

from R.D. Fohl, *Buffalo News* — “Coulson’s Work Mirrors Struggles of the Working Class,” a review of *The Vanishing Moon*

“I live in the city where my brother and I grew up, where we made our choices, and choices were made for us,” laments the no-longer-young narrator of Joseph Coulson’s first novel “The Vanishing Moon,” which will be published next month by New York City-based Archipelago Books. “I go to the old places to make peace with what happened there, but then memories take hold of me and I twist and turn my body, trying to keep the past at arm’s length, trying to shake it off, feeling a grip that is strong and absolute,” Coulson’s working class narrator Stephen Tollman relates. A literate, if unpublished, short story writer and chronicler of the Tollman family misfortunes from the depths of the Great Depression to the end of the 1970s, he has traded in the romantic dreams of his youth for the security of a job as an assembly line supervisor at a General Motors plant in Cleveland.

Novels about the struggles of working class American families are increasingly rare in the current literary marketplace, but Coulson — who lived in Buffalo while earning a Master’s degree in Writing and Poetics and a Ph.D. in American Literature at the University at Buffalo in the 1980s — has never been particularly constrained by literary fashion. In addition to three chapbooks of poetry, he has co-authored “A Saloon at the Edge of the World,” a full-length play about William Faulkner and Raymond Chandler’s disagreement over how to adapt “The Big Sleep” as a screenplay that was produced and staged in San Francisco in 1996. More recently, he has been Editorial Director, Chief of Staff, and Senior Editor of the Chicago-based Great Books Foundation, where he oversaw not only GBF’s publications, but also its community-based discussions of selected Great Books, including Alexis de Tocqueville’s “Democracy in America,” which was the topic of a GBF-sponsored event here in Buffalo in 1999. As “The Vanishing Moon” (which has already been selected by Barnes & Noble Books for its “Discover Great New Writers” program)

went to press this fall, Coulson was teaching American literature in Paris as sponsored by the University of Toronto.

Set against the backdrop of 20th century American politics and popular culture, the novel follows the tribulations of three generations of Tollmans — a Cleveland, Ohio family cast into poverty, homelessness, and personal tragedy during the Depression of the 1930s. As a consequence of sacrifices made and not made, of foolish and shortsighted decisions, the family's dislocation permanently scars and alters all its descendants.

More particularly, the narrative focuses on the relationship of two brothers — Phillip and Stephen — whose strikingly different responses to their father's abandonment and the subsequent disintegration of the family leaves them full of inarticulate rage and mournful regret, respectively. Even as their lives and fortunes change in the relative prosperity following World War Two, their restiveness seems almost congenital.

By way of contrast, the novel introduces us to a succession of strong and fiercely independent women, including its most compelling narrative voice Katherine Lennox — a political activist turned jazz pianist who is beloved but unattainable by one brother, seduced and abandoned by the other. One evening a stranger in a tavern tells Stephen that the greatest talent of women in general is their “capacity to spend endless amounts of time with dull men. To spend it without being bored, or at least without minding that they are.” The comment echoes like a revelation to him, like an indictment of a still salvageable life.

For James Tollman, Phillip's youngest son and a college-bound intellectual in the making who narrates the Viet Nam era portion of the novel, “Irony is the only faith in a fallen world,” but the house he inhabits is still ruled by retrograde emotions like guilt, fear, and self-loathing

Despite the use of multiple narrators and a protagonist — Phillip Tollman — constructed entirely through the accounts of others, “The Vanishing Moon” opts for a traditionalist approach that will remind readers of classic authors like Steinbeck and Zola, or perhaps such contemporary masters of wounded male pride and self-doubt as Raymond Carver and Russell Banks.