

***The Apprentice.* Lewis “Scooter” Libby. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1996. 239 pages. ISBN: 1-55597-245-4.**

“Scooter,” of course, has made the news on account of the scandal swirling around dubious loyalty (and even more dubious integrity) up at the headwaters. He did *not* make the news on account of his deathless entry into literary waters with *The Apprentice*. Libby’s credentials to write, he succinctly announces beneath a grim portrait on the book jacket, come down to “graduate of Yale University and of Columbia University School of Law” before the first of “numerous” and “official” visits to Japan in 1969, the which I guess explains why he wasn’t in Vietnam with the rest of us dummies in 1969 and if I ever meet one of those Iv(or)y League squirrels who doesn’t in the first two minutes of the interview let you know where he “prepped” and where went afterward and why he wasn’t at Hué for the big fight, I think I’ll have to eat my shorts... or worse, *his*. Meantime, of course, with indictments pending, it’s pretty clear who’s gonna have first crack at Scooter’s shorts in the near future: his roommate in Cellblock C at Leavenworth.

That said, *The Apprentice*, now commanding around \$1000 on used-book web sites, is a mystery, set in “Snow Country, Northern Honshu, Japan, Late Winter 1903.” And a good thing we get that declaration (the only one, by the way), too, since not much else in the narrative anchors the story to any particular time or place save for the few Japanese names (Ueda, Matsuko, Setsuo, Yukiko... sound Japanese to me at least) and a fleeting reference to—like what the hell else happened in Japan in 1900?—the Japo-Russian War. Otherwise, it’s a “timeless” tale, the prime “mystery” of which being just how the author or publisher persuaded Francis Fukuyama (I *think* he’s the “end of History” guy and a heavy-hitter, though he’s called “Frank Fukuyama” in the acknowledgements... Frat bro, maybe? Boola boola!) to endorse the book, ominously pronounced Mr. Libby’s “first novel,” as if there were yet more where that came from.

We find ourselves, then, in the snow-swaddled woodland of Honshu at a wayside inn, where guests, identified only by their profession or by their physical traits (“lac-tapper,” “rope-maker,” “straw-man,” “hunter”; “round-faced man,” “pox-faced man,” “narrow-faced man,” “bearded man” and on and on... and on) speak Chaucerian English to one another while the blizzard howls outside, covering with its... uh, lessee... what would Chaucer cover stuff with? ...with its ...um, er: *mantlet*, a multitude of sins. Or not. Our protagonist, called merely—and annoyingly—“the youth,” an “apprentice” to the innkeeper (hence the title and, let’s hope, *some* double-edged advertence to the kid’s “apprenticeship” to life, durance, honor, love, the lot), discovers at once the dead body of a sinister wayfarer (nameless) with a mysterious “box” *and* the live body (not to say “lithe” body) of a melancholy “entertainer” (Yukiko) with likewise a mysterious “box,” if you catch my (snow)drift. Dark agents are after the box (the worm-wooden one, that is, the contents of which, we later learn, impinge on Japan’s perdurance in the looming war), and one mystery is who’s going to get which and do what with it and on and on.

The language is overwrought, it’s true, but not without a certain elegance (the guy did, after all, go to Yale University and Columbia University School of Law) and a serious effort to retrieve mood and ethos in “old” Japan: caste, prejudice, authority,

bondage, bushido (pronounced “bushy-toe,” or so I hear), inked-on pubic hair. Sadly, the elegance serves only to impede the narrative, which dawdles in interminable petty conversations that don’t propel the story, in minute descriptions that set mood but not mode, in inner monologue that doesn’t account for let alone set afoot... *action!* Not much happens, and when it does, it falls in simple, declarative sentences buried (“snowed in,” you might say) at the end of chapters (“The youth fell asleep”; “the hunchback”—yes, there *is* a hunchback—“played with its feet”; “He saw the bearded man”; “Soon he fell again”; and on and on) and according to the glacial pace of ponderous *sensei* Kobiushi Kwanaki patiently revealing to his staid Zen acolytes, immobile on the polished planks of the *dojo* (or *domo*, I always get them mixed up) the inscrutable secrets of inner peace ...and ...qui

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...zzzzz. Well, the snows thaw

as thaw they must, even in Northern Honshu, Japan, 1903. The ending comes, literally out of nowhere, wholly gratuitous, explains the whole incomprehensible sequence in a couple of pages, sends the “youth” happily—and richly—off to an ambivalent destiny. Or not. With the fulsome Yukiko. Or not.

“When the Almighty lays his hand on a man’s shoulder, sir,” snorted Thomas Hart Benton one time, “I take *mine* off, sir” (*Italics* mine. Thomas Hart Benton wouldn’ta known an *italic* from a houn’ dog and woulda kicked my butt, sir, if I’da proposed to *italicize* him, sir!). Scooter is sleepin’ out an’ far tonight and so deserves a little consideration. About the best I can give him over this novel is that it seems to me the product of someone who set out to write a novel, someone with a good education (as if, what do you know? ...he were a graduate of Yale University and Columbia University School of Law) and a good vocabulary (when’s the last time you saw the word “tumular”?) and a certain grace with prose, someone fascinated by whores, thieves, bullies, louts, and naifs. Now where do you suppose a nice kid, graduate of Yale University and Columbia University School of Law would ever run into people like that?