

Hillbilly Heaven, Hillbilly Hell

Pilgrim's Wilderness: A True Story of Faith and Madness on the Alaska Frontier by Tom Kizzia. New York: Crown, 2013. Hardcover, 336 pp., \$25; New York: Broadway Books, 2014. Paperback, 336 pp., \$14.95

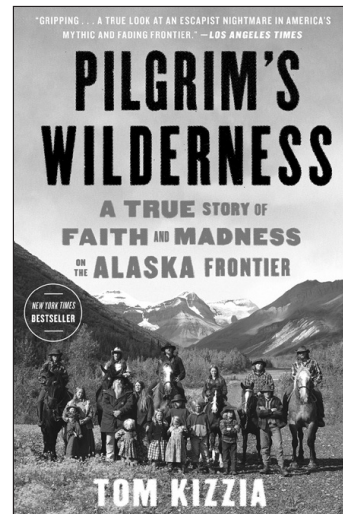
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Many of the greatest characters in Western literature are thought to be so for their complexity. We are often not sure whether we love them or hate them, whether their motivations are pure or not, if they can be trusted. Think of Jay Gatsby, of course, or Humbert Humbert, or Rabbit Angstrom, or Kurtz, or Seymour Glass, and the list goes on. This rendering of complex characters, a hallmark of literary fiction, is also one of the most distinctive features of literary journalism. In his introduction to the anthology he co-edited, *Literary Journalism: A New Collection of the Best American Nonfiction*, Mark Kramer writes that literary journalists immerse themselves in their subjects' lives precisely to understand this complexity "at a level Henry James termed 'felt life'" (Sims and Kramer, 23) At this level of understanding, says Kramer, writers come to understand their subjects' "individual difference, frailty, tenderness, nastiness, vanity, generosity, pomposity, humility, all in proper proportion" (ibid.).

Tom Kizzia, author and former reporter for the *Anchorage Daily News* (now *Alaska Dispatch News*), knows something about this kind of immersion, and the complexity of character it can yield. In his 2013 book, *Pilgrim's Wilderness: A True Story of Faith and Madness on the Alaska Frontier*, Kizzia's subject is Papa Pilgrim, or Robert Allen Hale, Bobby Hale, or Sunstar, depending, perhaps, on when you met him. Kizzia, a tireless journalist, extensive researcher, and gripping storyteller, met Hale as Papa Pilgrim, but through his investigation, which spanned a decade, came to know him well in all of his other identities. And, in Kizzia's book, the complex character of Papa Pilgrim comes fully to life.

Between 2002 and 2008, the story of the Pilgrim family made national headlines, first for their battle against the National Park Service in Alaska, the result of bulldozing an out-of-use road to the ranch they purchased in the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, near McCarthy, Alaska. Though they eventually lost, the Pilgrims became heroes among anti-government activists. And then, just a few years later, Papa Pilgrim's even more harrowing crimes, the physical and sexual abuse of members of his family, came to light.

For Kizzia, the story of Papa Pilgrim and his family—including wife Kurina



Rose (or Country Rose, as Papa Pilgrim came to call her) and their fifteen children—begins when they move to their ranch outside of McCarthy. The property, which Hale dubbed “Hillbilly Heaven,” represented the last in a series of efforts by the Hale family to live off the land, outside of a society they viewed as corrupt, and, ultimately, to live a kind of Christian life, the terms of which were set solely by Hale himself. They had tried to make such a life for themselves in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of New Mexico, but found that even in that remote place, their neighbors were too close and their proximity interfered with Hale’s attempts to keep his family pure. Hale moved his family to Alaska, he told Kizzia, simply because, “We really enjoy our Christian life together. . . . We knew this land was in the middle of a national park,” he continued, “but to us that just meant our neighbors would be few and far between” (157).

But that’s not all it meant to live in the middle of a national park, as Hale found out when he received repeated entreaties from the Park Service to survey the land. Hale ignored the United States National Park Service requests, but rangers persisted in their efforts to survey Hale’s land using snowmobiles and airplanes. On one such flight over the property, a ranger found that Hale and his family had bulldozed a road from McCarthy to their property, “thirteen miles through the national park,” Kizzia tells us.

The standoff with the NPS launched the Hales into the public spotlight. Suddenly, the family that moved deep into the wilderness to get away from society was the subject of close inspection and speculation by the federal government, Alaskans, and even their neighbors in the remote town of McCarthy. And this is where Kizzia himself enters the story. As a reporter for the *Anchorage Daily News*, Kizzia wrote a series of stories on the family, and had many opportunities to speak with them and even to visit Hillbilly Heaven. In the book, the moment the reporter enters the story reinvigorates a narrative that, without his presence and voice, risked falling flat. At the start of Chapter 11, when Kizzia writes, “Not long after the Pilgrims reached McCarthy in early 2002, I started hearing stories” (155), his own story is reanimated. Indeed, Kizzia becomes a character in his own book, at first trusted and befriended by Papa Pilgrim, and, later, when Kizzia began to dig up Hale’s past—his time in New Mexico, his scandal-ridden youth, and his bizarre ties to the Kennedy assassination—demonized and ignored by the family.

Kizzia’s book is as much about journalism as it is about the particular story of Robert Hale. That is, Kizzia as a writer is interested in the role journalism plays in unfolding the story. His own newspaper, and indeed his own writing, was instrumental in this—hence the distrust he eventually encountered from the Hales. He also quotes extensively from the local McCarthy newspaper, the *Wrangell St. Elias News*. He’s particularly fascinated by a pseudonymous writer who calls herself McCarthy Annie. She writes an unabashedly biased column defending the Hales in their fight against the Park Service right up until the end, when Hale became indefensible. The world would learn, as media attention focused on the family, that Hale had been physically abusing his wife and children, and, in the book’s most harrowing turn, sexually abusing his eldest daughter Elizabeth, whom Hale refers to as Elishaba, the original Hebrew version of Elizabeth.

And, indeed it is through this name changing, the way a character appears one way through one perspective and yet completely changes when the perspective shifts, that Kizzia's narrative unfolds. In short, he understands the complexity of his characters in a profound way, precisely because he spends so much time getting to know them, both in person and through their backstories. Even at the end of the book, when all of Hale's egregious crimes come to light—he eventually pled guilty to charges of physical and sexual abuse, and died in prison—Kizzia still seems to grapple with the complexity of Hale's character. He writes of his reporting of Hale's trial, "In my notebook I had circled in red a comment . . . from Robert Hale himself: 'If my children look good, walk good, talk good, *are* good, well then how did they get to *be* good, if their father is so evil?'" Kizzia tells us, "I had scribbled a big question mark next to the quote" (281).

The strength of Kizzia's narrative, and of his abilities as a literary journalist, is the way in which he paints, in full color, the complexity of his main character. In the end, the reader is sure that Hale was a vicious criminal, but this judgment, like Kizzia's, does not come without a heavy dose of complexity, and, indeed, empathy. Kizzia's effectiveness as a storyteller lies precisely in his ability to portray a character like Hale, who lends himself to quick and easy judgment, in a way that problematizes such judgment. Kizzia sees the complexity of his subject and renders him so completely that the reader, ultimately, sees it too.
