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Ernest Hebert, The Dogs of March (1979).

b. May 4, 1941, Keene, N. H.

Ernest Hebert has placed Darby, New Hampshire alongside such fictional locations as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County in his six-novel exploration of a local place that resonates with American values and meanings. Starting with The Dogs of March, Hebert has explored the life of Keene and its surrounding towns as the area wrestled with changing times from the 1970s to today. Hebert's other novels begin in the Keene area but take the reader far afield imaginatively and historically. Mad Boys (1993) explores the power of the media and virtual reality through the experiences of a thirteen-year-old boy. The Old American (2000) starts its journey towards questions of what constitutes American identity in a tale of captivity of a New Hampshire settler by Algonkian Indians. As in the Darby novels, this work of historical fiction enables readers to reimagine American society from the perspective of the displaced and oppressed. In The Dogs of March Hebert chronicles New Hampshire's version of class warfare, updating the portrait of shack people and factory workers in Grace Metalious's Peyton Place (1956) to focus on land use and the battle over the image of New England. The plot threatens at once to descend into class and gender warfare and to rise to an uneasy truce if not reconciliation among elemental New Hampshire forces.

Born in Keene in 1941, the son of a mill weaver and a nurse, Hebert experienced working-class life in an area that would soon lose most of its factories and be forced to market itself, like much of New Hampshire, to tourists looking for a New England image and flatlanders fleeing the urban and suburban metropolis of southern New England and New York. He served in the United States Army upon graduation from high school, worked as a telephone installer, taxi driver, and gas station manager before becoming a newspaper reporter and then editor of the Keene Sentinel in the 1970s. A graduate of Keene State College in 1969, he is currently on the faculty of Dartmouth College. In his speech accepting the 2002 Sarah Josepha Hale Award, he discussed the influence of his family and coworkers in Keene on the evolution of his Darby novels. His father's hard life as a weaver and personal losses did not diminish his sense of humor about life or his "crazy optimism." Hebert tells of his father's traumatic realization in World War II, when officers locked him, "just doing his job," in the engine room of a sinking ship, that he could be sacrificed by bosses who didn't have the decency to tell him so. Hebert believes his father's experience is "a parable that illustrates the plight of the people who do the grunt work of America [who are] dispensable and unimportant." This is the condition of Howard Elman in The Dogs of March who is left unemployed and without health insurance when the factory is bought and the jobs and machinery are moved south. Hebert celebrates the dignity and artistry of working life in his memory of Harold Archer, a telephone man whose attitude towards work displayed extraordinary self-worth. Archer

is like Elman whose IQ is mainly in his hands. Hebert dedicates his work to the people who are “the soul of America, the working grunts.”

Hebert’s central concern in The Dogs of March is the breakdown of community in a town like Darby when economic hardship and outside influences disrupt the livelihoods and social networks of the working class. The story unfolds from November to late March in the early 1970s by telling the story of Howard Elman, a foreman and loom repairman, and his family. Howard hears “work-for pay, work-for-pay” in the sound of the looms, and it is pride in the work of his hands that defines who he is. One plotline traces Howard’s loss of his job when the company is sold to a southern manufacturer. Without adequate literacy or job skills beyond a gift for repairing machines, he descends into unemployment and drinking. He is alienated from his wife, Elenore, who practices a home-made Catholicism and becomes crippled after a fall, and he finds himself increasingly in conflict with his son, Freddy, a student at UNH, whose education moves him ever farther away from the culture of work, hunting, and small-town life of his father. The other story involves the arrival of Zoe Cutter, a wealthy New Jersey widow, who purchases the farm up the hill from the Elman place and transforms it into version of the good life in New England, complete with a country crafts boutique in the barn. Cutter wants to remove the Elman eyesore from her view of the countryside, offering to buy the property and petitioning for an ordinance to force landowners to remove or fence off from view junk cars. She also wants to reform the working poor through education, dentistry, and employment as cheap labor on her projects, and failing that, through the force of law. She seduces Howard’s son Freddy and schemes to remove the youngest Elman child, Heather, from her parents.

Through Howard’s eyes, we meet a cast of characters, including other displaced millworkers. One commits suicide; Cooty Patterson, is sent for a spell to the state hospital in Concord and then leads a hermit’s existence living on road kill in a shack in the woods; and Fralla Pratt, with whom Howard has a drunken one-night stand, struggles to extricate her son from a life of crime. The Jordan family, who will reappear in later Darby novels, is lead by Howard’s best friend Ollie, a patriarch of a clan of the invisible, rural poor on the outskirts of New Hampshire towns. Through Zoe’s eyes, we encounter her brother Ronald Thorpe, a gay soap opera star from New York, and a collection of locals who fall into orbit around this wealthy, stylish, and powerful woman. The weasely realtor Bert Reason tempts Howard with increasing offers for the property, and country-store owner and selectman Harold Flagg, who finds Zoe’s feet and money equally erotic, threatens to challenge Howard’s deed to much of his land. Under increasing pressures from his internal demons, the illness of his wife, the alienation from his son, looming poverty, and Zoe Cutter, Howard plans to murder Reason and Cutter. He is saved from this by the appearance of Cooty Patterson, who leads him to his shack in the woods for a restorative stew of road kill. Howard is also revived by the woods themselves and the elemental struggle of late March between packs of domestic dogs and the weakened deer they run to death across the punky snow. In an explosion of violence, Howard strangles Zoe’s dog, Kinky, an Afghan hound with a strange, woman-like face, but he then returns home to attend to his wife and responsibilities. In an ironic twist, Howard burns down his house for insurance money to cover medical bills and sells out his land to Zoe, reserving a quarter acre, he claims, for a vegetable garden. He promptly moves a new 12-by-70

trailer onto the plot and starts a trash-hauling business. It is a costly and small victory over Zoe's vision of New Hampshire, but Howard transforms himself through night school, a government loan for his business, a hearing aid, reconciliation with Elenore, and some wisdom.

Much of the conflict in The Dogs of March centers on opposing images of New Hampshire that divide insiders from outsiders. The Howard Elmans and Ollie Jordans of Darby see a working landscape and factory employment, both with their gritty reality, populated by fiercely independent people who recognize basic rights and responsibilities of life in a New Hampshire town. Howard Elman surveys his land: "He paused by an overturned wheelbarrow to survey his land. Birches, a score of junk cars, a swing on a limb of a giant maple, a bathtub in the garden, a gray barn, a house sided with fading purple asphalt shingles, a washing machine riddled with bullet holes—to Howard, these things were all equal in beauty. He saw no ugliness on his property" (1-2). His neighbor, Zoe Cutter, represents the other view of the New Hampshire landscape as a place of rural beauty and picturesque town greens. The one blot on her postcard view is the Elman farmstead, with its "Yankee yard" of cars, appliances, and other potentially useful items. What drew her to New England first was a picture she saw as a child growing up in a Kansas City tenement:

. . . a picture discovered thirty years ago in a National Geographic magazine formed in her mind: forested hills, fields that rode the lower slopes, a tidy stone wall bordering a country lane, white birches in the foreground like two angels, white church steeple just showing behind maples in the background . . . Poof! She imagined the field on a warm summer day without Elman's house and clutter but with the barn, a solemn tortoise on a green sea. (59-60)

Cutter wants Darby to be "a massage for the eye and soul" (193).

Deep personal desires—economic, sexual, and spiritual—drive these competing visions of the landscape. New Hampshire has struggled over how one preserves a viewscape without supporting the human ecology that creates and sustains it, the "working grunts" and locals who support community life. This philosophical, political, and economic struggle is entangled in the personalities of the insiders and outsiders of Darby. Hebert provides humorous and insightful portraits of families and personalities, from the Jordans, almost parodically dysfunctional and beleaguered by poverty, ill health and disabilities, like Faulkner's Snopes family or the Cross family in Peyton Place, to Bert Reason, the realtor who fancies himself as an agent of change and the American dream, and Harold Flagg, proprietor of the general store, selectman, who becomes sexually aroused at the sight of Zoe's feet and money and imagines himself as her potential suitor. He dies covered with donuts and roses in a car crash on his way to propose to her. Even the Elman family reveals the complex divide of generations, as Howard and Elenore's daughters move away and their son Freddy heads off to UNH where he become alienated from his father's ways and then hears the siren song of Zoe Cutter. Everyone in the book is searching for something lost, such as a sense of self-worth, youth, community, authenticity, or a connection to nature. The sense of loss may be based in individual experience and psychology, but it drives them to find meaning in

abstract, idealized image of a New Hampshire way of living that may conflict with one's neighbor image. Hunting becomes a metaphor and a reality leading to violence for this search for dignity and meaning. As Howard Elman ponders about the pain following the loss of his finger, finger "How was it that something that no longer existed could make you feel?" (31). This is the question that confronts everyone who faces the changing New Hampshire landscape.

The debate over change is presented in the very best town meeting scene in New Hampshire literature. Ernest introduces the cast of characters at a typical small town meeting: selectmen, farmers, commuters, shack people, and the new people. Even the town hall reflects the psychic divides among these groups, since it has a dilapidated and seldom used hall, a small library, town offices, storage areas, and a rotting pulpit in the basement. As Hebert describes these demographic groups in terms of their ideas about government, human nature, religion, and taxes, he demonstrates why the power of resistance to change and to taxes may be the only shared value among wary insiders in the face of commuters and new people. As in a similar scene in Peyton Place, the failure of Cutter's ordinance reveals a fundamental value in New Hampshire towns not to interfere in one's neighbor's life or land. This, however, is a tenuous foundation on which to build community.

Zoe Cutter's desire to cleanse the land has an aura of eugenics when she turns her gaze on the Elmans. She fantasizes that Howard "was one of those male animals that ought to be castrated for its own good and for the good of other creatures" and to get rid of the "male ego, that small dictator part of the brain that was wired directly to the genitals" (58). Unable excise Howard's ego, she seduces his son Freddy and hatches a plan to remove Heather from his influence and to fix Heather's buck teeth. Ollie has to flee the area so social service agents won't take his mentally disabled son from him. As Nancy Gallagher has shown in Breeding Better Vermonters, a dark side of maintaining a New England image has been the categorization of certain classes and ethnic and racial groups as undesirable or degenerate. Cutter acts in the name of aesthetics and a sense of managed reform, but locals like Harold Flagg cruelly stigmatize the "defective" Jordans to settle grudges and extend personal power.

All of these issues bear close attention, but it is the connection of gender and violence that drives the plot. The very interest in figures such as Elman in contemporary fiction of New England has something to do with debates over the meaning of manhood in American culture over several decades. Donna Cassidy has explored how in the 1930s New England "folk" figures such as lumberjacks and fishermen were used by artists and writers as models of a revitalized American male who might strengthen a country weakened within by economic depression and urban male neurasthenia and from without by the challenges of fascism and communism. By the 1970s, writers such as Robert Bly proposed that manhood had to be rescued from the feminizing influences of that era, spawning the men's movement with its ersatz tribalism, encounters with nature, and male bonding. Males such as Howard Elman or Chute's Beans project a powerfully sexual and physical masculinity in opposition to the neurotic sexuality of Harold Flagg or the sensitive, intellectualized, and alienated masculinity of Freddy, Howard's UNH-educated, poetry writing son. As Donna Cassidy has shown, such anxieties over gender can also

involve cultural attitudes towards homosexuality, evidenced in literature in the Vermont stories of E. Annie Proulx and in Stephen King's Salem's Lot.

The fear of a loss of masculinity, symbolized by a missing finger or a gun that won't shoot in The Dogs of March, can provoke violence, and Elman finds what critic Richard Slotkin has called the essential masculine experience on the American frontier, a "regeneration through violence" in the struggle between dogs and deer. Howard thinks, "The fight between dog and deer was an old one, designed within the malicious order of things to weed out the weak and preserve the strong among both dog and deer" (204). Such mythic conflict inspired Faulkner's The Bear a generation earlier, but Hebert does not simply replay this trope in his novel. As Howard strangles Kinky, he sees himself as the hunted deer, with the dog a "woman ascendant over him" (240), but he moves through this grotesque tableaux of masculine violence towards a melting like that of the snows of late March. The dark side of such frustrated, alcohol fueled violence can be found full-blown in Russell Banks's novel, Affliction. Another book in the Darby series, A Little More Than Kin shows the destruction of a man's life by alcohol, and his new novel, Spoonwood chronicles the story of Howard Elman's son, Freddy, who moves to the woods to confront this inner demon. Such books present an ironic twist on Robert Frost's question about New England, "What to make of a diminished thing?" Hebert's skill as a writer is revealed not just by his placement of the development of a character in terms of this national literary and social debate, but also by his ability to create a Howard Elman who is not simply a regional stereotype. Elman approaches the powerful limitations and passions of his nature and aspires to self-understanding, wisdom, and accommodation. The burning of his house, the destruction of his relationships with some of his children, and a drunken one-night stand are self-destructive, yet he learns "He was an ignorant and stubborn man who only now was reaching adulthood . . . free and sad with knowledge" (241). We can see Howard's transformation in his speech, as his favorite phrases move from the sarcastic "Ain't you smart," to the speculative "I daresay" to the humorous and ironic "Indubitably nothing."

Ernest Hebert writes in distinguished company about the people of northern New England, joining such writers as Howard Frank Mosher and E. Annie Proulx in Vermont, Carolyn Chute, Richard Russo in Maine, and Russell Banks in New Hampshire. The attention these writers pay to the working poor, rural conditions, and the arrival of "flatlanders," tourists, and city folk reminds readers of the realities of life in the region. Nevertheless, New England writers of necessity frame their works with the perspectives of modern and postmodern images of the New England region. Joseph Conforti has described the process in the twentieth century whereby the location of the "real" New England has moved northward into an imagined Yankee kingdom where old lifeways and values persist. However, he notes that this image itself has much to do with tourism, literature, and national media creating such places to contrast with the seemingly less-authentic life of suburb and city. Kent C. Ryden points to the power of the idea and the image of New England in preventing an understanding that as a "discrete and small-scale place, a location gains its meaning and identity from its unique local particularities: the stories of individuals and families, the unremarkable rhythms and patterns of neighborhood work and economy, the locally memorable but regionally insignificant highlights of a strictly bounded history" (112). Regional images of New England are

driven by “ideology, abstraction, and the tides of cultural politics” (112), and these may shift with time as they draw outsiders to the region who desire to find what the images tell them will fulfill some desire derived from their placeless existence elsewhere.

What is especially complicated in Ernest Hebert’s work is the rejection of either/or definitions of the meanings of a place like Darby or its inhabitants. To use anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt’s term, one finds a “contact zone” in Darby where various cultures meet, blend, and contest meanings, even in the context of an unequal distribution of wealth and other forms of power. Hebert shows with great insight the ways in which individuals such as Howard Elman and even Cooty Patterson learn to read the landscape old and new in order to develop strategies of resistance, self-preservation, and self-transformation. It is a mistake, then, to posit the life of Howard Elman as somehow representing the “real” New Hampshire as opposed to the artificiality of Zoe Cutter, since Elman himself is in many ways the creation of the same forces that shaped Cutter. The intensely regional focus of the novel is balanced by connections to the larger issues troubling America in the early 1970s, such as violence at home and in Vietnam, the rebelliousness of the baby boomers, race relations, the war on poverty, and women’s liberation. Freddy Elman grows a beard, gives up hunting, takes up writing poetry, and moves to California. Howard Elman’s life is deeply involved with guns and hunting, and we learn that Zoe Cutter’s fortune comes from her deceased husband’s armaments company. The compelling stories and fine writing in The Dogs of March continue in the other novels of the Darby saga, each eagerly awaited by Hebert’s readers in New Hampshire and across the nation.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the images of New Hampshire towns that come to mind in your community? How do these images lead to conflicts in town over zoning, education, economic development, etc.?
2. Has your town debated issues similar to those presented in the town meeting in Darby? Does Hebert describe accurately the groups represented at your town meeting?
3. Both Howard Elman and Zoe Cutter truly love the land of New Hampshire. What values and personal needs does this love of the land express for each, and what values do they, in fact, share?
4. How do you like the ways in which Hebert describes working life, hunting, etc., in Howard Elman’s life. Do you like Howard? Why, or why not? How do you like the ways in which Hebert describes Zoe’s life. Do you like Zoe? Why, or why not?
5. Consider the cast of characters in Darby. How do they enrich our understanding of the town and of the main characters, Howard and Zoe?

Suggestions for Further Reading:

“Hebert, Ernest,” Contemporary Authors New Revision Series, vol. 110 (Detroit: Gale, 2002): 187-89.

Donna C. Cassidy, Marsden Hartley: (Hanover, N. H.: University Press of New England, 2005).

Joseph A. Conforti, Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity from the Pilgrims to the Mid-Twentieth Century (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

Ernest Hebert, “Speech to Accept Sarah Josepha Hale Award, Sept. 7, 2002,” http://www.upne.com/features/hebert_speech.html

Kent C. Ryden, “Region, Place, and Resistance in Northern New England Writing,” in Locating New England, Colby Quarterly XXXIX, no. 1 (March 2003): 109-120.

David H. Watters, “‘Build Soil’: Language, literature and landscape in New Hampshire,” At What Cost? Shaping the Land We Call New Hampshire (Concord, N. H.: New Hampshire Historical Society and the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, 1992): 61-73.