

Golden Hill, by Francis Spufford, Faber, 344pp, £16.99

It's New-York in 1746, the lights of Breukelen twinkle over the water, a young Mr Smith arrives with a thousand-dollar bill, and what we have here is a novel of gloriously capacious humanity, thick-woven with all life in its oddness and familiarity, a novel of such joy it leaves you beaming, and such seriousness it asks to be read again and again. In short, this is a masterpiece.

In the American tradition, but with a wholly original and inimitable English voice, Smith is an Adam in the New World, announcing himself boldly as a 'new man... new-made'. Across the city, among merchants, daughters, slaves, actors, rogues, runs the general murmuring, 'who is he?' He has no past he's willing to talk about and ahead of him everything a man might do with a promissory note and four shining guineas in his pocket. Life does not, of course, run smoothly for a picaresque hero: Smith's guineas are stolen at once, leaving him to walk, 'with what sadder steps and slower', like Milton's Adam and Eve venturing out from Eden with 'wandering steps and slow'.

Not that anything goes slowly in *Golden Hill*: the novel is a riot of action, as busy with talk, troubles, passions and large breakfasts as the Merchants' coffee-house when a brig is just in. Gentlemen leap from sash windows at midnight and escape across rooftops; card games are played for fortunes and reputations; sex is steamy because it's in a sauna. Since Smith finds himself arraigned for capitol offences with remarkable frequency, he lives with the intensity of a man both 'new-made' and about to die – his energy matched only by the abrasively brilliant Tabitha Lovell, thwarted and explosive, determined to take command of the plot.

Spufford's people are usually on the move: gobbling, coddling, puzzling, worrying. They disappear down the wooden stairs of those tall, narrow, Dutch-gabled houses 'like ink down a drain', or swing up them like monkeys in a tree – and that's not to mention the inner staircases of their minds. Even when snoozing in elbow-chairs, they are vividly alive.

Colonial New-York was a city with edges: cows on the common were visible at the end of the street. It was small enough that everyone knew about a wealthy stranger just arrived, yet large enough to contain every kind of person and possibility. Spufford works magic at the moments when intimacy sways out giddily into vastness. We feel the dolls' house closeness of rooms that smell of waxed wood and tea-leaves, and then, as

dusk falls, a dim apprehension that beyond the familiar streets lie all the 'forests of the night', a continent barely known.

This tipping of scales is particular to a time and place. But all human lives are both miniature and vast, made up from the mixed materials of Mondays and Tuesdays, clocks and tea-cups, metaphysical questions of purpose, love, and faith. In the stillness of a snowy street or a courtroom, Spufford's characters may suddenly feel 'as if a piece of folded white paper had abruptly opened up' to reveal them 'standing tiny at its middle point'. Stepping into Trinity Church on a Sunday morning we see powdered heads bobbing above white box-pews, but can a novel record what happens, invisibly, in people's souls when, 'lidless before the lord', they kneel down out of sight? 'Certainly, all the heads reappeared again looking none the worse'.

Spufford is profoundly interested in what novels can do. Can they contain life's 'mess of accident' while also sorting out the muddle? Is the energetic narration of incident a 'conjurer's distracting busywork', holding our attention with arabesque flourishes in air so that a playing card, or personal tragedy, can be smuggled up a sleeve? *Golden Hill* is a celebration of the eighteenth-century novel as it was shaped by Smollett, Sterne, Henry and Sarah Fielding. It plays at the city limits of the genre and it ends with flourishing conviction about the transformative empathies that become possible in fiction. Plenty of dubious currencies change hands in old New-York, but this novel is verifiable gold.