

ZEROVILLE, RAUCOUSLY

By Michael Ventura

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Steve Erickson is my dear friend, and the finest novelist of my generation. He's a reticent guy. Oh, we've talked a lot, but about movies, books, music, politics, relationships. Me, I also rant about my psyche, the meaning of my life, and the like. Not Steve. My ranting makes him laugh, and that's fun, but his psyche, the meaning of his life, uh uh. Yet there's one subject we're both reticent about: writing. (We bitch about it, but that's different.) Sometimes, obliquely, one of us says something about writing in a kind of code, a sentence obscure to others because it's in the particular context of our friendship. Only when one of us finishes a manuscript do we speak of writing in detail. "This works, maybe this doesn't, you lose me here, it's overkill here" -- matters of technique. Or it can be: "I've been worried about you. After reading this, I'm not worried anymore." We've both had occasion to say that kind of thing. We sometimes take each other's advice, sometimes not. (All Steve said about the first draft of my first novel was, "Cut it by half." I increased it by a third.) But stuff like the meaning of our work, its inspiration, the meaning that may or may not be inherent in our vastly different styles -- we've never spoken of such stuff.

(Footnote: I don't mean to suggest I'm Steve's equal as a novelist. I'm not even close. But I can be a useful sounding-board sometimes.)

Our careers as writers -- we don't talk about that. I learned *Our Ecstatic Days* sold less than 2000 copies from a recent article in the *Los Angeles Times*, not from Steve. Nor did Steve ever mention that four of his novels have been on the *New York Times* list of Notable Books of the Year; I found out from the publicity sheet that came with my publisher's copy of his new novel, *Zeroville*. (I couldn't have learned it from the *New York Times*, as Steve knows. I don't read lit critics anymore -- for reasons that will be clear in a bit.)

A year ago October, Steve sent me the manuscript of *Zeroville*. I read it in a night, laughing out loud over and over, thrilling at its brilliance, damn near crying in the places where it broke my heart -- and proud, proud of this man, three masterpieces in a row (and I don't say "masterpiece" lightly). The duet of *The Sea Came In at Midnight* and *Our Ecstatic Days*, and now *Zeroville*. Upon finishing, I got very happily drunk, sang songs, woke the neighbors. (I get raucous about great writing.)

But one piece of my advice Steve should never have taken. It's this way...

A few days ago I got an email -- not from Steve -- saying *The New York Times* gave *Zeroville* a great Sunday review. So I did what I usually wouldn't: go online, read the review. Beneath a nifty drawing, it says *Zeroville* is a "funny, disturbing, daring and demanding novel -- Erickson's best." I yelp like a sled-dog, howl like a coyote, and (in the wee hours, inconsiderate of neighbors) I yell, "FINALLY the frackin' *New York Times* comes through!" Then I read the review again. "Stop the bus. What about Abraham and Isaac?" No mention that this darkly hilarious Hollywood fable is also a *really* dark (but, in the end, shining) vision of modern monotheism's founding myth, the story of Abraham and Isaac. You think you'd notice this when, four pages in, the protagonist -- whose nickname is Vikar, but whose given name is Isaac -- says of Hollywood, "I've found a place where God does not kill children but is a Child Himself."

So I go online, read all the reviews I can find. 'Cause all lit-crits can't be morons and ignoramuses, right? I mean, I'm glad the gal on the *Times* dug the book, but come on, it's a lit-crit's job to do more than like or dislike, right? I found (mostly) wildly enthusiastic reviews from *Bookslut*, *The Washington Post*, *MostlyFiction.com*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *TheFanzine.com*, *The New Yorker* (dumb), *The Los Angeles Times* (favorable but superdumb), *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Seattle Times*, *The Toronto Globe & Mail* (really smart but nothing of Abraham and Isaac). Ah, *The New York Sun* mentions there's stuff about "Abrahamic religions," but that's as far as it goes; loves the book and good for him.

By this time I'm liquored up, disturbing the neighbors again (unpleasantly). I go to *Zeroville*. For hours, I make a list of pages that accent and/or reference Abraham and Isaac (the novel starts, as many do, on page 15): 18, 20 (Vikar's given name, *Ike* -- short for *Isaac* -- is emphasized), 28 (given name again emphasized), 34-36 (blazing Technicolor can't-be-missed reference), 45, 50-51, 64, 81 (ok, this's one's iffy), 98, 102-103, 105, 115, 119, 125, 139, 140 (iffy, maybe), 154, 170, 185 (a reminder that Vikar's name was once not even "Ike" but *Isaac* -- ok? in case anyone forgot?), 206-207, 210, 216-217, 222-223, 224 (iffy), 240-242 (blazing Technicolor again, and the Abraham/Isaac tale is even briefly retold, making this a really-and-truly-cannot-be-missed reference), 251 (blazing black-and-white, a reprise of the blazing Technicolor on pages 34-36), 275, 276, 284 (sky-written in flame for all to see), 287, 299-300, 301 (iffy), 303, 310-311, another on 311 (maybe the weirdest), 312 (wow, that's all I got to say about that one!), 313, 319, 322 (vaguely), 327, 328-329 (and 329 is the very last page, and if those last two pages don't shine a bright light into your mind... well, read it again in a few years, some lights take a while to shine at just that angle that sees into, illuminates, the mind. And some people take a while to tilt their noggins in the beneficial direction).

One guy, bless him, Andrew Hulkrans, *BookForum.com*, his first sentence: "Fading in with an epigraph from Joseph von Sternberg -- 'I believe the cinema was here from the beginning of the world' -- Steve Erickson adapts nearly the oldest story in the book (Abraham and Isaac), threads it through the projector through which all film history spins... [etc., very enthusiastic]." Fourteen lit-crits. One got it. Some were smart (two, very smart); most were morons; one got it.

The joke is it's my fault. Steve knew (he'd never say, but he knew) he'd be lucky if one critic in 14 got it. His manuscript had, as prefacing quotes, the Joseph von Sternberg line and two verses of Leonard Cohen's "Story of Isaac." I told him Josef von Sternberg's line was so strong it should stand alone, the Cohen quote was overkill, readers couldn't help but get that the root of this comedy was Abraham and Isaac. But his first instinct was right. He trusts his readers, or he wouldn't write the way he does. But he knows better than to trust the mostly mal-educated I'm-articulate-so-I-must-be-intelligent ignoramuses who write about books. (I also suggested he change the title and he said I didn't get it. It's a terrific title, what was I thinking?!)

Ok, let's try lit crit in two paragraphs. The founding story of modern monotheism is about a god who'd ask you to kill your kid. You, super-idiot, believe in this god more than in your kid. Just as you're about to kill your kid, the god says, "Stand down. I just needed to make sure you'd do it if I said to." After this royal mindfuck, this god claims *you* need redemption! Vikar won't accept a god who commands that we kill children,

even if the command is a cosmic joke, and even if that god is the capital-G God! (I'm with him all the way on that.) Vikar thinks that the phenomenon of cinema is, itself, the key -- not to "the meaning of life" but to what humans are. He takes a funny, quixotic journey of twists and turns in which nothing is predictable but, at the end, every move seems inevitable. Also, you meet a woman named Soledad Palladin. She may be the illegitimate daughter of Luis Bunuel. If you've never known anyone remotely like her, you have my sympathy. And: every page needs to be there. You can't take one page out of this book, every single word is necessary. When was the last time you read anything so well-crafted?

What *Zeroville* is about (far more so than *Finnegan's Wake*, and funnier -- the way Buster Keaton is funnier and more profound than D.W. Griffith) is a verbal model of monotheistic consciousness. I shout (waking the neighbors again). "NOT a rendition or a treatise, a MODEL!" It's about how one's perception, like it or not, is sublimely undermined -- if not driven stark staring mad -- by monotheism. Which is why lit crits -- blind, cowardly, creepy, buggers that most of them are -- either couldn't see what was going on ('cause monotheism programs itself not to see itself), or could not/would not admit what it saw. And hey, you can be an atheist or whatever, but if you grew in a monotheistic culture you have a monotheistic consciousness, I promise. *Zeroville* also is a fable, an urban folk-tale -- often hilarious, sometimes heartbreaking -- about how much shit you have to go through to see, to really see, how monotheism screws up your consciousness, and to begin to experience what consciousness might be like without it.

Great stocking-stuffer for Christmas.

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