

I am delighted to write a letter in support of Samuel Shem's novel *The Spirit of the Place*. As you know, "Shem" is the pen name of Steve Bergman. I have been an editorial advisor of Mr. Bergman's for several years and it has been my privilege to read his unpublished, as well as his published, work. It is my strong opinion that *The Spirit of the Place* represents his finest and most ambitious work to date. It also happens to be my personal favorite among his novels. I love the book for its humanity and humor; for the rich, complete, and wholly involving world Bergman creates, populates, and makes real down to the tiniest detail on the street signs of his fictional Columbia, New York (a stand-in for Hudson, the historic Hudson River town). Compassionate, capacious, funny, full of big ideas and memorable personalities, *The Spirit of the Place* is truly a great novel.

The story concerns a young doctor, Orville Rose, who returns to his hometown, Columbia, upon the death of his mother. Orville is stunned to learn that his mother has left him an enormous sum of money as well as her historic home (a hot property in this rapidly gentrifying town). But there is a catch. The will stipulates that Orville must stay in Columbia and live in the family home for one year and thirteen days in order to claim his inheritance. Orville has always felt stifled in Columbia and desperately wants to return to Europe and his Italian girlfriend. But the financial freedom his inheritance would offer is a strong incentive to stay put, at least temporarily. As Orville struggles with his decision, he re-connects with the man who had been his surrogate father: Bill Starbuck, the town doctor. Bill is the kind of small town doctor who has long since disappeared. His dusty office features a prominent "YES SMOKING" sign and a cache of his home remedy "Starbusol". Bill treats the working poor, the people that the medical and insurance industries have shut out, and is a genuine healer. Now in his seventies, Bill needs a break and he talks Orville into helping out. As Orville takes over Bill's practice, he plunges into the grim realities of American life (as perhaps only doctors are subjected to with such grinding regularity): "Alcohol and violence. Murder as grisly as Angola. Malnutrition as bad as the Third World...Cornucopia of drugs...Epidemic smoking and obesity."

Interestingly, Bergman sets his novel in 1983, a point midway between the idealism of the 1960s and the cynicism and divisiveness of today. As a compassionate, politically-attuned person, Orville senses a drift towards conservative, profit-driven policies and is deeply alarmed. He sees the effect of those policies on the health and prospects of his patients. I think on one level *The Spirit of the Place* can be read as a portrait of that moment in time when we (as a country) had a crucial choice to make...and failed ourselves.

"History" is one of the important themes here and it enters the novel through a romance Orville has with a delightful young woman, Miranda Braak, who aspires to be the town historian. Her extensive knowledge of the past challenges Orville to achieve perspective on his present crises. Her love and personal integrity challenge Orville to become less self-absorbed, to grow as a person. Bergman

has a real gift for character and Miranda is one of his most sympathetic and inspired creations.

Bergman's novels *The House of God* and *Mount Misery* are required reading in many medical schools and Bergman has a cult following among doctors. But I believe *The Spirit of the Place* presents a broader, more mature vision. Like those earlier books, *The Spirit of the Place* offers an authentic and unvarnished portrait of the medical profession and those who practice it, but it also underscores the crucial link between the health of individuals and the health of our communities.

Rosemary Ahern  
Editorial Director  
Other Press