Books

Tales of Magic and Prophecy

Oracle Night by Paul Auster (Henry Holt & Company, Inc., 2003).

By
Robert E. Clark ’90GSAS
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In *Oracle Night*, Paul Auster ’69CC transposes an esoteric tradition of prophecy to the everyday streets of Cobble Hill, Brooklyn. If Brooklyn does not immediately call to mind the writhing Sybil at Delphi and her ambiguous messages, that is just fine. For Auster only gradually makes his landscape both familiar and strange by introducing supernatural motifs from several earlier novels: uncanny coincidences, bizarre chance events, doppelgängers and ghosts, and sudden disruptions of characters’ identities.

Oracle Night stands out in Auster’s fiction, however, for the directness with which such artful contrivances are connected to their source—the act of writing. The novel is a skillful writer’s book about writing, but we need not accept the notion of writers as prophets and makers to enjoy it. It is enough to have an interest in the questions that people tend to ask more humble oracles like fortune-tellers. What are our chances for future love, success, or even cheating death?

So, first back to Brooklyn. There we meet Sidney Orr, a sweet and naïve high school history teacher turned novelist and screenwriter. Sidney lives in Cobble Hill with his wife Grace Tebbetts, a book designer he adores. At the novel’s opening, Orr is recovering from a nearly fatal illness; he is deep in debt to hospitals and ashamed that he could not pull his financial weight in the household during a long convalescence. We eventually learn that Sidney fears losing Grace; he sees her as a beautiful and “luminous creature” of integrity, unflappable independence, and mystery. After all, she chose to marry Sidney suddenly over an unknown rival for reasons that Orr was too grateful to question. The story of their marriage unfolds dramatically; it also serves as the frame tale for *Oracle Night*. It is tempting to

consider this overarching narrative of marital tension the most important of the novel's interwoven stories.

But magic and prophecy have already entered *Oracle Night* by way of tales within the tale. Sidney buys a handsome notebook made in Portugal from the eccentric owner of a stationery shop named M.R. Chang—one of several candidates for the "oracle" of the title. A story pours out of Sidney, almost as if the notebook itself generated the writing. His effusion is a reworking of a famous story-within-a-story from Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*. Hammett's novel offers a parable of the difficulty of truly changing one's identity. The story Sidney writes (which, of course, also has a story-within-a-story embedded) has more frightening significance. To add another layer to the cake, Sidney draws inspiration from a famous writer who makes a fetish of exactly the same kind of Portuguese notebook (and this matters). He tells Sidney that these magic tablets are "friendly" but also "cruel." This remark proves powerfully prophetic; the embedded tales touch on everything from the Holocaust to intimate family horrors.

Oracle Night is compact and invites a second reading to appreciate its internal correspondences and echoes, which ripple out to other Auster writings. It could be read for its postmodern self-consciousness and allusive playfulness—qualities that are serious in the end because they suggest that writing has magical presence, the ability to unite past and future. Yet the novel is also like very old romance-epic, where magic requires no explanation (think Merlin, Arthur, and Guinevere, or the more demure *Lord of the Rings* or Harry Potter books). Characterization is swift and sparse, the hero is far from flawless, and the author makes no bones about being in league with the prophets and oracles.

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