Chapter One:

Ordinarily, a bear's life tends to be pretty uneventful, and up until what I guess was about my fifth year mine was, too. Like most bears, I kept pretty much to myself.

I spent my time alone in the great gothic wilderness, rambling over the hills that bumped along in every direction and made up so far as I was concerned the whole of the known world. Food was plentiful and lay, so to speak, ready to hand. I munched as I rambled, and thought about how fortunate it was to be a bear in a world in which everything seemed expressly designed for a bear's happiness . . . (5)

Not the opening of *Huck Finn*—it's too equable, and grammatical. But not bad, either.

This next passage is even better, one of the many very comic moments in the book. It takes place on a stagecoach with Bruin, Sam, and others stuck in the mud on the road to Baltimore. Bruin, it turns out, is very proud of his weight:

The driver . . . flung open the door. With a good deal of swearing he confirmed what was already no secret—we were stuck—and ordered everybody out.

"It's all the fault of that blasted bear. God damn it to hell," he said. "I never saw such a blame fool thing, packing a bear as freight. Why, he must be all of four hundred pounds if he's an ounce. If it weren't for him, we'd have got across, burn my old mother."

I thought this was unfair. Five hundred pounds is five hundred pounds. He could just as well have left behind two or three of the others. And if he had, I could have ridden inside . . . (266-67)

Then there's the melodrama. Here's a Dickensian description of one of the book's two villains, Flavius Raskin, in his lair in the catacombs of the Hell's Gate slum in Manhattan:

Raskin was a thin, sharp-faced man with deep-set, haunted-looking eyes and a mouth whose long, carious teeth were prominent in outline even when his lips were closed. What with this and his sunken cheeks and lank, wispy hair, he reminded me of one of Meleager's skulls from ancient battlefields. . . . He seemed as near entirely made up of nerves as any man I'd ever seen.

. . . Raskin spoke first, his voice hissing into the room like air escaping from an inflated bladder. (197)

Other delightfully nauseous characters have names like Flexible Grummett and Jason Meleager. Meleager uses his skulls, Bruin, and a buxom singer named Molly Money to draw crowds to his phrenological demonstrations, until he eventually sells Bruin to Sam for a large profit. He has a mix of the King and the Duke in him, not to mention Werner Erhart and L. Ron Hubbard.

Meleager turned to him gratefully.

"No, sir, we are merely spectators here, like yourself.

My associate and I are newcomers to Paterson. We have consented to a week's engagement at the Liberty Theater for a phrenological lecture series. The first is tonight, sir, by the way, and it's free. *Pro bono publico*, you know. Miss Money, another handbill, please. Eh? There aren't? Well, here you are, sir, my card," said Meleager, fishing out and surrendering that article reluctantly. (75)

It turns out that this charlatan becomes jealous of Sam's greater popularity as an entertainer, and has not a little to do with Sam's eventual demise in the Genesee Falls.

But I shouldn't give away too much of the story. I'll just quote some more—it's irresistible. Sam's first Paterson jump is recreated with great color and hoopla; Williams, had he read it, would have been tempted to steal it and put it in *Paterson*. And the last jumping scenes—at the Genesee, then Niagara, then the Genesee again—build suspense so flawlessly that few readers will be able to put the book down once they reach its last sixty pages or so.

Meanwhile Sam was examining the falls [of the Genesee]. Unconscious of the water pushing at his ankles, he walked to the edge and looked over. Mist billowed up in his face as he searched below for rocks, snagged trees, or peculiar eddies that might mean unseen hazards beneath the surface. A full hundred feet the water plunged in wavy tresses of foam before exploding at the bottom with an ominous roar. But Sam was in his element. (305)

Earlier, the book's pace is much more ambling, more bear-like, so to speak; it has all the love of digressions and new plots that a three-volume nineteenth-century novel does. Sam's and Bruin's jumps, though they're high points, take up relatively little space in the overall story.

Sam's slogans of course were as famous as any of the advertising slogans of the day. In fact, they represent the newly discovered power of advertising in the Age of Jackson. The country was in transition from the days of the Yankee peddlers to the newer forms of promotion being invented by young dry-goods merchant princes for the coming age of mass-market consumerism. "There's no mistake in Sam Patch," Sam would say to the impatient crowds when he showed up for a jump, as if he were endorsing a product, and afterwards, as they cheered another successful leap: "Some things can be done as well as others." Late in the book Bruin gives a fascinating interpretation of what this latter slogan means, linking it with the populist rhetoric of the Jackson Era:

What if this didn't mean that some things can be done *in addition* to others, but as *properly*—so as to have as much merit? . . . Was he trying to show that it's not *what* that counts, but *how*? Yes, he made a splash, so

to speak—but does anything leave less trace than a splash? The point is—who cares? It doesn't matter! How is Sam any the less for the fact that he, like the rest of us, can't leave a footprint in a river? (310-11)

Quite a leap, for bear or man.

(Incidentally, Sam's motto that some things can be done as well as others has always struck me as being a particularly apt one for Williams as well. The words could be the credo of *Paterson*—a reply to Greek, Latin, and Ezra with the bare hands and Sam Patch.)

Given the stretchers in the narrative, it's not surprising that at a few points—just a few—the tale becomes strained to the breaking point. There's a preposterous scene in which Bruin teaches himself to read by studying phrenological books, which would have been very funny if only the author hadn't taken it all so seriously. And despite some great fun that's made of nineteenth-century conventions for describing sentiment, the book's attempts to draw its female characters fails as often as it succeeds. The women are either cooing and crying or cold and distant. It's clear that this novel is in the long line of books written by American males (including Twain's) which are much more comfortable when all they have to deal with is descriptions of male bonding, of boys being boys.

Also, occasionally Getz betrays the fact that even though he lives in California, land of the tall tales, he did graduate work in philosophy as well. In these moments, his prose loses its bruin-like amble for rhetoric that is dangerously close to that favored by Raskin or Meleager: "Was he perhaps plumping for a subtler view, not so much quantitative as qualitative—an *adverbial* style of valuation, and a route back to self-esteem?" (310). And no bear would ever use the word "albeit," I don't care how many pounds he weighs. Many such passages occur in the narrative's periodic flash-forwards, in italics, showing us Bruin in a pen about to be made into Sears Famous Bear Grease, so that we deduce that the whole tale of Bruin's friendship with Sam is narrated after Sam's death. These scenes often have too much purple prose for a brown bear, and they dilute the other powerful moments of foreboding and melancholy that deepen and darken the book's effervescent mirth. Bruin's loneliness after Sam's death is heartbreaking; this book's real subject is friendship and loss, not jumping and drinking.

Bears and bear-suits have been part of comedy for a long time, for there's something both buoyant and sad in their shamble and their all-too-human mannerisms. Chaplin's walk has something bearlike about it, and Octave stumbling about in his bear suit in Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* brings all the slapstick and inconsolable melancholia of that movie to a head. (More recently, Stanley Elkins has used a bear too, to give weight to the black humor of his story "The Making of Ashenden.")

Still, Mr. Getz's bear is special. He's far more interesting and complex a character than many of the boors who pass for comic characters in new fiction. Same goes for Sam.

So buy this book, stretchers and all. Finding a good picaresque tale isn't easy these days. There's few mistakes in *Sam Patch*.

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