

BUSHNELL ON BOOKS: ‘Soft Features’ and ‘A Countryman’s Journal’

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By Bill Bushnell

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SOFT FEATURES

Television journalism is bad news with graphic video and talking heads. Radio journalism is vivid word pictures and a passionate tone. And that is why Coralie Threlfell is public radio journalist with the WMPR station in Maine.

“Soft Features” is the debut novel by central Maine author Gillian Burnes, a tragic-comic story about a radio-news reporter whose passion for the job flames out in spectacular fashion. This is an ambitious effort, a thoughtful and subtle exercise portraying a young woman who loves her job, but can’t do it anymore. Her downfall is slow in coming (the reader will see it before she does), and it takes a while to get there, but the resulting conclusion is worth the wait.

Coralie likes covering “soft features,” the cheerful, upbeat, positive stories. She is a professional, talented and experienced radio reporter, a skilled interviewer and soothing on-air voice. She is certainly not a “newsiopath,” a reporter who thrives on train wrecks, child abuse, crime and disasters. In fact, violent and tragic news make her cry, and she’s not really sure why.

Several curious on-air mental melt-downs worry the station’s staff and her husband, putting her on the side-lines, wondering what’s next. Coralie’s radio career might be over, but she embarks on a final, unassigned story — determined to discover the truth about the Ptarmigan Pond Goblin.

Best is Burnes’s fascinating descriptions of how a public radio station really operates — the technology, production, editing, story selection and the quirky staff like the ombudsman who goes on a “Language Rant” over the difference between an acronym and an initialism. The reader should keep a dictionary close by, because Burnes uses a lot of words nobody has ever heard of like chelonian, boleadora, and pronathous. Still, this is an excellent novel.

A COUNTRYMAN’S JOURNAL: VIEWS OF LIFE AND NATURE FROM A MAINE COASTAL FARM



SOFT FEATURES by Gillian Burnes; Littoral Books, 2022; 248 pages, \$20; ISBN 978-1-7357397-7-9.

Writing a proper essay is a fine art — cogent, succinct, meaningful, maybe humorous, maybe acidic, but always a delight to read. And nobody wrote essays like Roy Barrette, and he's been dead since 1995. Sadly, it seems the art of the essay died with him.

This wonderful book is a collection of 77 of Barrette's published essays, written as an award-winning columnist years ago. Roy Barrette (1897-1995) and his wife moved to Maine in 1958, leaving a lucrative profession in Philadelphia to live on a farm in Brooklin, Maine. They were casual farmers, gardeners really, who kept some livestock and marveled at the life they found: "We did not come here to escape anything, but to find something . . . the opportunity to rediscover some of the virtues of a more stable, simple society."

Barrette was a gentle, thoughtful man — witty, sharp and a master wordsmith, providing vivid word pictures and rare insight. He wrote about little things like a boy's attic room, a cheerful bird or a good book, as well as philosophy and the meaning of life. One essay laments that the education system is flawed, "teaching people how to make a living instead of teaching them how to live."

He also wrote about why good manners are important and why property lines aren't. In one essay, he claims it was so cold even his patience froze solid. He tells how to make a good cup of tea and how to cook coq au vin (add more wine).

Funniest is the essay "Mothers-in-Law," hilarious and so true. His best advice about happiness and life: Be like the seagull in bad weather, take it as it is and don't whine about it. And watch out for old poets, they're everywhere. This is how essays should be written.

Bill Bushnell lives and writes in Harpswell.

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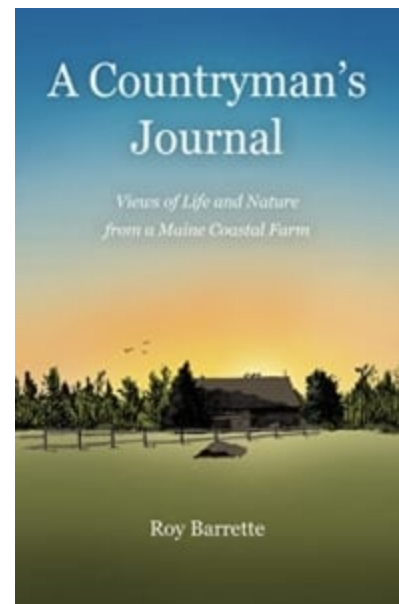
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