



Fool on the Hill

Matt Ruff

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It is a literary event when a genuinely new fictional voice comes along. When that voice achieves its newness not through a certain formal facility but through the freshness of its vision, there is truly something to celebrate. Matt Ruff was only twenty-two when *Fool on the Hill* was first published, but with his novel he gave us a story that won over readers of every persuasion. Not your usual first effort, *Fool on the Hill* is a full-blown epic of life and death, good and evil, magic and love.

Think of the imaginative daring of Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale*. The zany popism of Tom Robbins's *Another Roadside Attraction*. The gnomish fantasies of J.R. Tolkien. Think of these and you begin to get some idea of one of the most remarkable first novels to come along in years.

In the world of *Fool on the Hill* dogs and cats can talk, a subculture of sprites lives in the shadows and underfoot (if you're the sensitive type, or drunk enough, you might see them cavorting across the lawn), and the Bohemians, a group of Harley- and horseback-riding students dedicated to all things unconventional, hold all-night revels for the glory of their cause.

Then there is Stephen Titus George, the novel's youthful hero, who somehow finds himself the main player in a story that began well over a century ago. George is a mild-mannered flier of kites, a sometimes writer of bestselling fiction, and would-be knight looking for a maiden. George will find his girl and the century-old story will provide the proverbial dragon whose slaying will sanctify their love. But it will not be a sword that fells the foe but the transforming power of the imagination.

Fool on the Hill Details

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From Reader Review Fool on the Hill for online ebook

Melanie says

This book was first lent to me by a coworker and fellow Cornell alum who said, "I don't know quite how to describe this book. It's kind of out there, with fairies and talking dogs, but it's set at Cornell and somehow I just know you will like it."

She had me at talking dogs.

It's a treasure trove for fans of literature, mixing quest sagas, fairy tales, Greek mythology, Shakespeare, Tolkien, Richard Adams, not to mention cinematic Westerns, epic battles, zombie-like attacks, and motorcycle mayhem. Place that all in a setting I know and love dearly, in roughly the same era as my own college experience, and I couldn't help but adore this book.

Now I have bought my own copy so that I can share it with my son - the next generation Cornellian in the family - and my husband, who is not a Cornellian but does appreciate weird stories.

And by the way, they are sprites, not fairies.

Alex says

Rich, fun, inventive, imaginative, borrowing from everyone but owing to no one. Matt Ruff is an amazingly frantic writer who can take a story in fifteen different directions at once, but somehow tie them all back together in the most creative of ways. Fool on the Hill takes place at Cornell University, but a Cornell that is just outside of our own. His vivid details will leave you walking the campus, looking around and trying to see the world that created on top of this one.

Larry H says

This is easily one of my favorite books of all time. I've read it three or four times and love it more each time. This is the story of a man looking for love, truth and dragons to slay, and as corny as that may sound, it's an amazing book.

Marina Furmanov says

this book started off with so much potential. I actually thought that it may be similar to Jitterbug Perfume, the only book that intertwines stories like ingredients to a wonderful ramen broth. Well fool on the hill had no such seamless elegance. It was bulky.. wrong.. and at times I wish I was reading something more captivating. At no point was I in disbelief of what was happening.. some twists were indeed a bit too fantastical - but I wanted it. I craved Matt's imagination to engulf me with waves of tightly executed, all consuming plot lines.. but why? why did you have to just start so high and then slowly deflate like a helium

balloon whose smiley face turns into a sad face on day 4? and since we are on the topic of time.. why whY wHY WHY did this book drag on and on and on and ON?!? 400 pages?

Mike Vigorous says

A few of my thoughts on the author, having read only this, his debut effort:

Matt Ruff is smart. Not Nabokov smart. Not Pynchon smart. Not Dave Foster Wallace neurotic, tortuously smart. In fact, maybe he's not quite so smart after all.

Matt Ruff has read a few books. Tolkien. Who doesn't like Tolkien? Greek and Norse mythology is fun, too. And V.! I love V. Wait, though; besides the pun (Benny Profane and the V-necks, a college band) there's no substance to that reference. Nor most of the others (see: Bradbury). In fact, this all looks more like namedropping than anything else.

Matt Ruff is young. Painfully young. His entire world shares a tedious, undergraduate attitude towards sex. Good thing the story is set on a college campus, where at least most of the world actually is an undergraduate. Or a dog. Turns out dogs are a lot like undergrads.

Matt Ruff has a hard time thinking up names for his characters.

Matt Ruff is pomo. It's too bad that his biggest "don't forget that there is a person writing this story that you're reading" effort comes writing himself in as God. And as the hero. Both. Shit!

Negative enough for you? The writing is pretentious without the stylistic flair, broad knowledge, or deep complexity of story that would allow me to put aside the pretension and really enjoy myself. But my friends love him so! And, for all his juvenile flailing, Ruff spins a decent yarn. There's promise; probably worth trying a more mature effort of his. [Book:Set This House in Order|71847]?

Martin Pepe says

Matt Ruff does something extraordinary in his masterstroke of a first novel, *Fool On A Hill*. He breaks all literary conventions and none at the same time. I hesitate to use this comparison because the content and tone of the two men's work share no similarities, but Ruff wields total command of previous books and literary conventions the way Quentin Tarantino does with genre cinema. Tarantino doesn't copy and I don't think of his films as homages to the films that inspire him. He elevates, the way only a man, who has total control of his material and what inspired it, can. Ruff does the same with *Fool On A Hill*. He masterfully intertwines multiple moving love stories, fantasy elements like talking allegorical cats & dogs, and a community of sprites, all of whom have their own riveting tales to tell. Then, for good measure, Ruff adds touches greek tragedy, Tolkien, and the Brothers Grim, with all elements and converging story lines being coordinated by an omnipotent "writer" looking down from above driving the whole tale to its conclusion, if for no other purpose then the "writer's" own amusement. The story can be harrowing one moment sending chills down your spine, then ethereally beautiful and reassuring the next. Included are an unbelievably varied cast of characters you never want to leave when you are unfortunately confronted with finishing the book's last page. Anyone who reads this book will wish they went to Cornell University where the story takes place. I

honestly want to make a pilgrimage to the campus to see the canvas on which this tale is painted because Ruff has caused me to believe that it may be the most magical place on earth. I would like to make the pilgrimage on a specific date, but I leave you to find out when that is. This is story telling at its finest and I couldn't recommend it more highly. Do yourself a favor and let the world of Fool On A Hill envelope you.

Ingo says

Ein Autor mit viel Phantasie und die Geschichte ist durchaus "positiv anders". Aber das Buch hat Längen, es fehlt lange an Spannung, die einen zum Weiterlesen treibt. Und schon wieder der alte Kritikpunkt - das Schreiben selbst ist Thema im Buch. So bleiben nur 3 Sterne...

Dena says

This book has been on my reading list, no joke -- since circa 1988. I could never find it via library loan or in a used bookstore but I had a gift card and it seems like it's been reissued. Ruff is a post-modern writer, using irony liberally and I previously read The Public Works Trilogy which was much more successful. There are a bunch of narratives here with the only connection really being Cornell University or Ithaca, NY. Supposed to be a modern day fairy tale incorporating different cliques of students, fairies, and talking canines and felines, each with a sort of quest but the cast of characters is vast and it gets really murky -- like the Canterbury Tales meets One Hundred and One Dalmatians -- although all the ends don't really line up well at the end. Also the cheeky references are plentiful, I'm not sure how he didn't get in trouble with either the Rubbermaid Corp. or the Tolkien estate, but seriously he even threw in a Bel Kaufman reference so it's a little too precious even if it's from back in the day (the late 1980's). I'd say if you are not a fan skip and read the later utility/trilogy book. If you like weird narrators that slip in and out with intrusions to plot as a plot within a plot (I think), fairies and talking animals -- then give it a go.

Margaret Taylor says

Is it ever a good idea for a magician to explain his tricks? When you find out the mechanics behind an illusion, it leaves you feeling disappointed when you realize there isn't really any magic involved. Even worse to be shown how a hot dog is made. There are some things man was not meant to know. It should come as no surprise, then, that when Matt Ruff shows us the ugly workings of how a story is made in his novel *Fool on the Hill*, he gets mixed results.

That I felt that there was some wish-fulfillment going on in this book would be an understatement. S. T. George is a multiply-published, rich and famous author who has a writer-in-residence post on the campus of Cornell University. He slays a dragon by story's end and gets the girl, and no, I am not revealing any spoilers by saying this. Along the way he gets to have fantastic sex with a goddess. George is too much of a dork to accomplish any of these things by himself, so we get to see the god Apollo manipulate events in his life into the shape of a story.

Fortunately, the side characters – and the prose itself – are good enough to make up for a bland leading man and love interest. (Her name is Aurora and she's a Daddy's little princess – three guesses as to what happens to her.) This alternate Cornell is populated by pixies, a possessed mannequin, and Ragnarok, the Black

Knight. Ragnarok is an undergraduate haunted by his past in the Klan and interesting enough to be the main character of a book in his own right.

Matt Ruff is a master of the throwaway reference, rivaling Neil Gaiman's Sandman comics and perhaps even besting him for the sheer density of the things. One of the characters (he's a talking dog) approaches a pair of canine philosophers to ask them about the nature of the divine. They inform him that they are waiting for Dogot, and ask him whether he has seen him. No mention of this incident is ever made again. There is also the case of the best scene of the book, when the villain's rat army is preparing to take over Cornell's dining hall. They forgot to account for the hall's head chef:

“Vermin?! Vermin in my kitchen? DUH-HYUN!”

The chef is Swedish, in case you were wondering.

Ruff is also capable of writing beautiful prose ... when he feels like it.

“Are you real?” he asked her, still dizzy from the fall.

“What?” Myoko glided up to him. “You been into something heavy tonight, Li?”

He didn't answer, but reached out gently to touch her, as if fearing that she too might whirl and vanish. He clasped her hand in his, marveling at the feel of solid flesh and bone; he brushed his fingertips against her cheek.

True, there are so many gonzo occurrences in this book that it can only be called a WTF book, but it's a good kind of WTF book. The plot is contrived. Ruff acknowledges that it's contrived, and even goes to lengths to show us how he ... I mean Apollo ... contrived it. As a writer, I'm quite familiar with the manipulations that Ruff/Apollo undergoes to get characters in the right places so that coincidences can happen. I'm just not sure if it belongs in a finished product. When an author tells us he's about to employ a deus ex machina, it's not as much fun anymore.

Saroj says

A friend recommended Fool on the Hill a year back. I finished this book today, a little over a week after starting it. What I have wondered from the moment I started to read it is why I delayed picking it up for so long.

As a Cornell alumna, I was drawn immediately to the book because it was set in Cornell, though a Cornell that was decidedly fictional, despite the presence of many familiar names and places (Risley, the Arts Quad, West Campus, and McGraw Tower are just a few that are mentioned). Those who know Cornell know that the campus is verdant and beautiful, its buildings are varied architecturally, and each part of campus houses its own share of unique quirks and secrets. I think many Cornellians and visitors sense that there is something magical in much of the campus and surrounding town. What Matt Ruff was able to do was bring the magic to the forefront.

Ruff effortlessly toys with the act of storytelling. Two storytellers, one immortal and the other mortal, tango amid several equally compelling subplots. What I enjoy is how easily he is able to switch between plots and

somehow keep the reader riveted despite the change in scenery, characters, and sometimes species. Ruff's confidence and command is imbued in the plot, so that fantasy, when woven into the story, is never questioned and always believed. Students, sprites, dogs, miscellaneous Cornelliana, and a series of unbelievable circumstances come together to create a tale that, though larger than life, feels at home nestled among the buildings and natural expanse that I called home for almost 4 years.

I'm officially a fan, and I can't wait to read his other works.

Karli says

I described it to my son, as he asked what my book was about - "There is this old, eternal man who is writing a story which brings the people, animals and sprites of Cornell together to fight an epic battle with words, fairy tales, swords and magic" Cool, he said.

Yep - it's a good one!

Alexander says

Guter Unterhaltungsroman. Wie so vieles, das gut ist, wäre der Roman sehr gut geworden, wäre er gekürzt worden.

Bob Nolin says

One hundred pages in, and there are only vague signs of a plot. Mostly, this book seems to be just "stuff happening," and not particularly interesting stuff, either. A story (or Story, as Ruff would have it) holds a reader's interest by making her want to know what happens next. Usually that means either a strong plot drives the story, or an interest in the characters. Both are missing here, and so I'm done with this one. I had a feeling that this book, written while Ruff was an undergrad at Cornell, would be solipsistic, especially as I saw it features a Cornell grad who is a fiction writer. I had hopes that creativity, humor, originality, or brilliance would make up for that, but alas, it didn't happen. There's remarkably little originality here. Names are all borrowed (Hamlet, Macduff, and ZZ Top, for starters), the milieu is, of course, the actual Cornell, and the style owes much to Tom Robbins and Richard Grant. A quarter of the way in, so far we have a dog that wants to go to Heaven (because his dog friend recently died) and thus begins a quest; we have the Cornell-grad-now-famous-author teaching (though the book skips right over his first day of class), coolly hanging out while he waits for his second sexual encounter (he seems to have nothing else motivating him); and we have a coed who is questioning her relationship with a too-staid boyfriend, with broad hints that she'll end up with the famous author dude. Oh, and there's refugees from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" running around, too. I got to a scene where the sprites (who just seem to be there doing stuff unrelated to the rest of the book) decide to liberate the animals in the university research lab. Carnage ensues, and I found myself yawning. Why are they risking their lives for guinea pigs? I don't know, and don't care. You probably won't, either.

Kurt says

This is a contemporary fantasy story that isn't derivative of Tolkien, which in and of itself merits at least three stars. Beyond that quirk, though, this is a terrific story. I was introduced to Matt Ruff through *The Mirage: A Novel*, which I loved, and I wanted to try his first novel to see if I wanted to read more of his work. By the time I hit the halfway point in this fairy tale, I had already gone online to order two more of Ruff's novels. I love this book.

On a surface level, this is a romance about a novelist who lives at Cornell University, falls in love a couple of times, and has some weird and lovable Bohemian friends who fall in love a few times. And the relationships face some big challenges. The fantasy elements, though, draw from *Midsummer Night's Dream*, as the reader is treated to the machinations of the invisible (or just unnoticed) supernatural figures dancing around the edges of the tale, along with the Storyteller guiding the action behind the scenes. The story becomes a modern analogue of *St. George and the Dragon*, as our hero confronts increasingly dangerous forms of evil in his journey to the novel's conclusion, and I love the mixture of familiar and new elements.

This novel began its life as a thesis when Ruff was a student at Cornell, which explains the mildly embarrassing Cornell love that seeps from its pages, but weren't we all young once, and in love with our chosen community in some way? When I caught myself thinking about obnoxious Andy from *The Office*, I chose to redirect my attention to an imaginary college tour guide. Ruff isn't saying Cornell is better than other schools - he's saying he digs the people and the atmosphere and the geography of a place that has been good to him. It's immature, maybe, but sincere.

I love the way this story makes use of the fantasy elements to craft a more transcendent literary tale. There are some truly frightening chase scenes like a well-done slasher flick (Ruff is a master of a well-paced chase scene, balancing detail and momentum flawlessly), but instead of being popcorn, they pick up religious tones to be deeply unsettling to readers familiar with the New Testament (the updated Legion story shook me up in a way that had me curled up on my couch - if I hadn't caught the reference, it would have been a great action scene, and the reference is subtle enough that someone who misses it won't miss what's going on, but adding the demonic aspects allowed Ruff to say so much more without lengthening the story). Also, the scenes with the Storyteller illustrate a compelling and nuanced exploration of the relationship between fate and free will - and in the last couple of years when I was a member of a church, I read so much about that dynamic that I had absolutely no interest in revisiting the topic, so when Ruff engaged me here, I knew I was reading something special. Ruff nimbly sidesteps the pit of Predictability with skillful use of Foreshadowing and Inevitability, so even when the outcome of a scene is fully projected, the reader can focus on the muscular power of the tale without looking for a flashy plot twist.

I don't expect that this 20-year-old novel is going to be widely read these days, even though I hope Ruff becomes more popular as *The Mirage* gains new fans. It's long, it's a little dated, and there's a lot of Cornell love that is a bit off-putting for those who didn't apply to Cornell. I think fans of thoughtful and exciting literature, especially when it comes to fantasy that goes beyond the tired quest structure, should definitely check it out. This is a largely undiscovered gem, and readers with open minds will fall in love with it.

Alan says

I had a hard time even *finding* *Fool on the Hill* the first time I tried to do so, several years ago, spurred by the

"Also by Matt Ruff" list in his brilliant later novel *Set This House In Order* (which you really should read—and I should reread, for that matter). I never saw it in bookstores, and eventually ended up snagging a copy to read through Inter-Library Loan. (ILL's a great service, by the way—you should check it out.)

Since then, though, Matt Ruff's first novel been reissued in trade paperback format (with, I fear, a rather unfortunate cover). I finally picked up my own copy at City Lights in San Francisco, and have since seen it on a couple of other bookstore shelves. Which is all to the good—while this is definitely a first novel, contrived as all hell (sometimes it's hard to figure out just how *many* different demigods and minor mages are meddling with the unwitting characters), pretentious and awkward in places, with frequent Capitalization of Common Nouns to indicate their Significance, it's also a lot of fun, especially if you've ever been a role-playing college student. (Another book in a somewhat-similar vein: Neal Stephenson's *The Big U*, which is also a first novel that spent a fair amount of time out of print before relatively recently becoming widely available.)

The college in this case is a real one, though heavily filtered through a pair of Tom Robbins-colored glasses. Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, is the setting for Ruff's complexly intertwined plot, with skeins that involve a pair of far-from-starcrossed lovers, a war between fairies and rats, another war between dorm students and frats, and the unlikely entente between dogs and cats. Its central human character is an improbably successful young author named S.T. George (yep, he does eventually have to face a Dragon, too) who's at Cornell to teach. Of course, he gets kinda sidetracked... not least by Calliope, a young lady who may well be his perfect Muse. And then there are the Bohemians, a crew of horseback- and motorcycle-riding warrior-students, as well as the mysterious denizens of Tolkien House; against them, the spoiled children of privilege who've pledged Rho Alpha Tau, magical forces of chaos like Rasferret the Grub, and the occasional misguided Ithacop.

This is one of those "kitchen-sink" novels, stuffed full to bursting with Big Ideas and tiny grace notes—it actually took me longer to get through the second time, because I kept noticing bits like Ruff's nod to early George R.R. Martin that I rather liked—but somehow Ruff manages to keep the excitement going, keep juggling those chainsaws and Molotov cocktails, right up to the end.
