



Spiritual ecstasy in retreat

Books

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Published 03/22/2018



"The Final Retreat" author Stephen Hough. Photo: Jiyang Chen



A D V E R T I S M E N T

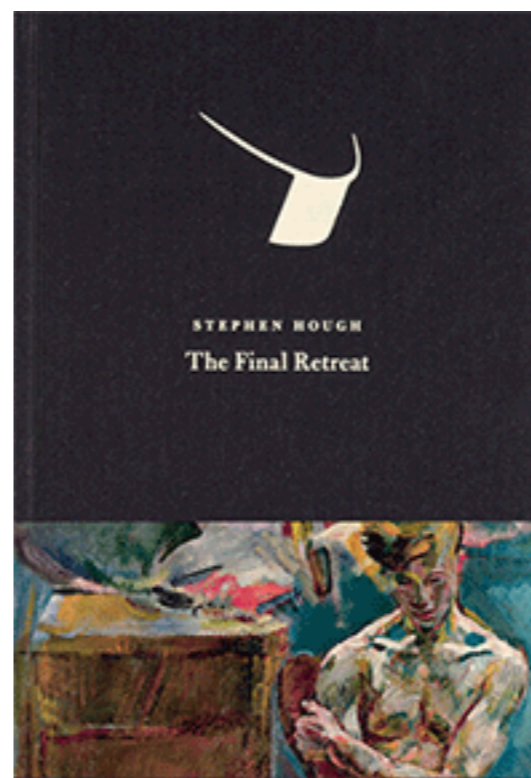
Stephen Hawking died a few days ago confident that, regarding his personal future, "This is it," and the Internet hasn't shut up about God since. In her just-published book of essays "What Are We Doing Here?" Marilynne Robinson writes, "Religion could quiet our antagonisms if we let it be what it is fundamentally and at best." We of the opiated masses stretched between those poles remain God-bothered from here to there.

Spiritual agonies and ecstasies of several kinds are the subjects of Stephen Hough's new, first novel, "The Final Retreat" (Sylph Editions). All the overtones of the word "retreat" reverberate as in Debussy's shimmering harmonies on Hough's recent CD, but here they are adamantly earthbound. The grubbiest retreat, Craighourne, is a down-at-the-heels remote country house where Catholic priests in crises about their "vocation," quiet and otherwise, are "invited." There are no double rooms.

Father Joseph Flynn, Hough's protagonist, drives himself to Craighourne in a dismal rainstorm, but he is driven there on the hot poker of a sex scandal. He has been threatened with blackmail by William, the most recent in a series of rent boys he has sought out for succor. After surprisingly sensational sex with William, he breaks a worldly rule: he goes back, gets obsessed and, stripped of his better judgment, convinces himself he can help the drug-addicted boy.

If you've spent any time around churchy types, you know this guy. If you're gay and of a certain age, you may even indulge Father Joseph – "Peter" to the rent boys – who's ditched the vow of celibacy that hasn't ditched him. "I rarely meet someone for sex without money changing hands." If there's room in your heart for the disgraced clergy, you love him, albeit uneasily.

The best novelists make all of their characters fundamentally sympathetic. That doesn't mean readers approve of their thoughts, words or deeds, but understand where



they come from. Taken to its logical extreme, even the characters readers revile are people whose insides they know.

High on the list of distasteful people in Hough's cast is Father Neville, his assigned pro-tem spiritual advisor at Craighourne. There's little to like in this shriveled, self-righteous, literally self-flagellating, pompous snoop. But, miracle of miracles, with each of his morning appearances, you're more sympathetic for this man who cloaks his personal fears in doctrine. Unlike Father Joseph, you even start looking forward to his morning visits, if only to witness the new day's charade.

For Father Joseph, being God-possessed is constitutional. "I actually feel like a priest to my core," he reflects as he looks out past the gates of this dreary, fake Eden. "I can't really explain it except as an instinct, of care, of protection: an arm around the parish; a mother with her cubs; a conduit for blessings not my own; a bringer of joy not my own." Now he's trapped in an aging body with a riven mind and a tormented soul.

The stuff Father Neville would love to hear all about is vouchsafed to the reader, who is given more to savor than the string of rent boys Father Joseph turns to for rueful succor. The sex writing is as frank, rank and sticky as anything in Garth Greenwell's "What Belongs to You," a book it also mirrors in its emotional candor.

The novel has an intricate, unsurprisingly musical structure that doesn't require a Schenkerian analysis to make you succumb. It poses as a diary Fr. Joseph obediently keeps during the retreat, framed by memoranda first panicked, then mortified. It rapidly becomes the opposite of the priests' self-described numbing hours in the confessional, hearing vaguely recounted misdeeds and dispensing nostrums and Hail Marys. It digs to the core.

Not only do we get the full span of Fr. Joseph's coming out, we witness a mother-son relationship worthy of D.H. Lawrence.

Joseph's father is crushed under a bus in Rome (!) on his parents' honeymoon shortly after he has been conceived – "I owed my existence to a 12-hour window" – and his mother never remarries.

This is not a plot twist that every first-time novelist could pull off. Cunningly, Hough springs it well into the book and reports it in a single sentence, by which time it less startles than "explains everything." It's a perfectly timed reminder to the reader that however common many of its elements, our Father's experience is singular.

Its core revelation is related by the book's most compassionate, wise and realistic cleric, Bishop Bernard, who speaks from experience. "I know this is going to seem completely mad in your present state of distress," he tells his broken brother, "but I think this is a special moment of grace for you. You have reached the very bottom of the pit. There's nowhere to escape. And Christ, who faced suffering and disgrace and death, is waiting there for you."

Hough, himself a convert to Catholicism, is likely reporting as much as imagining. No one wants him to quit his night job, but if "The Final Retreat" indicates what he can do with stolen time, neither is he a thief anyone would want apprehended.