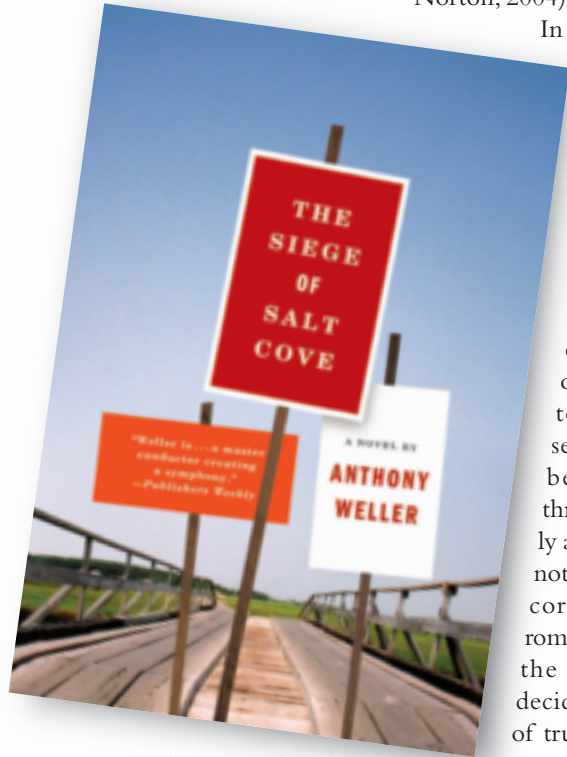


A BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS | By Peter Greer '58; '81 (Hon.)

Anthony Weller's *The Siege of Salt Cove* (W.W. Norton, 2004) is a tour de force.



In his new novel, Anthony Weller '75 tells the story of a group of North Shore townsfolk who take a quixotic stand against not only governmental bureaucracy, but also the larger forces of fate.

In the first place, the story is told by no fewer than 39 narrators, their voices threaded into a literary chorus by the directing pen of Jessica Stoddard, secretary of the Salt Cove Village Hall Association and self-designated “historian of the Siege of Salt Cove.” In the second place, the plot pivots on the decision by a group of Massachusetts North Shore townsfolk (the “Salines”) to secede from the United States because their community is threatened, then bullied and finally attacked by a government that is not only boorish, but also deeply corrupt. In the third place, the romantic high point of the piece is the impassioned, inventive and decidedly unironic consummation of true love between a 73-year-old woman (the aforementioned Jessica) and a public defender turned private inventor named Toby Auberon, who is roughly half her age and as undersized and wise and even magical as the classical French version of Oberon (not the peevish version in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). And finally, Toby's grand invention is the Machina Excelsior, a pinball machine named Xibalba that represents both the Mayan world and the Mayan underworld, giving this mechanism of lights and bells and flippers an allegorical dimension of mythic proportion. As you can see, in the reading experience of this novel, suspension of disbelief is the order of the moment.

The plot is incredible, but compelling. The state of Massachusetts declares unsafe the pedestrian bridge over Salt Cove that is both picturesque and historic. The townsfolk first protest, then band together to fight the state's decision to replace the bridge with a “concrete monstrosity,” rejecting the twin justifications of safety and town access. Events coupled with sleuthing make clear that the real reason for the state's decree is greed, in the person of an ambitious lieutenant governor whose sights

are set on occupying the governor's office and filling his own pockets. The heterogeneous voices of the earnest defenders of the town's autonomy lift higher and higher, to a sadly fatal pitch, such that by the end it is hard to answer Toby's rhetorical question: “What's been won?” Worse, it is easy to agree with his conclusion that the whole episode feels “like the most miserable defeat.”

But there has indeed been victory in Salt Cove's stand, manifest in the determined and principled position the townspeople take, as well as in the particular pluck and courage of many of those townspeople: the aging woman dying of cancer who stabs the tire of a state vehicle; the fearless boy who discovers, in the dead of night, the explosives on the supports of the bridge that the state agents had planted; the irreverent and mysterious man who calls himself the Wily Scativo and who sacrifices himself in a quixotic counterattack; and countless more.

But perhaps the greatest victory of all is manifest in the unlikely love between Toby and Jessica. In the face of the skepticism of her friends that matched the skepticism of this reader, Jessica persists in responding to her rich romantic feelings for this unusual man, and she slowly wins him over. When, in the novel's culminating scene, she lets Shakespeare speak for her—“And let the world slip. We shall never be younger”—she is clearly no shrew manipulating a younger man, but rather “an infinitely capacious person” who loves a man the way a man would hope to be loved. I had tears in my eyes as I turned the final pages of this novel; having succeeded in suspending my disbelief regarding the plausibility of their love, I found that that disbelief had given way to a deep sadness. Both Toby and Jessica lose something substantial when they leave each other. They know it, and I felt it.

So what is Anthony Weller up to here? Is he offering us the dark humor that some reviewers have implied? I don't think so. At times his book is very humorous, to be sure, and it is dark in its political implications, but it doesn't have the underbelly of cynicism that I associate with such humor. On the contrary, I experienced *The Siege of Salt Cove* as urgently positive, a challenge to action in a life through which we

can sleep if we choose to. “We should react,” says the Wily Scativo (whose real name is Scott), “not live in perpetual hibernation.” Jessica puts it another way: “Give the gyroscope of the world a nudge whenever [you] feel the teeter and totter [are] out of whack with what [you sense] the equilibrium should be.” And Toby another way still: “Play the Excelsior. Remind yourself how it feels to be alive. Watch the progress of your singular, rolling soul as it descends through ever shifting labyrinths of the cosmos, through paradise and purgatory and hell, yet refuses to die, but is ever resurrected and sprung again, shot sprocketing back into play.”

“In some future epoch, a greater-perspectived chronicler of Salt Cove will be glad of what I am going to reveal,” says Jessica toward the end of the novel, and we recognize that Anthony Weller is just that chronicler, a kind of Deus ex Machina Excelsior, if you will. And we are grateful to him, just as the Salines would be grateful to Jessica, for his urging is her urging: “I believe it is up to us to shape the flow of time, and thus to pretend that the world is not made new again, every day, is a way of rejecting the only offer granted us on a regular basis. Like turning down a gift.” That shaping we can do, following the lead of the feisty band of Salines, by constantly nudging the gyroscope and “sprocketing back into play.” After all, it is the only time we will ever have, and it is not to be slept through. ●

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