Latter-day Pagans in the Northern Maple Forests

The Sugar Season: A Year in the Life of Maple Syrup—And One Family's Quest for the Sweetest Harvest by Douglas Whynott. Boston: De Capo, 2014. Hardcover, 279 pp., $24.99

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It would be easy to pigeonhole Douglas Whynott's latest book, *The Sugar Season: A Year in the Life of Maple Syrup—And One Family's Quest for the Sweetest Harvest*, as an example of the "how-it's-done" narrative. Or as "nature narrative." But in fact I found it to be a much more complex book, one that is difficult to fit into any one sub-generic category. Which is why I liked it. The account of collecting maple sap and rendering it into syrup and sugar in New Hampshire and beyond follows Bruce Bascom—and friends—during a maple harvest. Bascom is a third-generation maple sugarer, who also happens to be one of the major distributors of maple syrup in the United States, buying production from elsewhere, including Canada (which happens to be the largest producer of maple syrup and maple sugar by far; after all, why is there a maple leaf in the Canadian flag?).

One dimension is, of course, the opportunity to learn about this fascinating enterprise and the people dedicated to going out in late winter to tap the water-like sap as the temperatures begin to rise. But there is more here than initially meets the eye.

First, full disclosure: I confess I have long been fascinated by maple sugaring. This is because I live in Upstate New York (the other "New York"), in what was once the land of the real-life Hiawatha (Longfellow notwithstanding). Our area is the heart of Upstate's maple-sugaring industry. Along winding country roads here in the Appalachian Highlands you frequently pass farmhouses with awkwardly scrawled signs reading "Maple Syrup 4 Sale." So, my interest had long been aroused by the subject, and perhaps that makes me something of an insider. But I am also an outsider, since I have never made maple syrup (you heat the maple sap, which when gathered has two percent sugar content, into a steaming broth until it thickens into syrup, a practice native Americans taught European settlers). We only have a Norway maple in our yard, not a sugar maple. But still, maple sugaring is a part of our regional culture (and if "Upstate" had a flag, we could justify the maple leaf, too). Necessarily, my appreciation for maple sugaring "flavors" my reading (incidentally, speaking of flavor, when those early settlers arrived, a major source of sugar in this part of North America was the sugar derived from maple syrup, at least until cane sugar from the Caribbean started to be imported).

But there are other reasons why I enjoyed the book as part of my leisurely summer reading. It is, of course, a "how-it's-done" narrative. It is, moreover, nature writing in that it reflects on our relationship to the land and how the land nurtures us.

But again, it would be too easy to pigeonhole the narrative as such. Because the book is more than just a bucolic account about those engaged with a nurturing nature, for which I concede I am a sucker—but then I am descended from Northern Europeans whose haunts were northern woodlands. Because beneath the bucolic, there is an uncomfortable undercurrent Whynott examines. Even as nature nurtures, we can also sense that all is not well in Eden. Those ubiquitous maple trees that rise mutely throughout the northeastern United States and eastern Canada provide a message in their own slow time and in their own slow way about all life, and, yes, the consequences of global warming: Even as nature can be nurturing, we also sense what is being lost. The result is a poignancy, and the realization that the bucolic really always was about what we feared we would lose (especially if the northern woodlands are in your DNA). One can all but imagine banana trees growing in Boston someday.

In addition, there is a kind of literary journalism that *The Sugar Season* exemplifies, which in my view does not receive nearly enough attention. It makes up, I suspect, a kind of subgenre, and I can't say I've ever really heard a name for it. But it's the kind of narrative that celebrates the ordinary of everyday life. In doing so, however, it uncovers the extraordinary. Maple sugaring ordinary? Well, yes and no. For many it may not seem so ordinary, and reading this review this may be the first time they have heard of the practice. If you live in the desert in New Mexico, maple sugaring will seem to be downright exotic (I say this because I once sent a cousin in Santa Fe a jug of New York State maple syrup as a thank you for his and his wife's generous hospitality, and I'm not sure he knew what to make of it). But that's the thing about Whynott's book. In examining the subculture of those who tap maple trees, he helps reveal what is all but taken for granted in my part of the world.

In my view, one reason such a subgenre is not acknowledged nearly enough is that most of our popular modern narrative in its different media seems so centered around bone-crushing, blood-spurting "*traumadrama*" (imagine Mount Vesuvius exploding, sending thousands fleeing the rolling viscous flow of wall-high lava). Trauma can certainly be genuine, and I do not mean to belittle it: It should and must be examined. But at the same time it so often gets trivialized. For my part, I have often had a suspicion that *popular* narratives of trauma—the bang-bang-shoot-'em-ups of movies, bad police novels, video games, and the evening news, serve as a distraction from examining what we do not like about ourselves: They cheapen our postmodern condition in which it is difficult enough to find value.

Finding the extraordinary in the ordinary is, I believe, one way to do it. This is because narratives like *The Sugar Season* help to serve as necessary correctives, reminding us that people can live relatively quiet, useful, and meaningful lives—in this case, like latter-day pagans in the northern maple forests of North America. Ultimately, what we discover is the extraordinary in the everyday rituals. For the maple sugarer it means going out into the snow and slush every year when the sap begins to rise. The result for me when I read such works is a subtle comfort and reward, psychically fatigued as I am by the gratuitous violence of the *traumadramas*. There is much we can learn from those who have found quiet meaning in the rituals of everyday life, the dignity it bestows on our postmodern condition. As Whynott observes: "Walking

in these woods always brought me the feeling of peace, and another feeling I can't quite identify but associate with the idea of dignity." The dignity derived of the rituals of the everyday is a wonderful antidote to our internal and external wars. What is remarkable is that Whynott does all this without being didactic or pedantic.

But again, I confess I live in the land of the sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*). I cannot help but feel the excitement every autumn when the maple leaves turn a brilliant scarlet and gold in the crisp air (they beat oaks easily for color, and smell sweeter in the fireplace). And yet as *The Sugar Season* reminds us, we cannot take such sweet bucolia for granted because it poignantly reminds us of what is passing. But again, I am descended from a long line of those whose haunts were woodlands, and who preferred worshipping wooden idols, seeking for signs in them. As Whynott has demonstrated, the maple can provide us some of those signs. From them we can learn much.