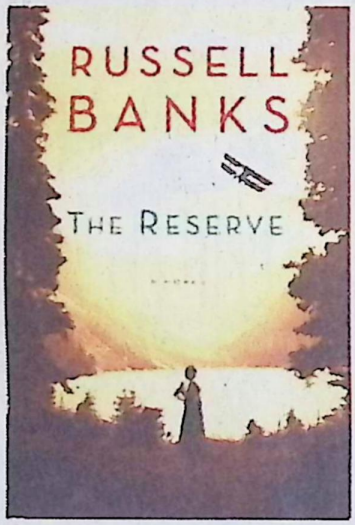
The Rich Guard their Secrets in the Adirondacks

HELLER MCALPIN



New York's Adirondack State Park encompasses some of the most beautiful, unblemished land in America. As Russell Banks writes in his new novel, set in 1936, the Adirondacks have been a magnet since the mid-19th century for the country's wealthiest families seeking "to quicken and refresh their sooty, urban souls with transcendental views of nature unadorned."

As someone who refreshes her "sooty, urban soul" every summer at a family camp somewhat similar to the one described in "The Reserve," I approached Banks' 18th book with personal as well as literary interest.

Since Banks moved to upstate New York in the 1980s, he has set several novels, including "The Sweet Hereafter," "Rule of the Bone" and "Cloudsplitter," in blue-collar Adirondack towns. The region, with its jagged contrasts between majestic scenery and a depressed local economy, is awash in the sort of disenfranchised souls who so often populate Banks' fiction. While severe restrictions on logging, industry and development have helped preserve its pristine beauty, they have also limited employment opportunities for locals.

In "The Reserve," Banks highlights the area's social history and the origins of its two-tiered class system, but, unusual for him, his primary focus is on wealthy outsiders. Also unusual for him, he maintains his emotional distance. His characters, as a result, seem more like emblems of the evils of their class than fully realised individuals.

When artist Jordan Groves flies his seaplane - illegally - into the Tamarack Wilderness Reserve on July 4, 1936, to see Dr. Carter Cole's art collection, he immediately recognises his host's daughter as "Definitely a woman to be careful of." At 30, Vanessa Cole is a beautiful, wild, twice-divorced socialite. Deflecting her initial advances, Groves says, "And people like you and me, we leave a lot of wreckage behind us."

Banks' omniscient narrator explains - somewhat disdainfully - that Vanessa's family camp is "no more an actual camp than her father's Park Avenue apartment. But calling it a camp helped people like the Coles coddle their dream of living in a world in which they did no harm. It let them believe that for a few weeks or a month or two, even though their so-called camps were as elaborately luxurious as their homes elsewhere, they were roughing it, living like the locals, whom they hired as housekeepers, cooks, guides, and caretakers: the locals, who were thought by people like the Coles to be lucky - lucky to live year-round in such pristine isolation and beauty."

A successful artist living in nearby Petersburg, Jordan Groves is the rare local who can straddle the class divide; what he lacks in breeding, he makes up for in fame. Based on the popular illustrator and painter Rockwell Kent, who lived the second half of his life in the Adirondacks, Groves has the potential to be a more intriguing character than he is. Like Kent, he is a womaniser, adventurer, memoirist and leftist who never joined the Communist Party - attributes we're told about rather than shown. Unlike Kent, who died in 1971, he doesn't live long enough to be targeted by McCarthyism.

Banks' artist is a brawler and philanderer who excuses his infidelities as "minor crimes" because he never allows love to play a part. When Alicia, his long-suffering wife, seeks solace in the arms of a local wilderness guide, it disturbs their fundamental dynamic: She's more comfortable inducing guilt than suffering it.

Banks spins an overwrought, not always convincing narrative that evokes - distantly - Theodore Dreiser's "An American Tragedy." It's a web that ensnares all of his characters in questionable behavior. At its sticky hub are Vanessa's frantic efforts to prevent her widowed mother from committing her for psychiatric treatment in Switzerland and taking control of her inheritance. Vanessa insists her erratic behaviour is a diversion and cover for secrets that really trouble her: her adoption and her father's early sexual abuse. She's convinced that, if sent abroad, she'll be tamed with a lobotomy.

Flying is the novel's central leitmotif, a metaphor for detachment. Groves zips around in his pontooned Waco, tracking his wife's whereabouts from on high and sneaking into the Reserve through a back mountain pass so the officious manager won't hear him. He finds the Zeppelin Company's doomed, hydrogen-filled Hindenburg floating over Lake Champlain "dangerously attractive" - like Vanessa - until he spots the Nazi swastika on its flank.

Like pilots who lose their bearings in a fog, Banks' characters lose their moral compass in Vanessa's storm. The stalwart guide, caught in adultery and an accessory to more serious crimes, complains repeatedly that he has lost all sense of what's right and wrong. The truth about Vanessa's past and fears is even harder to locate.

The most resonant passages in this American tragedy about class, lying and secrets are airborne descriptions far removed from the Reserve. Initially disorienting, these exquisitely sad, italicized sections spirit us above and beyond the histrionics at the Lake and remind us what a skilled and subtle writer Banks can be.

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