

Book Review

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American Quilt By Leah Hager Cohen

FOLLOW ME By Joanna Scott. 420 pp. Little, Brown & Company. \$24.99.

Sally's quite a gal. She can crack a walnut with her front teeth and laugh the bark off a pine tree. She can mollify an ornery bear by dancing with him, and sing accompaniment to boot. No wonder: ever since she quit home for the frontier as a slip of a girl, she's had to face down any number of threats. Why, by her own estimation she can out-grin, outrun, out-lift and out-lie any old scoundrel.

That's Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind, heroine of traditional Davy Crockett stories — not to be confused with Sally Bliss (a.k.a. Sally Werner, Sally Angel and Sally Mole) — heroine of Joanna Scott's latest novel, "Follow Me." But the Sallys bear more than a passing resemblance, just as "Follow Me" owes a lot to the tradition of the American tall tale.

Consider that Scott's Sally also runs away from home at a tender age, with no more plan than to follow the meandering (and made up) Tuskee River. Consider

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that she sings like a nightingale, eliciting praise from even the surliest of sources. Consider that she's got pluck enough to face down a gauntlet of drunks, a loaded pistol and a bully who beats her nearly to death, knocking out two of her teeth. So much for cracking walnuts. But Sally's not beaten, no, Sally's not broken, not so long as she can keep reinventing herself, keep moving north with the current, toward the mouth of the great Tuskee.

And Sally's not alone. Most of the characters in "Follow Me" are drawn with the bold, primitive lines of a woodcut, or — updating the allusion for the mid-20th century, when the story begins — a cartoonist's abbreviated stroke. There's "grizzled old" Swill Jackson and his "stuttering brother," Mason; boozy Gladdy Toffit, prone to getting so drunk "she couldn't think straight"; brash Benny Patterson, the "cream-cheese prince," careening around in his green Cadillac; and cheery Penny Campbell, a "freckled girl . . . in a hurry to get going with life." Even minor characters have names that would render them right at home in a vintage comic strip: Miss Krumbaldorf, Melvin Trotter, Bruce Brewster, Walter Stackhouse, Dara Bliss.

Scott, the author of nine other books (including "The Manikin," a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize), has here fashioned a densely stitched crazy quilt of a story that spans more than 60 years (from 1946 to 2008) and borrows from the conventions of a wealth of genres — not only tall tale but also historical novel, oral history, magical realism, bildungsroman, epic and soap. Everything about this book feels oversized, overstuffed. The prose style itself pays homage to variety, veering from folksy to Socratic to exclamatory to echolalic.

Not every patch serves this quilt equally well. Passing references to such real-life news items as the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the death of Mama Cass and

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the conditions at Guantánamo seem both unnecessary and obtrusively Gumpian. And we might have done with an abridged version of the 50-page section representing a transcript of audiotapes recorded by one garrulous character. But on the whole there's a lusciousness to all the excess, an egalitarian sensibility in keeping with the most quintessential aspects of American mythology.

Even the voice of the narrator turns out

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to be a mishmash. The novel is presented as an account pieced together and told by Sally's granddaughter and namesake — but other voices (an invisible Greek chorus? Sally's conscience, divided?) keep leaking in:

"Hurry up, Sally!
She can't hear you.
Dreamin' a dream of no return.
Good-bye, Sally.
Aw, let's give her another chance. . . .
Shhh.
What's going on?
She's waking up!"

SUCH interjections remind us that the narrative is not really in the hands of young Sally at all, derailing our suspension of disbelief. But the effect, though disconcerting, is not clumsy. Certainly, it's not unintended. At best, it produces a weird thrill. Whether readers find these voices annoying or tantalizing is likely to correspond to their appetite for indeterminacy, since we never learn to whom they belong. Scott drops a hint in the novel's early pages, where she describes legendary beings called Tuskawali, whom the "natives" believed were "the sacred incarnations of fate." These water-dwellers, we are informed, "have the faces and hair of humans and the spotted bodies of tadpoles." They turn out not to figure much in the plot, appearing — or rather,

half-appearing — only a handful of times: once, while crossing a creek, Sally feels "a cold, wet wormy thing" on the back of her leg and flicks it off; a decade later, miles downriver, she glimpses "some kind of water snake or maybe a salamander or a newt," its "long-fingered hands clinging to the curve of a rock." These brief encounters function to communicate Sally's belief in "a magical being," but how, or whether, such a belief informs her actions remains less certain.

Although great at adapting to whatever chance brings, she's less adept at scripting her own course. Like a leaf being buffeted downstream, Sally lets herself be borne along by life's current, receiving with apparent equanimity unprovoked fortune and misfortune alike. She roams from town to town, encountering strangers who take her in as well as those who cast her out, all the while existing in a fog of moral relativism that allows her to abandon her newborn baby; steal from an old man who has treated her kindly; mooch off a lonely drunk; act as such a "bad influence" on a teenage boy that people blame her for his death; desert a friend on her wedding day without farewell or explanation; conduct an affair with a married man; neglect her daughter to the point of driving her away; and tell lie after lie after lie. Her resilience may be heroic, but she's no saint.

The one thing she tends faithfully throughout her peripatetic existence is the dream of reclaiming her firstborn — the baby she left "like a pile of fresh-baked biscuits" on her parents' kitchen table. But it's only a dream, not a goal, as we see from her single, desultory effort to locate him and her resignation thereafter to do no more than mail a \$20 bill, week after week, to an address where she cannot be sure he lives. In fact, she cannot be sure he lives, period. It is the result of her selfish desire to believe he does — to insist on a dream-version of events that would relieve her of guilt — that gives the novel its somewhat strained, comedy-of-errors ending.

BUT perhaps Scott intends to derail us here, too. Perhaps what she's after, not only with the disembodied chatterings that comment on the narrative, but also with the improbable plot twists, is something more than our credulity. It's as though the author couldn't resist snatching up a pair of sewing scissors and, now and again, snipping a little rent in the fabric of her own work — not so much to reveal its artifice or the nothingness beyond the page, but in order to pay respect to the rush of voices, the press of consciousness, beyond her authority: a presence unseen yet avid, and undyingly alert to human endeavor. □

