

Foreword

I bought *Incandescence* in 1980 on its first publication in Great Britain. I still have my hardcover copy (dust wrapper chipped and worn) and the fact that I bought it in hardcover is testimony to my then intense keenness to read it – I couldn't wait for the paperback. In fact the book was published in the USA in 1979, was Craig Nova's third novel, and the third in a remarkable sequence of novels that he published in the 1970s: *Turkey Hash* (1972), *The Geek* (1975) and finally *Incandescence*. I had read *Turkey Hash*, alerted by a review that declared it "carried the kick of a nail poked into a live light socket", and had not been disappointed. It is a stark, bleak view of the underbelly of Los Angeles life (a city Nova was born in), written in a prose that marries Hemingway's monosyllabic heft with a dystopian lyricism that Scott Fitzgerald would not disown.

The Geek is altogether odder, a novel of powerful eroticism – with illustrations – set on a Greek island where a young couple become involved in dangerous mayhem with some unscrupulous opium smugglers. Once again the prose is heightened and the physicality of the island, its blazing sun, its burning light, is almost tangibly rendered.

All Nova's many talents, however, cohere in this his third novel, *Incandescence*, set largely in New York City. It tells the story of one Stargell (the only name he has) a young inventor, recently fired from his well-paid job in a think tank, where brilliant minds are challenged to come up with all manner of inventions, from a swiveling spoon for cerebral palsy patients to an invisible lethal gas that explodes when inhaled. Stargell is now on the skids, however, living in lower Manhattan with his alcoholic Greek wife and scraping a living as a taxi driver. As we follow Stargell's peregrinations around the city – with a brief foray to Los Angeles to visit his father, dying of cancer – we meet a raft of eccentric characters and down and outs. *Incandescence*, among

other things, is a great novel of New York (just as *Turkey Hash* is a great novel of Los Angeles) and Nova's taut, physical prose finds its perfect subject matter as it both skewers and hymns the city and its denizens. Nova is an absolute master of this particular tone of voice, a kind of wised-up urban lyricism, unashamed to celebrate and enhance the low-rent quotidian surrealism that the city has to offer:

"The exhaust is everywhere and the gutters are filled with sooty snow, but I can feel the undeniable tick of spring. I stop when I see a delicatessen, go inside, buy some beer. Yes, Stargell, I think, this is it: here we are in a rented Cadillac filled with a bunch of burglar alarms and an Eighth Avenue whore."

Almost every page offers up similar pleasures. Nova's prose is charged but never super-charged, the present tense and the first person singular allowing Stargell's voice to sing in its wry, knowing, analytical way but never letting the style obscure the view.

As Stargell's erratic life progresses – he borrows money from a loan shark, tries to set up his father-in-law as a burglar alarm salesman, makes a few thousand dollars through a property rental scam, seduces a rich former girlfriend – it's not the narrative that engages so much as Stargell's world-view. The key aspect of this novel, it seems to me, is its refusal to judge – indeed it is very Chekhovian in its absence of any kind of moral censoriousness, its strict moral neutrality. I think of Chekhov rather than Camus (another viable comparison) because, like Chekhov, while being absolutely non-judgemental, Nova also genuinely relishes what life has to offer. This explains the novel's title, I feel. The word "incandescence" is barely mentioned but it is that potential to ignite, that sense of a pulsing glow in the people Stargell encounters and the sights he sees, that informs the novel's pages. On one of his taxi shifts Stargell is robbed of all his money. As he drives away, he reflects:

"Horns honk. My smile deepens. Stargell, I think, most things

are great, as long as you live through them... It doesn't last, though. The incandescence dies and I'm left with the certain knowledge that after ten hours behind the wheel I've only got the Barber's fifty cents."

"Most things are great." The word "most" encompasses multitudes: Stargell's incandescent, epiphanic gaze lights up the tawdry and the insignificant, the mean and the forgotten. *Incandescence* is a novel of great sensuality – all five senses fully engaged – though "smell" and its synonyms are the most used. New York comes uniquely alive, in an olfactory way, in *Incandescence*: its stench and odours, its rich fetor, its reeks and eerie redolence.

Nova himself has remarked on the schism in his work after the publication of *Incandescence*. His next novel was called *The Good Son* (1982) and, for all its admirable qualities, might have been written by a different author. Many fascinating novels have followed and Nova's career has progressed with evident and continued success but his first three novels stand apart as a discrete body of work. They are, in a real sense, a young writer's novels – full of swagger and bravura, happy to take risks with narrative and prose, unflinching in their clear-eyed, bleak honesty. This sequence reached its apotheosis in *Incandescence*, a novel of great power, deadpan humour and uncanny beauty – and one of the finest American novels of our modern times.

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