

THESE AMERICAN DREAMS

By Michael Ventura

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An image haunts me lately. It is from *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*. In North Carolina during the Civil War, DeMille's father, ten years old, watched their church catch fire: "As the wooden steeple burned, the church bell tolled by itself until its supports were burned away and it fell, a shapeless, molten mass of bronze."

I wonder, does our Liberty Bell toll by itself while its structure burns and its supports crack? Is it fated to drop into the wreckage and lie misshapen on the ashes of history?

And I must ask myself: Am I merely a watcher, intellectually and emotionally, secretly thrilled by the fire while I bear witness?

By contrast, Steve Erickson is no mere watcher. As a writer and a man, he's in the burning building, smack under the bell – and he chooses to be. It is where he takes his stand in his latest novel: the tender, yet ferocious, *These Dreams of You*.

Just so you know: Erickson and I are close friends who've trespassed into each other's writings. He shows up briefly under another name in my Las Vegas novel, *The Death of Frank Sinatra*. A clownish character called Ventura is a supporting player in Erickson's *Leap Year* and *Amnesiascope*. (I've selected passages to be read at my funeral. They're very funny.) Objectivity being obviously impossible, what follows is not a critique but an impression of *These Dreams of You*, in which I am the protagonist's unnamed "anarchist friend ... from the flattest part of the Texas Panhandle," who dislikes, but prays for, Barack Obama -- as, in fact, I do.

The novel opens on the night of Obama's election, watched with varying joys by the Nordhoc family: Zan, a novelist who, first thing every morning, searches a Web page to see whether the family's home is in foreclosure; Viv, a freelance photographer; Parker, their 12-year-old son; and Sheba, age 4, "the color of the man on the television, in whose form the country has now imagined its most unfathomable possibility." Sheba is adopted from Ethiopia, "the burial place of the oldest human fossil." ("We are all Ethiopians," Viv likes to say.)

The white father of a black daughter watches a black man become president. I cannot imagine how that feels. Erickson can. He lets readers know that *These Dreams of You* is, in part, autobiographical. I know the family, and on his pages, they are who they are, though readers may disbelieve the reality of wee Sheba. This tiny Ethiopian-American says and

does the extraordinary. After a weekend at the Ericksons's, I called several friends well-schooled in child-development. They were in agreement: No 4-year-old could do or say what I described. But this kid did.

To be sure, Parker, Sheba, Viv, and Zan himself, are fictional, in that their real-life models are sifted through Erickson's psyche and formed in his prose; they are fictional, but not exaggerated.

What Zan feels on election night is not an unalloyed joy but a joy excruciating in its vulnerability – for it is a joy that can be fulfilled only by the future, and the future is a terrible thing to depend upon.

Obama offered young people the stars. In my view, not Erickson's, Obama's appeal to older political veterans was more subtle: He offered an un-innocent fling at being innocent once more – un-innocent because it was sentimental and willed. Compare the other Democratic candidates' records of effort and accomplishment, and you had to leave your adult mind behind to prefer the nomination of Obama. The power of his charisma was precisely that he invited such a leap of faith – the very fact that it didn't make sense is what gave it strength. Erickson stands with all who took the leap, and this makes his novel a document of our time like no other.

Erickson's vision is prismatic, but at its core is the agony of faith and the faithful. Not faith in Obama, not faith betrayed or lost; rather, Erickson's is the agony of a faith in America, a faith sustained amidst all the catastrophic contradictions affixed to the word "America." It's as though Erickson could not lose that faith if he wanted to. His alter ego Zan says it for him: "Without that faith, I am nothing."

These Dreams of You is a novel of parenthood and childhood as they are enmeshed in history in the present and in the history that does not yet exist and is called the future. It is a novel of the existential abyss at the heart of the modern family, the abyss at the crossroad of three realities: You cannot protect your children from who you really are; you cannot protect them from who they really are; and you cannot protect them from history.

For the childless, the future is no more than a gamble. For parents, the future is what you prepare your children for, and to fail at that is to fail at everything. Erickson makes this excruciatingly vivid. He writes, "[C]hildren lay waste to rational odds. ... [O]ne always has to err on the side of the long shot." And: "Parenthood is another word for fear management."

Again, it's a question of faith. The family in *These Dreams of You* is acutely conscious of how certainties have peeled off society like flakes of old paint in a fire, so a family is forced to improvise a tiny society of its own, in which certainty is necessary but impossible. Nothing can take

certainty's place but faith. The family lives or dies, as a family, on whether its faith is wishful or sincere.

At every turn, *These Dreams of You* is a test of faith for each member of this family. Some tests are passed, some are failed, but the test within the test is that they keep going, devoted to each other no matter what. It is quite a feat of literature for Erickson to make their devotion palpable beyond question -- while he also makes the uncertainty of today's America equally palpable. To top that, he insists on America's promise, and makes that, too, palpable. As you read him, you believe it -- even if you don't believe it.

But I have drawn too solemn a sketch of his novel. For pages on end, in a kind of family slapstick I won't ruin by describing, *These Dreams of You* is laugh-out-loud hilarious -- though, while you laugh, your heart may break.

Of course, this is a Steve Erickson novel, so it happens in the present; the recent past; 30-, 40-, and 100-odd years ago; and in another kind of time measured by no calendar. It takes place in Los Angeles, London, Paris, Berlin, and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. And suddenly you come upon a novella within the novel that surprises you with an excruciatingly beautiful portrait of Robert Kennedy that wrenches even the heart of someone like me. (To put it mildly, I'm an unbeliever in the Kennedy Camelot.)

These Dreams of You is shaped very like the mazes in which its characters are lost and found. Linear purists tut-tut that Erickson's novels are difficult. Don't worry. Read on. All his mazes interlock and reveal one another in the end. You won't lose your sense of direction. You'll grow another.

These Dreams of You puts the reader smack in the center of what Joseph Conrad called "the hazardous enterprise of living." It is a story of the dire present when so much is uncertain, so much is at risk, and so much is possible. Only a genius of Steve Erickson's caliber could achieve such a profound, hilarious, heartbreaking, mind-bending, convincing, Custer's-Last-Stand, 76-trombone salute to family values and America.

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Tejana Dames singer Traci Lamar is battling cancer and needs our help. You may contribute at Traciforgrace.com; Traci and her family thank you.