

A Conversation with Francis Spufford

Winner of the 2017 Ondaatje Prize for a book evoking 'the spirit of a place'.

'The New York of *Golden Hill* doesn't exist', says Francis Spufford when I marvel at the immediacy with which he has conjured the city in 1746: 'It burnt down twice in the late eighteenth century.' Yet in his novel it is pungent and inhabitable and gloriously surprising. In these pages, everyone is in motion and their movements trace out an intimate geography. Merchants leap up polished wooden staircases and out onto rooftops, congregations bob up and down in their box pews, crowds of carolling Van Loon children press around polished front doors, and coffee-house waiters spin between tables, delivering breakfasts and the talk of the town.

The coffee-house scenes are written with such feeling that I suspect the author of spending a good deal of time in cafés. And so he does. We meet in his current office, a convivial coffee shop in Cambridge where he works surrounded by the chatter of people going about their lives, preferring to write on the tide of humming busyness than in the quiet of home.

'I work from pictures in my head', he tells me, 'and a compound atmospheric judgment of what a setting feels like, tastes like, and what it means for the human dramas and interactions within it.' I want to know more about what formed that 'atmospheric compound'. He spent a little time in New York but there wasn't much of the eighteenth century left to see: St Paul's Chapel from the 1750s and a mostly rebuilt tavern. Nor were there many images of it. Contemporary prints show a generic classical city of the kind it was meant to be and probably wasn't, but there is a map Spufford found particularly useful. It was put together in the early nineteenth century from the recollections of New York's oldest living inhabitant, David Grim, who might have been a child singing carols in the street the winter that our hero Mr Smith was in town. Grim remembered the streets of his young life: the Moravian church, the new Dutch church, the city hall. 'I looked at those with a magnifying glass', says Spufford. He could see that the city hall had a court room, a dungeon below ground and a debtor's prison in the attic: a world of narrative possibilities.

These buildings seen through the magnifying glass become life-size in the novel. The people who rush through the corridors express with every gesture something absolutely distinct about this time and place, what Spufford describes as a 'particular mixture of problems and resentments, a truculent finger-stabbing-at-table insistence that they are more loyal and more British than anyone'. Tabitha, he points out, the acerbic, bitterly brilliant woman at the centre of the novel, could not have existed a century earlier. In Salem, for example, she would have been tried as a witch.

Golden Hill has been called 'the best eighteenth-century novel since the eighteenth century', but it strikes me as being more evocative of streets and counting houses and harbour lights than anything written by Henry or Sarah Fielding, or Johnson, or even Sterne. We agree that no eighteenth-century novel would be a contender for the Ondaatje Prize. So what's going on? Spufford's response is candid and fascinating. 'I could not do without the Romantic revolution in description', he says, acknowledging that 'in sensibility' some of the book is much later than 1746: 'it's doing things with later layers of time, and of writing'.

I reflect for a moment on the feat of rooting us in the mid-1740s while also building up these temporal strata which allow him new kinds of description and which fold into the proud provincial outpost the knowledge of what New York would become. 'My backwards look was continuously filled with what the city was going to

mean' he says, 'the comedy of its later vastness as against its temporary tininess'. The American sublime is immanent in his writing of the green wilderness beyond the neat sash-windowed houses. 'How could I not be aware of the end of *The Great Gatsby*?'

As he says this, I begin to understand how fundamentally the novel is built from the vernacular materials of American writing. It wears the early English novel on its sleeve, but there's another passion here: 'This book is my love-letter to American literature'. Spufford lets rip with conmen and tricksters, with blank cheques and identities invented from scratch. And, like James and Wharton and Fitzgerald, he is deeply interested in forms of economic exchange. 'American fiction has always been clear that credit of different kinds can run together.' His own novel is populated by traders (men and women) who make transactions in many currencies. They exchange conversation, love, trust; rum and sugar; slaves and stories.

Time in *Golden Hill* is mapped as vividly as the streets between the churches. Each chapter unfolds on a significant date in the festive calendar, like All Hallows, Bonfire Night (or rather 'Pope Day'), and 'His Majesty's Birthday', when many a prolix ode is recited in honour of King George. These days have pronounced moral characters, so that even before anything happens each chapter has a moral framework, and a set of expectations. Spufford is joyously responsive to the twining of liturgical and civic calendars, and I have been looking forward to asking him about the book's festive latticework. Why did he choose the last six weeks of the year?

There are some charmingly simple reasons. 'I've seen the Hudson valley going into gunmetal grey upon grey, with maroon in the trees. And I've always like snow.' But there's a cultural story here, too, running over and under the natural story of the year. 'I wanted to give a ribbed and textured sense of *ancien regime* time: Guy Fawkes's Day was an important orgy of anti-Catholicism in colonial America. And the King's Birthday was celebrated.' Whereas now this portion of the year is the one 'most stuffed with all the most uniquely American festivals. It's when Thanksgiving happens!'

Spufford has used the calendar as a structuring principle which undergirds the rapidly unspooling action of the city. We may be lost in the double bluff of mercantile dealings, or in the crowd chasing Smith through the streets, but we know the date and what it asks of us. 'I wanted the calendar supporting from underneath all that picaresque running about. I wanted the reader to be passed on from feast to feast.' That seems to me one of the great delights of the novel: the relationship here between running-on and timetabled shapeliness feels very much like life itself. We don't know what will happen next, but there is a defined space for it in the diary.

'O Sapientia', I say, rather wistfully, naming the first of the great antiphons, the day when advent begins on 17 December with the anticipatory greeting of Christ as wisdom. 'O wisdom!' laughs Spufford. Why is he chuckling? 'O Sapientia has always struck me as wanting to have something intensely ironic happen on it.' I think back over that chapter and realise that it is the point of Smith's most sordid and stupid misdemeanours, a chaos of greed and sex and bad decisions, all wisdom distinctly in abeyance. How characteristic that Spufford's seriousness about liturgical time allows him such good jokes. How characteristic that everything he says makes me want to read him again.