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BOOK REVIEWS



Save Me a Seat! A Life with Movies

By Rick Winston (Montpelier, VT: Rootstock Publishing, 2023, pp. xiv, 242, paper, \$18.99).

As a film buff growing up in Yonkers, New York, Rick Winston spent his free time and spare change in such legendary Manhattan movie palaces as the New Yorker, the Thalia, and the Bleecker Street Cinema. These experiences made such a strong impression on him that, after leaving the metro area for rural Vermont, he established his own art-house cinema to feel more at home. Winston co-founded the Savoy Theater in Montpelier in 1980 and the Green Mountain Film Festival in 1999—highlights of a journey chronicled in this charming memoir.

Winston’s cinematic tastes were developed in a complex cauldron of Baby Boom prosperity and political tension. His parents, high school teachers, both came under scrutiny during the anti-Communist “Red Scare” purges. In fact, his father, Leon, resigned from his teaching job after being targeted by the House Un-American Activities Committee. Mother Julia appealed her charge and kept her job. (Winston published an award-winning book about that historical period, *Red Scare in the Green Mountains*, in 2018 with Rootstock Publishing.) The Winston household was also a hotbed of film appreciation. Winston remembers his father’s encyclopedic knowledge of movies, and his boyhood bedroom television was often tuned to *Million Dollar Movie*, which delivered a steady diet of films across genres. Seemingly everywhere Winston went as a kid, he encountered movies. Even at summer camp at Buck’s Rock in New Milford, Connecticut, where Winston’s parents were counselors, he made friends with children of blacklisted filmmak-

Vermont History Vol. 91, No. 2 (Summer/Fall 2023): 126–130.

© 2023 by the Vermont Historical Society. ISSN: 0042-4161; on-line ISSN: 1544-3043

ers and saw such classics as Vittorio De Sica's neorealist gem *Bicycle Thieves*.

Winston attended Columbia University for three years before transferring to the University of California at Berkeley. Both institutions, he recounts, had active film societies on campus. Hanging out with other budding cineastes would prove formative—as would his decision to visit some Buck's Rock chums in Plainfield, Vermont. Winston ended up making Vermont his home in 1970. On a lead from a Columbia classmate, he looked up Walter Ungerer, then head of the film program at Goddard College. Before long, Winston had a job there.

Goddard gave Winston a chance to see great movies but not with the regularity he craved. "Now, living in rural Vermont," he writes, "the lack of opportunities to see classic or foreign films finally provided the impetus for me to take that fateful step from passive viewer to active, participant whatever form that might take" (pp. 62–63). In 1973, Winston started the Lightning Ridge Film Society, showing films in Montpelier's Pavilion Auditorium.

That's the backstory of Winston's memoir. It flows well into a narrative structure that could make a good screenplay. The inciting incident—to borrow from screenwriting parlance—is the Savoy Theater's premiere on January 9, 1981. Joining Winston at the helm was former Goddard colleague Gary Ireland. Winston's wife, Andrea Serota, would join him at the Savoy in 1999, when Ireland left Vermont.

Buoyed by Winston's conversational style, *Save Me a Seat!* is segmented into six sections that function like plot points. Action rises with the challenges of operating the Savoy. Winston's communal ethos served him well in building a network of people—gratefully cited in the book—to help him find, acquire, and exhibit films beyond the blockbuster repertoire. The Savoy story is a tale of adaptation, resiliency, and, above all, community. The 1989 launch of Downstairs Video, a rental trade in the Savoy's basement, made Winston's enterprise a popular crossroads—a "cultural speakeasy," Winston remembers loyal patron Tom Hall calling it (p. 114). The Green Mountain Film Festival, which kicked off in 1999, connected the Savoy to an important event on the Vermont cultural calendar. The climax is the ultimate collision of Winston's goals with market forces and other challenges. At the risk of sharing spoilers, those tensions resolve as the action falls to a denouement that finds Winston no longer at the Savoy but still an active film educator around the state.

Save Me a Seat! is strongest in its reflective modes. Sidebar-like sections tagged as “trailers” offer Winston’s take on poignant films and film experiences. The “trailer” on the Alfred Hitchcock film *Rear Window* (pp. 9–10) revisits Winston’s boyhood response to the film and the joy he found in sharing it as a Burlington College instructor. Iranian filmmaker Samira Makhmalbaf’s 2002 release *Blackboards*, in which itinerant schoolteachers wander the war-ravaged Iran-Iraq border in the 1980s, is featured in a “trailer” that revisits its Green Mountain Film Festival screening near the start of the US “shock and awe” campaign in Iraq. The “trailer” titled “I Was a Teenage Popcorn Scooper” shares four interview excerpts from four young adults who ran the concession stand at the Savoy. Taken together, the “trailers” punctuate *Save Me a Seat!* with interstitial passages that add depth to Winston’s story, possibly compelling a reader to jot down a film title or two for future viewing.

Even the Savoy’s toughest travails bring Winston to points of fond reminiscence. Recalling the Montpelier flood on March 11, 1992, when ice jams forced the Winooski River over its banks, reads as a celebration of community bonds, one brimming with gratitude for the volunteers who rescued the Downstairs Video inventory from surging waters. Winston hits a humorous note with the image of his pacing anxiously about the Savoy while awaiting a film delivery dangerously close to screening time. The “fracturing conflict” among the board of the Green Mountain Film Festival merits only a mention, yielding to the more enduring memory of his involvement as something he “will always cherish” (p. 171).

Winston devotes substantial space to chronicling the myriad tasks involved in operating a movie theater, challenging the notion that it’s simply a matter of showing up in time to run the projector. These minutiae are not all compelling, but they accrue to a painstakingly detailed behind-the-scenes look at what it takes to open a lens on the wider world of film culture for people living in a small rural state. Combined with plentiful anecdotes, they also manage to capture a beloved independent theater’s ephemeral moment in media time.

Save Me a Seat! is unlikely to inspire the next arthouse cinema proprietor in Vermont, but it may inspire gratitude for the labors of love that have enriched Vermont’s arts culture in the post-World War II era.

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Granite Kingdom, A Novel

By Eric Pope (Montpelier, VT: Rootstock Publishing, 2022, pp. x, 260, paper \$18.99).

Granite Kingdom is a Cineramic view of a small Northeast Kingdom town held captive by two competing entrepreneurs in the early days of Vermont's granite industry. In his author's note, Eric Porter tells us that the fictional town of Granite Junction is modeled after Woodbury, Vermont, once known for its exceptional quality fine-grain granite, used in "some of the grandest structures built during a golden age of American architecture, including the state capitols for Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, the city halls in Chicago and Cleveland, and dozens of churches, banks, mansions, post offices, and public monuments as far west as Idaho" (p. ix).

The other ongoing narrative is the *Granite Junction Gazette*, inspired by Pope's former ownership and management of the *Hardwick Gazette* eight miles away from the fictional town, which he credits as primary source material for this rich tale of historical fiction.

The story revolves around the sometimes fractious relationship between the town's largest employer, George Rutherford, president of the Sterling Granite Company in another nearby town of Sterling, and an upstart competitor, Ernest Wheeler, president of the Wheeler Granite Company.

The story's omniscient narrator entices the reader through a vast array of the locals who people Granite Junction but also relies on the two principals in his fictional *Granite Junction Gazette*: Clarence Slayton and Dan Strickland. Slayton is the owner, editor, and publisher, who also writes a regular column called "Local Lumps." Strickland is his ad salesman, galley proofer, and part-time reporter.

As I read further and was introduced to the panoply of characters comprising Granite Junction, I felt I was somewhere between Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* and a compendium of *Vermont Life* magazine stories. Among the many compelling characters and subplots the reader will encounter are a lady vendor of home-made whiskey, a local knock-shop laundry service, the emergence of silicosis as a threat to the granite finishing industry, a murder/suicide, and the suspicion that anarchist rebels from Barre's Socialist Labor Party Hall may have infiltrated the politics of Granite Junction. The deep variety and well-drawn character development of the people of Granite Junction

makes for an intriguing glimpse of life in a Vermont mining community at the turn of the twentieth century.

At first, I struggled with the author's narrative style, which occasionally overreaches and violates the basic principle of narrative storytelling: "show, don't tell." But I got used to it and came to see the narrator as, in fact, not the author's omniscient voice but rather another character in the plot: "Edna knew her first duty was to her husband, and she didn't want to add her frustration to the bitter disappointment he struggled with" (p. 146).

Reading and re-reading *Granite Kingdom*, I tried to imagine an appropriate metaphor for the storyline's lack of a single narrative arc, and it dawned on me that reading Eric Pope's lively tale was like watching a home movie plucked off the shelf and seeing a slice in time of a former life. I say this as an indication of the story's power for me.

My interest in *Granite Junction* never waned, and I looked forward each evening to turning off the TV and revisiting it by reading another forty pages, even on the second read. The novel does not conform to the most common narrative conventions; but it does not in any manner let the reader down. It's a rich and enticing tale told unconventionally, with great character and community detail and an intriguing glimpse of an earlier time in Vermont.

The historical aspect of the novel triggered an interest in learning more as I assumed, like many Vermonters with a limited knowledge of Vermont's geological understorey, that Vermont's quarrying industries were limited to Barre for granite and Poultney and Proctor for the softer slate and marble stones. Having grown up in Morrisville, I had no idea that Hardwick/Woodbury was also a major center for granite and was eager to learn more.

Not only did I learn a great deal from *Granite Kingdom*, but I also thoroughly enjoyed reading it and recommend it unconditionally to all who love a great story or appreciate Vermont historical fiction.

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