



Join our mailing list!

Join

archipelago books

[DONATE NOW](#)
[ABOUT](#)
[CATALOG](#)
[SUBSCRIBE](#)
[SUPPORT](#)
[CONTACT](#)

a not-for-profit literary press dedicated to promoting cross-cultural exchange through international literature in translation

[about](#)
[reviews](#)
[news](#)
[events](#)

from Sidney Hyman *The Common* Review -- "'Concealment and Interest'" a review of *The Vanishing Moon*

The distinction a great sage drew between make-believe secrets and real secrets is uniquely applicable to Joseph Coulson's first novel, *The Vanishing Moon*. A make-believe secret, the sage said, depends on concealment, and it stirs interest only as long as its core is hidden. When the core is revealed, the secret loses its fascination – as in the case of a stage magician. Once the mechanics behind the trick become known, the act loses its magic.

The elements that make for a real secret, however, can be apparent to the naked eye. They can be seen by everyone, traced, turned inside out. Yet, the more closely they are examined, the more mysterious the source of the spell they cast as in the case of Coulson's novel. Start it, and you become unaware of the hours passing by while you read it. Finish it, and you silently wonder why you still care so much about a certain character in the novel whom you came to know and live with in your reading.

The things that are very clear about the structure of this book include the interplay between the fate and freedom of three generations of Tollmans – a working class family in Cleveland and Detroit – some of whose members pursue illusion that end in the shock of disillusion, while others pursue realistic hopes in defiance of the possibility that these hopes, in the end, will be snapped like matchwood. They also include the dynamic between the private lives of the Tollmans and the course of American economic, political, and cultural experience from the Great Depression to the aftermath of the Vietnam War. It is not quite accurate to call this a work of historical fiction; rather, Coulson has skillfully woven into the plot references to public events that seem designed to appeal in a personal way to readers; he has created benchmarks where the reader can locate him or herself in time and say, "Yes, I know that about

Jessica, or Phil, or Stephen, because I was there"

Other things are very clear. The transcendent figure in the novel is Jessica Tollman, the mother, who without whimpering or striking heroic poses, suffers the loss of two children, her home, her husband, and her eyesight – and whose grandchildren prefer not to visit her in a nursing home because she smells of "urine and disinfectant." Jessica's one reliable source of comfort throughout her adult life is Lethea Strong, a mulatto who acted as a midwife at the births of all the Tollman children. Among these children, the one who serves as the point of departure and return for much of the action in the novel is Phil, the oldest, whose animal charm and bright, hell's bells bravura as a young man is overtaken later in life by cynicism, belligerence, and drunkenness.

There are several clear voices that touch and retouch the story from various perspectives, depending on the dictates of selective memories and views of their own roles as participants in the drama. The voices are those of Stephen, Phil's restrained younger brother; Katherine Lennox, who matures into a celebrated jazz musician, but as a young woman was seduced and abandoned by Phil and loved but never attained by Stephen; and James, one of Phil's sons and the carrier of a promise that his education could make him a fortunate mutant in the Tollman family cycle of pain.

What is the secret source of this novel's power to haunt? Several suggestions, not answers, seem right. First as the author of three published books of poetry, Coulson brings to his narrative a mature poet's respect for the integrity of words – where each word, in relationship to those next to it, is summoned to stand as one with the reality it is meant to describe, whether that reality is an emotion, an idea, a physical gesture. All this, applied to the characters, makes them so vascular and alive that if you were to cut into a page on which they appear you would half expect the page to bleed.

Second, Colson has absorbed into himself the attitude of classical dramatists, who never denied their characters – even the most odious – the right to their own inconvenient humanity. In Coulson's hands, you are led to hope that even the most broken characters will somehow make the right choices leading to their redemption, and you want to cry out to them, "For God's sake! Wake up! Can't you see where you are heading?"

Finally, one more suggestion applies to *The Vanishing Moon* – what Joseph Conrad had to say in *The Mirror of the Sea*; “There is something beyond – a higher point, a subtle and unmistakable touch of love and pride beyond mere skill; almost an inspiration which gives to all work that finish which is almost art – which is art.” So it is in this case. Coulson’s novel partakes of a real secret, in which, over time, key elements laid bare contribute to an aesthetic experience that accumulates – rather than loses – its power to evoke the reader’s wonder.

232 Third Street #A111 - Brooklyn, NY 11215 - 718.852.6134