

A REVERIE OF CHRISTMAS PAST

By EDWIN D. REILLY, Jr.
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Gazette illustration

“Night came and we turned off the lights except for the little blue-and-white Christmas tree bulbs that reflected a million times in strands of tinsel. The memory of the four of us sitting in the front room, Mother and Ben in the squeaking rattan chairs, Anne-Marie and I sprawled at opposite ends of my

daybed, singing softly in the dim light from the tree, remains for me after more than sixty years an iconographic image of Christmas, a moment rendered poignant by the unspoken knowledge that Ben and so many men and boys from our block were going off into danger, and might not come back.”

—Trevanian, referring to Christmas 1941 in
The Crazyladies of Pearl Street

Nostalgia is the most bittersweet of human emotions, especially at Christmas time. The “Pearl Street” of Trevanian’s title is in Albany, of course, but his latest “novel” also ranges through Troy, Schenectady, Rensselaer, Cohoes, Watervliet, Green Island, and beyond, up to Lake George Village and Fort Ann. As is the case with many authors of singular name and fame, he enjoys a sense of mystery, even as to his actual identity.

Trevanian is best known as the author of the clearly fictional “Eiger Sanction,” but his latest work is almost certainly a thinly-veiled autobiographical account of his boyhood years in Albany. The story is told in the first person through its protagonist, Jean-Luc (John Luke) LaPointe, who was born in 1930 and grew up very poor with his younger sister and abandoned mother from the Depression through World War II. His mother, born of French-Canadian parents, was proud of her full name—Ruby Lucille LaPointe—but chose to be called Lucille. My mother, also born of French-Canadian parents, was equally proud of hers—Clara Cecelia Julia LeMay—but went by Cecelia. But I am not Trevanian.

The “crazyladies” of Pearl Street were not crazy, just desperate in the extremes they went to, scratching and clawing to provide for their families. At the height of the Depression, Lucille’s family had to live on \$7.57 a week, of which a dollar had to be set aside to add to a \$20 per month housing subsidy in order to meet rent that was five dollars more.

In Troy at the same time, we were not nearly so desperately poor because we were an intact family at the threshold of middle class. Jean-Luc’s mother took pride in her ability to make an Easter “Virginia ham” out of Spam and pineapple. We never went hungry, but I do recall eating a lot of Franco-American spaghetti. But I am not Trevanian.

<>Jean-Luc’s formal education was greatly enhanced by his relationship with Mr. Kane, the corner grocer, who claimed that his socialism was of a very special kind. He believed that money should be earned by capitalists but spent by socialists, who would give vouchers to families for schooling and other necessities that they would be free to spend wherever they could obtain the best value.

In my case, the “corner” grocery was that of my grandfather and my enhanced education therefrom was at the hands of its shopkeeper, my uncle Bill. He was much more a Yankee fan than a political theorist. He advocated inter-league play in the ‘40s but did not live to see it.

One of my lost memories that the book vividly restored had to do with a product that our store at 81 Hoosick Street carried (and some still do). Jean-Luc says: “Root Beer Barrels at two-a-penny were my personal favorites; the sugar grit on the outside soon melted, leaving them slick and hard and long-lasting, but dangerous to suck because deep holes with razor-sharp edges developed, and they would lacerate your tongue if you were stupid enough to explore the hole with it...and you always were.” Yes, *now* my tongue remembers. But I am not Trevanian.

Mr. Kane ran what Trevanian calls a “slate” but which I learned as a “cuff,” as in “on the cuff.” There was no Visa or Master Card in those days. Kane allowed neighborhood people to run up a bill over the month and pay it off at the end. So did my grandfather. So did Harry Harrison at the Economy on Union Street as recently as the ‘70s. We miss him and his market and his faithful delivery worker, Walt, who later performed the same function for Arthur’s in the Stockade.

Nostalgia is sprinkled throughout “Crazyladies” through the song titles that Jean-Luc mastered while listening to the Lucky Strike Hit Parade on the family’s hard-earned Emerson radio: “The Way You Look Tonight,” “I’ll be Seeing You,” “All the Things You Are,” “White Christmas,” and many others. And then there were the wartime songs such as “Over the Rainbow,” “White Cliffs of Dover,” “I’ll Be Home for Christmas,” and the overtly patriotic but less melodic and faintly blasphemous “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition.” Thinking that the Lord takes sides in war or football continues to be the biggest obstacle to civilizing our nation.

The most cherished daytime refuge of the young LaPointe family—mother, son, and daughter— was a picnic site near the lake in Washington Park in Albany. The most cherished daytime refuge of the young Reilly family—mother, son, and daughter—was a picnic site near the lake in Frear Park in Troy. But I am not Trevanian.

Jean-Luc’s movie theater was the Strand in Albany, where he paid 15 cents for his Saturday triple-feature and short subjects. Mine was the Palace in Troy where admission, after two years of inflation, was 17 cents. But the effect on us

was identical: “After the Saturday Special’s six-hour assault on your senses, you would stagger, blinking, out into the drab, insipid real world, your eyes blurry, your ears buzzing, your knees stiff, but your soul effervescent with adventure and your spirit strengthened by personal experiences of peril and courage.”

The pleasure of old-time radio was much more intense than that of present-day television. Jean-Luc says: “My favorite moment of the day was turning on the radio when I got back from school and feeling the delicious anticipation of those five or so seconds of hum while the tubes warmed up.”

TV is often just background noise and a flickering light, but one had to bond one’s imagination to a radio. Jean-Luc’s (and my) favorite shows were *I Love a Mystery*, *Inner Sanctum*, the *Lone Ranger*, the *Green Hornet*, the *Shadow*—who knew “what evil lurked in the hearts of men”—and the *Whistler*, “who knows many things because he walks by night.”

The considerably weakened radio waves that brought us these programs continue to propagate softly throughout the distant reaches of the universe. I can still hear them.

But I am not Trevanian.

Edwin D. Reilly, Jr., a noted time traveler, lives in Niskayuna and is a regular contributor to the *Sunday Gazette* opinion page. Dr. Rodney William Whitaker, a.k.a. Trevanian, born in 1931 in Granville, NY, died eleven days ago, shortly after this essay was written.