Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Interview with Eric Darton, author of the novel Free City

Hardy Griffin · Wednesday, November 25th, 2020

In 1996, W.W. Norton released a gem-like purple clothbound novel entitled *Free City*, by Eric Darton. I read it and became a lifelong fan, but was always saddened that it had not been released in paperback. In October of 2020, the novel was reissued in paperback and e-book versions by The Dalkey Archive Press. I recently had the opportunity to speak with the author on his experience of the novel's journey, and how its trajectory relates both to the novel's content and the larger literary scene.

Hardy Griffin: How did *Free City* first germinate?

Eric Darton: I wasn't intending to write a novel. The story I told myself at the time was: "You write short fables." And then one morning over coffee, this character, L., started using my pen to write his journal which ended up recounting a forty-day crisis in his life and the catastrophe unfolding in his home town. And there it was: a novel. Nothing before or since has ever come to me in a more unmediated fashion. But I have to acknowledge that I'd been accumulating the material for this book for a long time without being aware of it. What may have tripped the switch was Xavier Hernández's large format picture book, *Lebek,* a series of bird's-eye illustrations of the northern European port town evolving over the centuries from a stone age settlement to a modern city.* The bird's-eye image of the 17th century city pulled me right down into those streets, because I felt in some manner, I already knew them. Spooky, but there it is.

H.G.: And what was your experience of the publication of that "perfect little purple book," as one Amazon reviewer described the original hardcover?

E.D.: Naturally I was delighted to have a novel in the world. I thought a lot about my mother who died while I was still writing it, and it totally vindicated her belief that I'd eventually publish books. I'd always told her, somewhat resentfully, that she was crazy – my work was just too difficult for prime time.

Immediately, *Free City* got a bunch of favorable reviews from folks who clearly didn't get it, but thought it best not to trash something they suspected might have merit, so they focused on the "quirkiness" and "inventiveness," leaving readers with absolutely no idea of the book's real qualities. And, of course, commercial publishing is a zero sum game, so when it got a respectful short notice in the *Sunday Times Book Review,* with a very cool illustration, I was thrilled, but my editor was bummed it hadn't gotten a longer piece by a big name reviewer. You could feel the expectations cooling over the phone line. It was kind of an "Aha," moment for me.

It took the book being published in German and Spanish translations for there to be any reviews that actually addressed the book substantively. And the cultural divide was fascinating. The Spanish thought it was a critique of technology and dug the “feminist” heroine, while the Germans relished the battle between the male protagonist and his nasty patron. But at least they got their teeth into it. The only American reviewer to say anything insightful was John O’Brien at *The Review of Contemporary Fiction,* who eventually started The Dalkey Archive, and then, lo these many years later, published the paperback.

So, in essence it was a mixed bag: I had a beautiful book with my name on it, which had achieved a small, very enthusiastic readership, then *poof!* out of print in a New York minute.

H.G.: Why do you think the Spanish and German translations of *Free City* garnered such enthusiasm, and are there any other languages and cultures you think it would be particularly suited to?

E.D.: Well, the answer that springs to mind is that both national cultures had, in relatively recent history, experienced totalitarian rule, and knew something of its consequences. Since on one level, *Free City* is about the threat of unrestrained state power, my sense is that it resonated in a way it wouldn’t necessarily in the U.S. Until now, that is. A more nuanced answer is that both Spanish and German readers could find something recognizable in the characters and situations, albeit allusively. Adela is truly a free human being, and that felt exhilarating to younger Spanish women and men alike. The almost archetypal conflict between the two male protagonists seemed to resonate with German and Austrian readers. I’m judging mainly by the reviews, and some conversations. Currently there’s interest in Germany in adapting the book to a TV series and graphic novel. With CGI, even talking ducks are possible. In both cases, I think the imagery lends itself to reducing text to a minimum.

But to your point, the experience of seeing two such distinct European cultures both “get” the book made me realize that it could probably slide into almost any language because the situation the characters are in feels – that dread word – universal, or nearly so. Assuming the translation is a good one. In both previous cases, we were lucky – the translators managed to convey the gravity of the situation, but kept a light, playful touch. My hat’s off to anyone who can pull that off. In my next life, if I’m lucky, I’ll be a translator. Or an agent for my friends. Or a duck.

H.G.: Following its critical acclaim in hardcover, and the sale of two foreign rights, oddly, the book was not immediately picked up for paperback publication. Do you think this had to do with the literary context of the late 1990s?

E.D.: Yes, partly the times, partly the raw economics of commercial publishing. *Free City* hit at a moment of change in the industry: by and large publishers were not investing long-term in authors of promise – putting out two, or even three books that gradually built a readership, and eventually a profitable backlist, and then, perhaps a best-seller. So, for new authors, if you didn’t kill in the first two weeks, you were metaphorically sent to Siberia. Publishers had to pay for prominent placement in B&N and other big retail outlets, so store visibility turned into a competitive resource game as well. Then as now, warehouse space is expensive and publishers are taxed on their inventories, so if a book didn’t sell fantastically well more or less immediately the unsold copies got pulped. And you had to hit a critical point in hardcover sales for them to risk putting out a paperback edition because they’d already maxed their publicity budget for your book. It was at this point that a lot of “midlist” writers became unpublishable – at least by commercial imprints.

Squeezed from all sides, mainstream presses had begun to think like Hollywood or record moguls. The hit was everything. I remember these ridiculous six-figure advances for first-time authors whose books, a few months later, were piled up like mountain ranges on the half-price tables at the Strand bookstore.

And so many promising first books never got published at all.

H.G.: Recently, The Dalkey Archive Press approached you about publishing a paperback edition. How did those first conversations go?

E.D.: Happily, John O'Brien had always connected with the book. I woke up a year and a half ago to an email saying he wanted to republish it and I almost fell out of my chair. And thus ensued several cordial conversations. I also realized, as I'm sure John did, that there was now a broad meta-genre into which *Free City* fell quite readily. It had first been published before the huge "fantasy" genre – largely driven by reader demand – opened up a market for books that engage the reader's desire for a kind of reality-based playfulness. Back then, for all intents and purposes, books with fantastical elements were either Sci-fi, Tolkien or Latin American "magical realism," or for kids. If you were Rushdie, you might get away with it, but he was a state of exception: a genius who was also an exotic superstar. So in the '90s, there was a much smaller slot for a book like *Free City*. Today, Millennials – many of whom hadn't even been born in 1996 – connect to it quite effortlessly. *Free City* is set in the 17th century, but the world it describes resonates closely with current circumstances, or at least our perception of them. The book was always accessible, it just took a quarter century for the genre to ripen.

H.G.: And what about the launch process—what kinds of differences were there between hardcover and softcover, large press and independent press?

E.D.: It distills to the distinction between anxiety and excitement.

October 1996: The publisher is anxious, I'm anxious; even my anxiety is anxious. And why? We're pretty sure we're launching a fine book literarily, but really what does that count for when the market determines the ultimate good? Best case, if our book's a winner, we get to be anxious about movie rights and who gets cast as the duck, and how the next book needs to be even bigger. And if not… The abyss.

This time around, we get to enjoy the ride. To a large extent because we have nothing to prove. We know from past history that the book engages readers, so everything else is gravy. We're like Joni Mitchell's free man in Paris. And we – the author, publisher and readers – can move the book into the wider world through multiple channels: podcasts, blogs, social media, word of mouth, hand to hand. Friends of the book have much more say in determining its value.

It's still a small volume, but the paperback's got a lovely, shiny cover. It just wants to leap into whichever back pocket your phone's not using.

H.G.: I saw on your Instagram that various people have posted themselves reading short sections from the novel—how did that come about?

E.D.: For me, a novel is a collective experience channeled into written language by an individual. Reading and writing are by nature solitary practices, but we all draw different material from our readings, and either implicitly or explicitly share these meanings with others. Texts write

themselves into our molecular structure and transform it, even as we transform the text by reading and sharing it – combining it with other texts, experiences and sensations. So, if this thing called Instagram – which my daughter introduced me to – can facilitate the re-collectivization of a solitary experience, well sure, why not? What's lovely to see is that the diverse friends of this book, from elders to my daughter's generation all pick different sections to read entirely of their own accord. So the clips represent readers speaking aloud what spoke to them internally.

H.G.: I see, too, that independent filmmaker Bill Hayward has sort of taken this idea and run with it. Can you tell us about that development?

E.D.: Bill Hayward is a creative paradox: a master image-maker who lives surrounded by poets and writers. You should see what he does to his books, which lie in great stalagmites all over his floor – he marks and annotates them like a Talmudic scholar. And then he alchemically transforms what he's read into something filmic that can't be categorized in any conventional way. To my knowledge, no one has synergized visual, aural and textual material in quite this radical a form. I am not exaggerating when I say that his recent *Free City FilmTrips,* incorporating excerpts taken directly from the novel, may represent the foothills of a movie genre.

H.G.: Where can we see them?

E.D.: That's easy: Billhayward.com, and click on Films.

H.G.: What do you think the future holds for *Free City* now that it is out in paperback?

E.D.: Not only am I bad at guessing the future when it comes to my own life and work, but I've reached the age where I relish *not* building a narrative about what happens next. What I can say is that the demographics and the culture of the U.S. today are far more fertile ground for the book to be planted in than was the case in the mid-'90s. Those of us who aren't paralyzed intellectually by the awfulness of our social prospects as a nation are more open to work that "desubordinates" genre because we've learned to give more play to our internal sensibilities. My chips, metaphorically, are on the so-called Millennials. They grew up in a globalized world where class, gender, racial and other social codes are constantly in flux. I can't imagine a better moment for the book to become available again. If *Free City* has a substrate message, it could be: *Don't fix the gaze; anything can happen.*

* *Lebek, A City of Northern Europe Through the Ages,* Xavier Hernández, Jordi Bllonga. Illustrated by Francesco Corni. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991.

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