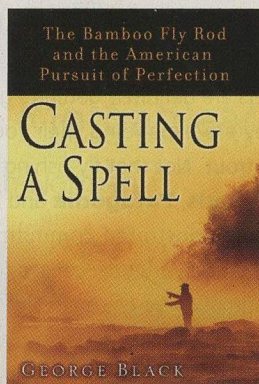


Casting a Spell

The Bamboo Fly Rod and the American Pursuit of Perfection

By George Black, 2006; Random House, www.randomhouse.com



“IN THE BIG APPLE THERE ARE BIG apartment buildings,” reports Judith Schwartz, a writer herself. “And in many of these buildings, mine included, the laundry room is also a library. People donate books and everyone is free to help themselves...I thought that you’d like this.” So came to me *Casting a Spell: The Bamboo Fly Rod and the American Pursuit of Perfection*. Ten pages in and I felt like I’d found Lana Turner in a soda shop. (Before I forget: Thanks, Aunt Judy.)

Paeans to split bamboo I have read. A poem, once—a rhapsody, naturally—also histories, collectors’ journals, a couple diatribes and debates. George Black’s *Casting a Spell* shares elements with some of these; however, beyond that, the author is simply a master of the vignette, offering carefully researched character studies of cane’s great, late craftsmen. Each is as full of details as should be expected from the foreign editor for *The Nation* and contributor to *Mother Jones*, *The New York Times* and the *National Law Journal*. But I suspect most readers will appreciate more how surprisingly bright these stories are, insightful, warm whenever he ferrets out some markedly human essence. “Inferential biography,” he calls this process, emphasis by the book’s author.

Why was it Americans who refined this craft, bamboo rod-making, to its highest form? Especially given how marginal the rewards were and still are for the vast majority of these craftsmen?

Big questions. While every elegant craft would welcome such a study, Black clearly believes rod-making deserves his finest effort. He rather reluctantly admits what readers would discover on their own: That, like his subjects, Black is driven by a quest for perfection in his chosen craft. Perfection.

Begin with Black as pilgrim. At about the age of 40, after fly-fishing for all of four years, he happens upon a lacquered surprise in a mall. An “antique” mall—the kind where one can buy “Barbie dolls and Star Wars action figures, as the cutoff line for the term antique creeps steadily forward.”

O, but she is lovely to his eyes, this willowy bamboo creation. Cherry-red, with “seven hexagonal sections nestled into notched dividers,” her “snake-shaped line guides...attached to the bamboo with silk thread windings in elaborate patterns of lime green and lemon yellow.” Speaking of excess, she had a beauty spot on her butt, also a monogram. “An inch or two above the cork grip, a lozenge-shaped acetate decal” depicted “a snowcapped mountain, perhaps a volcano, against a blue sky, with the initials ‘NFT’.”

Writer and rod shared special times and an 18-inch trout. In fact, it might have been pride that prompted Black to present his prize to an expert. Mount Fuji, that volcano turned out to be. As depicted for Nippon Fishing Tackle. And of course Black realized that “as a fly rod it’s worthless, it’s a piece of junk.” Sweet charity—we can only guess the pain. But before Black escapes this encounter, his scathing expert has turned high priest and tempter, seducing the author with descriptions of a tool that, when far better constructed, would reveal to a rehabilitated tart-lover the true glory planed from grass—“a useful thing, beautifully made.”

Writes Black, “I resolved then and there that I would go in search of this peculiarly American vision of perfection, never

suspecting that it would take me all the way back to Henry David Thoreau.”

All the way back, indirectly: it’s a long road that I found interesting all the way, a kind of historical highway intersected by technological innovation, wars, epidemics, enormous economic and social change. Black navigates and narrates their confluences and collisions. Take Hiram Leonard, for example. Together with Loman Hawes, H. Leonard made a “magical” mechanical strip beveller that would instantly revolutionize split-cane rod manufacture—his own, anyway.

For a time the machine made him a rare profit, but toward the end of his life it would become part of an evolution that threatened his reputation, if not his soul. While Leonard made efforts to protect his name, he lost it at last to an investor who clearly understood that “Leonard” was a “brand,” a powerful tool for selling to what we call a mass market; but downright invaluable, when appealing to those wishing to appear elevated from anything common. “It all sounds like an idyll, but in truth it wasn’t. The worm in the bud was apparent from the beginning...perfectionism versus economics.”

Increased production trumped careful workmanship—an attitude unworkable for some of the best craftsman in the Leonard company, who quit. Poor Leonard.

But wait: those brilliant and best builders who quit? They struck out on their own. Their names: Fred Thomas, Eustis Edwards, and Loman Hawes. Like others before and after, they remained committed to a craft from which it was difficult to carve a living, struggling to support families, perhaps by accident impoverishing people who they hoped to make proud. *Seeking perfection.*

Seth Norman reviews books in each issue of *FR&R*. He is also the Freewheeling Fly-Fisher at flyrodreel.com.