

*THE GLOBE AND MAIL*, 18-11-2000

Reviewed by Jim Bartley

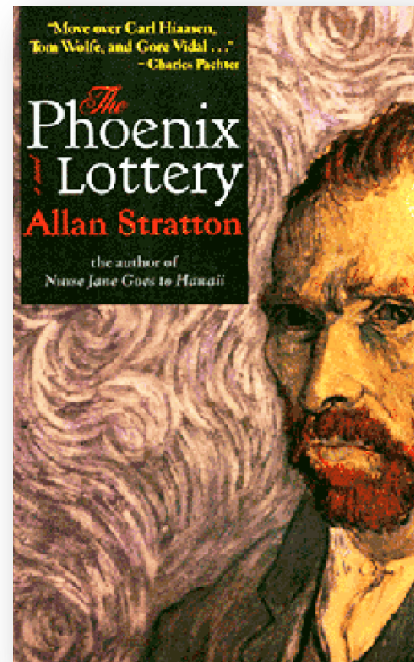
Award-winning playwright Allan Stratton has had a reputation for lunacy ever since his runaway hit, *Nurse Jane Goes to Hawaii*, first graced the boards of a converted cinderblock garage on Toronto's Dupont Street in 1980. Now, perhaps nostalgic for the low-rent days at Phoenix Theatre, he has made tenaciously ungentrified Dupont the address of his first novelistic anti-hero (heroes being, of course, hopelessly unfunny), and honoured the Phoenix with the book's central metaphor: a charity lottery whose winner will enjoy 15 minutes of global fame in the company of a blowtorch and a celebrated oil painting.

But don't buy this book for its metaphors, which are deliciously apt, or for its satire, which perversely, courageously, hacks through our cultural-capital pretensions like a blunt lawnmower in a Rosedale dahlia patch. Don't buy it for its sly cover, from which peer the accusing eyes of Vincent van Gogh, ear expectedly missing -- not, take note, as a painted absence, but sliced right off the book's edge. And most certainly don't buy it because some logorrheic reviewer importantly tumpeted its unprecedented evisceration of -- well, among other things, the windy, tin-pot omphalocentricity of arts trumpeters.

Read this book because it's funny. It's the funniest book I've read in years, maybe in decades. Read it because it's vicious in the thinly veiled fictions of its real-life finger-pointing. It's about a counter-cultural son of an art-loving Toronto booze magnate named Edgar Beamish. It's about the sucking tentacles of the media octopus. It's about a dead white male artist and a live white female one, the male brilliant, obscure and poor, the female impudent, notorious -- and poor. It's about love buried by acquisition, and human spirit buried by religious and aesthetic dogmas recast in the shape of stock options.

The breakneck paces takes us from Toronto's Queen Street to Baffin Island, from Cuba to the Vatican. The unrelenting giddiness of the writing occasionally gets a bit wearying, and the novel's impact would only increase with some judicious trimming of its near-400 pages. But these are quibbles. Among its diverse pleasures is Stratton's fearless talent for sacrilege. Here is his gouty Pope, convalescing after eating a large box of peanut brittle:

"Innocent checks the ornate clock beside his bed, a gift from a Swiss industrialist. ... The numbers have been replaced by carved figurines representing the twelve disciples, with the apostle Paul filling in at twelve for Judas. On the quarter hour the figures genuflect; on the hour they sprout haloes and wings; the alarm is the Hallelujah Chorus. According to the clock, it's the middle of the night in Toronto."



Stratton finally evokes a faux-rosy dawn, but it's the black light of this book, and the lunatic funhouse ride, that truly illuminate.