

In the Silence There Are Ghosts
by James Calvin Schaap (Baker Books, 1995)
Reviewed by K. D. Kragen

Can our parents' faith speak to us from the silence of the grave? Does seeking—and finding—faith require seeking and finding truth about our past? What hope does a parent have for their children's salvation? *What hope?* "What good is faith, she thought, if it delivers nothing but dread?" (*In The Silence There Are Ghosts*, p. 191.)

James Calvin Schaap's first novel, *In the Silence There Are Ghosts*, delves deep into questions of faith handed down from one generation to the next. The main character, Emily Doorn, with her two young children, leaves a failed marriage in LA for her home town of Neukirk, Iowa. There she struggles with memories of the untimely death of her older sister, Meg, as well as her mother's near-catatonic state after a major stroke.

The "radical 60's," the Vietnam war, child sexual abuse, abortion, all come into play as Emily re-establishes relationships with old family friends and acquaintances and tries to understand her divorce. Throughout, the mystery of her older sister's death in a car accident unfolds with fascinating and disturbing developments that support extremely well the book's main theme.

Schaap utilizes a variety of imaginative literary devices, well-drawn characters, and breathless moments to plunge us into what on the surface seems the typical soap-opera world of buried lies and "failed" lives. Yet, though the book takes its time to draw one into the story, as our attention becomes more and more riveted to the main characters—Emily Doorn, Norm, Marty, Will Kruse, and most of all the symbolically silent central figures of Emily's mom and Emily's dead sister—as we are sucked into the vortex of small-town Neukirk, Iowa, we see unravel before us a drama that exposes a little of the ragged heart of Evangelical Christian America. Schaap pulls his exposition off with artistic skill rather than by preachy, plodding platitudes interspersed with Biblical quotations from the Happy Church Edition of the Really New King James Version of the Bible.

A great lesson I learned from Schaap's novel: one transmits one's faith to their children by living out that faith in the day by day. The example of *faithful* living is more important in the communication of truth to one's children than the standard catalogue of moral imperatives taught at the dinner table. Of course, it goes without saying, one is not therefore to neglect the teaching of truth and good morals; yet, the example of truly honest and faithful parents leaves home with the kids even if nothing else does! This is by no means an easy lesson for the orthodox Christian parent—I can tell you that from really hardcore experience. Yet, it is a good lesson, which I for one am taking to heart. Thank you, James Schaap.

Not many fiction works today are struggling with issues of faith from the perspective of an Evangelical Christian *Weltanschauung* (worldview). Yet Schaap dives right into the thick of it. Neither are there very many novels that tackle the struggle of how parents deal honestly and at the most basic level with the question of their children's salvation—or damnation. (Not a popular subject in an emerging pagan culture let alone in the Christian community.)

Schaap addresses these issues with skill and insight. There are a few awkward sentences here and there (things that in a second printing will likely be polished out). The very first sentence of the book, for example, is a bit rough—sad, not getting a story's first sentence into that pristine, gripping clarity we writers all seek after. But all-in-all this work shines with smooth narrative and clean dialogue. Even the way in which the author breaks into the story once in awhile, even this somewhat old-fashioned literary device works surprisingly well and only adds to the story's readability.

Any flaws are easily offset by a plethora of great lines. For example, there's one line quite reminiscent of the old *Wittenberg Door* magazine: "I remember going to my office in the church and opening the Bible, playing this silly game of just flip it open somewhere and expect that Jesus Christ will

somehow walk out of the pages and spell relief" (p. 172). And: "'Sometimes I wish I was still there in Neukirk, you know—all that certainty about things', he told her. 'The only thing I'm convinced of now is that I'm not God'" (p. 174). And: "'Mom, the kids are fine', she said, straightening her voice as if it were a garment, wrinkled" (p. 222).

In the Silence There Are Ghosts is a marvelous first novel! Bravo! It is well-polished and keeps the pace strong right up to the clean and quietly remarkable ending! This book is a refreshing work from a CBA publisher. To see Baker take on a real piece of fiction is very exciting. There are no wild-eyed deliverance ministers in this story, no demon hordes battling outside small-town USA with little praying pastors and their two-dimensional Stepford wives. Just real, hard life, with kids that grow up and kids that don't make it—suffering parents and suffering people seeking some simple straight-forward meaning in their lives. Through the artfully written word, we see everyday people elevated to the fever pitch of existence on Earth as we all know it at the ragged end of the 20th century (or beginning of the 21st, as the case may be).

I suspect—a bit of speculation here—Schaap is purging some of his own ghosts in *In the Silence There Are Ghosts*, some of his own religious, cultural, emotional past. This is not a bad thing. It is the prerogative of the artist, sometimes a necessity. Herein is all the angst-ridden tension of the *Evangelical Xian Artist* unloading his past and future in fine literary form (very much art by a Christian, not "Christian art"). In Frank Schaeffer's first novel, *Portafino*, we have an analogous example of gut-wrenching revelations from the son of two of this century's greatest Evangelical voices, Francis and Edith Schaeffer. With *In the Silence There Are Ghosts*, Schaap joins ranks with the too few other literary figures coming out of American Christendom these days, like Frank Schaeffer, Ron Hansen and Annie Dillard. We need more quality Xian writers like James Calvin Schaap. We need them.

Braving the obvious ambiguities of such a term as "crossover," I would nonetheless consider unequivocally that *In The Silence There Are Ghosts* is a great first novel that should appeal to the widest possible audience, CBA and ABA. I for one will be looking forward with anticipation to James Calvin Schaap's next book.

Romey's Place. James Calvin Schaap (Baker Books, 1999) 280 pp.
Reviewed by K. D. Kragen

This second novel of James Calvin Schaap stands with countless other well-known quasi-autobiographical, youth-angst novels, e.g., Hesse's *Beneath The Wheel* (Noonday Reissue, 1988) or Frank Schaeffer's *Portofino* (Berkley, 1996). While such subject matter can get a bit tedious, Schaap's high quality of style and storytelling keeps the reader, chapter by chapter, moving down the inevitable though by no means predictable path. The breached father-son relationship hooks one from the start as the central, universal struggle upon which Schaap hangs his narrative and well-drawn characters.

Even his few clichés are so powerfully asserted, Schaap gets clean away with it. Passages such as Lowell's later adult confession to his father of a transgression made in his youth (p. 17) exhibit the believable realism and polished craft of the author, a scene beautiful in its simplicity and touching pathos: "'Tell me, Lowell'" replies the truly mystified, elderly father, "'was I always that hard to live with?'" And then comes the universal realization *qua* parent's fear, "Did I fail you?Sometimes you wonder whether you did anything right at all" (p. 20).

How often has a father been unaware of his harsh effect upon a son—or daughter? How many parents grow old really unknowing of the breach with their daughter or son that goes back to a childhood often never revealed? As *Romey's Place* moves cleanly from beginning to end in sure-footed prose,

beneath the wheels of its fiction it is also a warning to fathers and mothers—but especially fathers.

Often it is only the wisdom and hope passed from parent to child that in a son or daughter's later years raises one out of the existential emptiness lying at "the bottom of the river" inside each one of us (p. 12), the egocentric loneliness we're each born into and like soulful tadpoles must try to swim up out of, into the air of eternity, or die.

Maybe the only weakness of the story was that I felt it ended too sharply, leaving the reader unsatisfied not concerning the main character, Lowell Prins and what he learned, but concerning the secondary character, Lowell's best friend Romey Guttner. Romey is a creature of fiction as memorable as John Irving's Owen Meany (*A Prayer For Own Meany*, Ballantine, 1997); I anticipated a richer denouement for Romey, and I'm just not sure we're given enough to accept as ringing true Romey's final turn of life. Other than that one literary question mark, *Romey's Place* is again a clear sign of high aesthetic life blossoming amongst the community of Christian theists and serious Xian artists making great art. *And may the God of serious art protect us from the aesthetic void amen.*

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