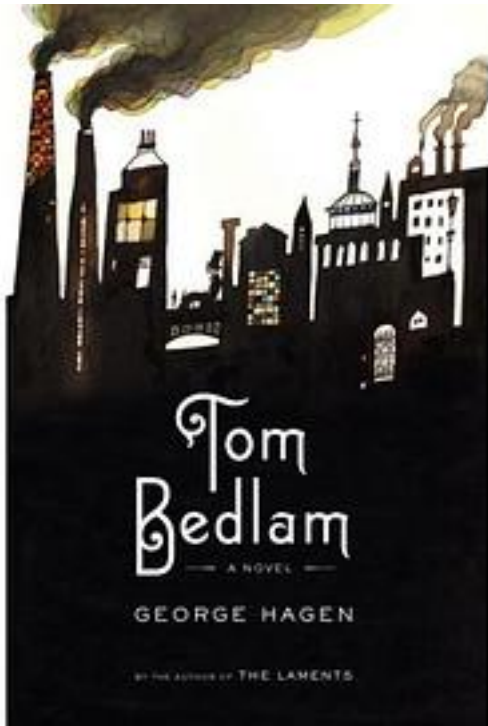


Tom Bedlam



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著者:Hagen, George

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From Publishers Weekly

Hagen (The Laments) rolls out the entertaining epic tale of the personable protagonist Tom Bedlam, beginning in Victorian London and ending in post-WWI South Africa. Along the way, Tom survives a rowdy boarding school, studies medicine in Scotland (where he changes his name to the more proper-sounding Tom Chapel), elopes to South Africa with his professor's daughter and fathers three daughters and a son. Tom is recruited as a battlefield surgeon during the Boer War, but the novel slows dramatically once the war is over and he settles with his family in the Johannesburg

suburbs. His steady life as a surgeon and doting father dominates the story until WWI draws pacifist Tom back to London on urgent business. Tom's trip to wartime England satisfyingly rekindles the story's momentum, aided by plot twists that require the suspension of disbelief. Realistic period detail adds texture to the humor that frequently counters Tom's personal tragedies and sometimes dour outlook. Hagen's prose is surefooted, regardless of which continent, ocean or war his characters encounter. A few lulls pockmark this hefty book, but Tom is a sturdy protagonist and a magnificent relic from a world far gone. (June)

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From The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.com

George Hagen's second novel, *Tom Bedlam*, is a big Victorian saga -- earnest, well-intentioned, thoroughly decent, the kind of book you'd like to marry, but not date. All the right ingredients are here: a London sweatshop, a dank tenement house, long-lost siblings, dastardly scoundrels, mysterious benefactors and the requisite rise from rags to riches. But bringing these Dickensian conventions to life requires something more daring and electric than Hagen generates.

The story opens when Tom is 9 years old, accompanying his mother to a porcelain factory where she paints facial features on figurines. No matter how poorly she's treated, she responds only with blessings, a cheery personality trait that eventually seems psychotic. When she finally wears out and dies, a wealthy relative introduces himself and announces, "It is my wish to provide you with the education you will require to go forth as a gentleman someday." And so Pip -- I mean, Tom -- begins his life again with a suitcase of new clothes and a head full of unanswered questions. "Some families lock up the liquor, or the savings," he observes, "The Bedlams were miserly with the truth."

Moderation is, perhaps, this novel's downfall. Tom's boarding school, Hammer Hall, turns out to be bleak but not too bleak. The old teachers are severe but not cruel. The food is bad, including something "referred to as 'pigeon stew,' though it was rumored that almost anything from squirrel to vole might lurk in it." A little comedy is provided by a pretty but careless cook who spills food on the boys' laps. "There was an increasing number of scalding incidents," Hagen writes. "Smaller portions became the request (clearly an attempt at self-preservation.)"

Amid these hard times, Tom does his best to fit in among the usual collection of frightened boys and bullies. Soon, though, he becomes convinced that the most abused student is his missing brother, and that belief eventually leads to a crisis that will haunt him for the rest of his life. His errant father, an actor who's been reduced to performing circus stunts in drag, advises him, "My boy, sometimes one finds oneself having to choose between one's beliefs and one's best interests." This is the novel's moral core, and it's a noble one. "Tom was no actor," Hagen writes; "he could not pass himself off as a character alien to his own conscience." As he grows up and raises his own family, he always feels the need to atone for the choices he made as a young man, choices that betrayed the affections and memory of those who loved him.

All this is laid out in well-modulated chapters that are rarely disrupted by anything too outlandish, witty or engaging. We learn that women faced discrimination in the workforce. When Tom moves to South Africa to practice medicine, he's deeply troubled by terrible racial and class divisions. He finds the Boer war brutal and

senseless. "What God could permit such misery?" Tom wonders. World War I is brutal and senseless, too, and Britain's forces are led by "a villain with the blackest heart" who perpetuates the fighting because it "keeps our economy going." A charismatic preacher attracts a lot of gullible followers by predicting the imminent end of the world, but -- surprise! -- he's really a fraud, and the end of the world and of this novel never seem to arrive.

Such are the respectable, tepid themes of Tom Bedlam. Only in the last quarter, with the birth of Tom's son, Arthur, does the story develop some surprising complications. For one thing, the narrative breaks away periodically from its focus on Tom, and for another, the emotional range finally broadens to include some genuine passion. Although young Arthur's attraction to the military and his adventures in France provide excitement and pathos, I suspect this will arrive too late for most readers. But if you're, say, 150 years old and complain that they don't write novels the way they used to, I've got good news.

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