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Wheeling Through the Apocalypse

Angele Ellis · Monday, November 21st, 2022

Wheeling Through the Apocalypse: Review of *Bicycles of the Gods: A Divine Comedy* by Michael Simms
by Angele Ellis

"I woke one morning with an image of two boys riding their bicycles up a hill that looks down on a large city," Michael Simms says of his debut novel in an interview with Deborah Kalb. "One boy, Xavi, dismounts and strikes a match, but the other boy, Jesse, stops him from setting fire to the dry brush. Right away I knew that these two boys were Shiva and Jesus, and this was the beginning of a story about the apocalypse."

"So it came to pass"—as *Bicycles of the Gods* begins—that Simms, a poet and longtime book editor, wrote his contemporary American Divine Comedy, and according to the writer Peter Makuck invented a new genre, "apocalyptic satire." But in the Creator's house there are many mansions, including not only social satire and Dante's castle of religious allegory (like Dante, Simms exercises the pleasure of putting his enemies in Hell and his friends in Heaven), but also magical realism, speculative fiction, action-adventure, YA fiction. There are elements of all these genres in Simms's fast-paced story, which careens from action to reflection, theological disputes to witty quips, realism to the miraculous, sometimes in the space of a single chapter.

Many of the best sections of *Bicycles of the Gods* take place in a fractured and endangered American Southwest whose Los Angeles—like Sodom and Gomorrah—contains few angels, perhaps not enough to save it from a fiery fate. The brown-skinned Jesse, whose earthly parents are incarnated as the Mexican Maria and Jose (although at one point Jesse refers to himself as Palestinian), and the black-skinned Xavi ride mostly unnoticed from the city's mean streets to its tinder-dry hills. A close look at their bicycles, however, provokes a second take. They are ten thousand-dollar Merida 96s that can negotiate any terrain—if not, as in the novel, appear like faithful steeds when their owners whistle.

Incarnating these deities as 12-year-old boys is a surprisingly effective fictional device. The barely pubescent Jesse/Jesus is idealistic and sensitive, while Xavi/Shiva is a hot-tempered, sexually active boy with voracious appetites (he recoils only at eating beef, as cows are sacred in Hindu theology). As in a buddy movie, the Prince of Peace and the Destroyer of Worlds agree on almost nothing. They jaw over whether this dying yet beautiful world should survive, with asides about how Jesse's Father will react to Jesse's pacifist resistance to the promised destruction, while they

share adventures with prostitutes and pimps, graffiti artists and struggling war veterans, churchgoers and social workers. Among Jesse's miracles are endlessly producing tuna fish sandwiches in a modern version of the loaves and fishes, and bringing symphonic harmony to a motley Babel of angry and abandoned parrots, caged in a so-called sanctuary. Meanwhile, Xavi—heedless of his celestial expense account, as of many things—hands out fistfuls of cash for necessities and pleasures.

"Man, I worry about you," Xavi said, picking up the remote. "You're taking this Savior of the Streets role way too seriously. Are you planning to save these humans one at a time? I think we should just do what your dad told us to do. Burn this city down, and if they don't learn a lesson, we'll burn down another."
He clicked the remote and an image of helicopters appeared on the screen. "Hey, have you ever seen *Apocalypse Now*? I'm right in the middle of it, and they're about to go all blitzkrieg on that village. You know when the helicopters come flying in like Valkyries?"
"I've never been able to get through that movie," Jesse said, getting up from the sofa and going into the kitchen. He wondered whether there were any vegetables in the fridge. A nice vegetable soup would taste good about now

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"You know you're not very good at this avenging angel shit," Xavi shouted over his shoulder.
"I know," Jesse said, thinking about this terrible thing his father was requiring of him. "I know," he repeated. He found a head of cabbage in the refrigerator, chopped it, washed it, and threw the pieces into a pot of water…He brought the pot to a boil, then let it simmer for an hour while he sat at the kitchen table reading *Walden*.

Despite *Bicycles of the Gods*' suggestion that the cosmos represents a mere fraction of the universe, and the presence of Xavi and Abe—a coot with a pack of trained coydogs who turns out to be an undercover Patriarch Abraham—Simms's theology and plot follow a Christian arc (or as the reviewer Wally Swist suggests, a "neo-gnostic" arc, "because Jesus…truly does become the emissary of the supreme being who delivers esoteric knowledge (gnosis) and is enabled to do so by his redemption in the human spirit").

This neo-gnostic bent is reinforced by Simms's strong characterization of Mary (aka Maria Nazarene), clairvoyant, city daycare volunteer, and Mother Superior of the Sisters of the Piston, a formidably trained group of justice-seeking operatives who ride Harley Davidson Fat Boys. Maria has long since "divorced" the Father, and strongly allies herself and her crew with Jesse. The novel implies that she may be not only Jesse's mother, but also senior to the Father—the female deity first worshipped by humans.

In contrast, God the Father and his opposite number in the Underworld, Lucifer/Uncle Luke, are conventional villains. On Earth, Father appears as a gray-haired, pompous mid-century businessman, and the luxury-loving Luke as a cross between a Hollywood vampire and an overly suave fixer. The glimpses that the novel provides of this duo's connected otherworldly realms offer only the occasional surprise—until the novel's boffo conclusion.

The most vivid mortals in *Bicycles of the Gods* are outcasts whose personal struggles lead them to become valiant warriors in the book's final battle. One of this reviewer's favorites is Trish, a Black trans woman released from slavery—that is to say, prostitution—by Jesse and Xavi, and who turns out to have big plans for her community. (Trish also appears in the persona of Kevin, child of Birdie, the woman who runs the daycare where Maria volunteers.) At the climax of Bicycles of the Gods, Trish/Kevin marches in glory as Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul.

Then there is Marta, a queer LatinX war veteran who lost her hand in an IED explosion. Marta is, as her therapist says, "a closed box" who shuns and deflects people. But Marta bears a deeper wound than the loss of her hand (now replaced by a prosthesis)—the murder of her beloved mother by a boyfriend during Marta's tour of duty, and her obsessive desire for revenge against the unpunished killer. In another of *Bicycles of the Gods*' miracles, Marta must forgive the murderer she has shot to death with an illegally purchased gun, essentially agreeing to his resurrection by Jesse. She then joins the Sisters of the Piston as their ace mechanic.

Dharma is mortal but not human—a kelpie with a heart and spirit far beyond her size. The only puppy alive in a litter found in an alley by Stefan, the homeless young veteran who adopts her, Dharma first comes into her own when she and Stefan experience a dream visitation in which they enter Heaven at the request of Jesse—revealed as the adult Jesus—and discover joy along with a call to battle:

"Dog Heaven."

Stefan found himself in a rolling green field with scattered trees. He looked at Dharma and was surprised that she had transformed into a big dog with long legs, a lean muscular torso, and a handsome face. She was tall as a deer and as quick as a rabbit…In [Stefan's] hand was a baseball. He gave a solid wind-up and threw the ball far across the field. It seemed to take forever in its long arc through the air. Dharma flew across the field, stretching her whole body in a powerful stride, and far away, so small Stefan could barely see her, she leaped and caught the ball happily in mid-air.

It is no wonder that Dharma becomes the leader of Abe's coydog pack during the ultimate showdown.

Simms makes a main character of Stefan, a poet in his mid–20s who dumpster dives for food and lives with Dharma in a small concrete "cave" that is a fissure in a bridge support. Stefan has been dishonorably discharged and imprisoned, spending two years in Leavenworth for unwittingly providing medical assistance to a buddy who committed an atrocity in Iraq. He delicately begins a poetry-fueled romance with the fortyish Christina—the aforementioned therapist—who operates from her heart, using compassion and the 12 steps she learned as a recovering alcoholic. (The poems in the novel attributed to Stefan and Christina are Simms's own.) Although sweet together, this unlikely Adam and Eve are as not compelling as some of the novel's other characters.

Bicycles of the Gods achieves a roaring finale—no more spoilers will be given here—in which the borders of Earth and the afterlife come down, brave and inevitable sacrifices are made, and much that has been hidden is revealed. Readers, buckle yourselves in for a wild ride.

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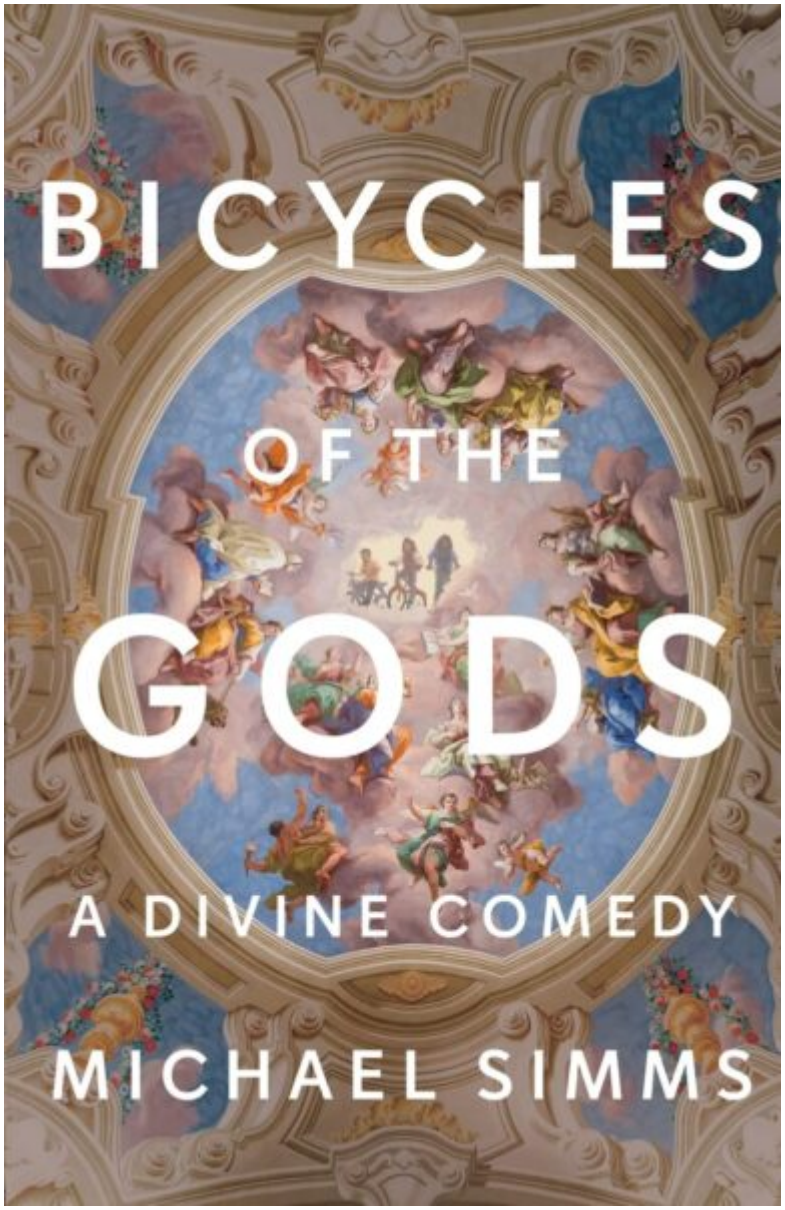

Bicycle of the Gods by Michael Simms

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