Snakes in our American Garden

Review of *Salomon's Garden*, by Nick Mace
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THIS IS A POLITICAL REVIEW, because while you're busy being dull, politics is getting ready to come at you.

Painfully timely, methodical in its vivisection of the radicalization process, aware of post-capitalist ideologies and mechanisms of control: this is the black soul of Salomon's Garden. But that's not all, not at first. The descent into nihilistic violence is the true conceptual pillar that Nick Mace fights against. He debuts with this hand grenade of a book, a terrorist attack on the kind of thinking that wants to split the world into black and white, blue and red, right and left, Baal and Molokh.

And yet, before all of this, what strikes about Mace is his almost poetic imagery, which frames the adventures of our main characters like glimmers: Ben, Jack, and Mickey, and finally Annie. These snapshots stand out most in the first chapter, which introduces the pledgeship of a University of Texas fraternity, but they continue throughout the rest of this dystopian tale. Texan nature is indifferent in its beauty to the violence around it (cf. p. 7), even if it is at times tainted by it: acrimony is all the Anthropocene leaves behind (cf. p. 26). The second chapter is another anomaly. Together with the first, it works as a dark omen of what will be set in motion and explode at the end of the book. Annie has gone to a psychic to try to save her relationship with Ben. It's worth remembering Jared's speech, in which he says that in a world where nothing is sacred anymore, we must find things to make sacred, and that rules will be broken for a higher purpose (cf. p. 7).

Benjamin Redden, the co-protagonist, is an annoyingly recognizable character. Either the reader has met someone like Ben, or the reader sees himself in Ben: a photo negative (p. 82) of the typical extremist kid who has nonetheless developed an extreme ideology. In their argument about think tanks and ideological pockets, Mace highlights how being in a bubble of doom and gloom simply makes you a sheep, albeit of a different kind (p. 38). Like Jason, who we learn in 1.4 is also obsessed with his lack of control, Ben seems to forge paranoid narratives to cope with the absence of future plans (cf. p. 200). That anxiety is made worse by a thesis he struggles with (pp. 85–87) and by his terror of his romantic and working life after college. It is in this fragility (relatable, human, typically male) that the propaganda takes root. Mace is a master at describing the radicalization pipeline. It starts with anxiety, uncertainty, and isolation, combined with being chronically online. Social media then plants a latent racial resentment, followed by crime statistics, videos of violence (both real and AI-generated), and comparisons of media coverage, all spoon-fed by an algorithm that knows how to keep you engaged. Next come holocaust denial, hagiographies of Rhodesia, edits of Nazi footage set to phonk music, infographics about replacement, spreadsheets listing the names of Jews in media and finance, and rivers of gore and porn (pp. 104–105). This is part of the heuristics of indoctrination, which leads to "a ideology of extinction that cuts through all boundaries" (p. 110).

So who's to blame? The Jews, trans people, women, Black people, gay people, Mexicans, libtards, immigrants? Or is it the fucking dystopian, turbo-capitalist surveillance system, grafted on by techno-fascists, that thrives in a socioeconomic crisis engineered by (mostly white) lobbies for whom we are just a means of getting rich?

From 2.1 onward, we're introduced to the other co-protagonist, federal agent Kirk McConn. Kirk has two official tasks and one narrative task. On one hand, he builds a detailed report on Ben, following his path to radicalization up to his initiation into the New Texian Front (a terrorist movement we'll discover is supported by Salomon). On the other, he illegally investigates Jason's death and Salomon's involvement in both matters. Besides being the voice of reason (and, in my opinion, Mace's voice as well), Kirk's narrative role is to counterbalance Ben. Thanks to his analytical mind, Kirk is the story's answer to Ben's violent nihilism and his rejection of the general discontent: we have to believe that we humans serve a greater good.

> Maybe it’s just me and my old man’s sense of ‘right,’ or maybe I’m clutching a young and starry-eyed idea of ‘justice,’ but we’ve got to believe we serve some greater good and recover it if we think it’s lost. As human beings, especially the ones who help run this machine, we do not have any other choice (Mace, p.281).

This doesn't mean Kirk can be reduced to a hopeless romantic, let alone a deluded one. He has long been suspicious of Salomon, and he soon spots their hand in Jason's death.

Let's talk about Salomon, or fear as a business model (cf. p. 281). Mace creates an even more dystopian version of Palantir: a private company elevated to a government body and then to a supra-governmental one. It becomes the undisputed leader first of the home security market and then of the AI and machine learning market, sitting on an exorbitant amount of data thanks to its access to state data and its mergers with other companies. The lack of control the characters feel is the very control Salomon has gained. It exercises that control through Seraphim cameras, AI patrol cars, and armed forces whose oppressive presence is meant to look like the only hint of order in a deliberately engineered disorder. They sell fear and offer the remedy, in a climate where they have snuffed out critical thinking (cf. p. 248). The big reveal about Salomon and the nature of Sophie Strange comes in chapter 3.6. As Kirk says, "[…] the powers that be will never care and never have cared about who or what their business hurts so long as the business is good" (p. 281).

In this system, real and artificial anxieties blend together, so it's hard to tell what has been planted in us and what is genuine fear of the future: nothing is certain. Ben expresses this when he opens up to his therapist, in pages where he fully mirrors an entire generation:

> “It’s just—there’s a kind of background feeling that things aren’t okay or aren’t gonna be okay. Like an anxiety that clouds everything, especially graduation […] But even if I did feel in control of it—my life—I’m not sure I’d be able to build something I wanted anyways. Nothing feels like it’s worth my time or energy anymore. [...] It’s all so trashy and cheap. Like I’m constantly moving from one crappy thrill ride to another” (Mace p.200-202)

Unfortunately, this ride is headed for a crash. That's partly because of his breakup with Annie, who represents his anxiety about the steps of harsh post-college life, and partly because of his initiation into the NTF, which will lead him to kill Kirk.

All he has left is violence: senseless, unfiltered. "Violence is all there is in a reality actuated by violence" (p. 303), and again, "They'll never understand the real problem, the real divide from which this rapture rears its dreadful head" (p. 306). In the end, Jared's words come true for Ben, with tragic poetry:

> All of life’s mirth, love, bonds, rites, affirmations, tender moments, sunny days and warm summer rains, the feats of human excellence, the beauty and emotional and
> physical catharsis and interwoven divinity could never overcome the
> harrowing face of meaninglessness and deep, existential vulnerabilities, the humiliations, the shame, the paranoia that so thoroughly diminished everything else. (p. 307)

Salomon's Garden offers no relief and no room to breathe, only a bowl of bitter, glittering food for thought in which we can still reflect before scrolling into doomsday. While there are a few small loose threads, Mace's debut is nothing short of a small contemporary masterpiece, and my love for this book will resonate for years to come.

50 American stars out of 50. Spread the word of Mace, O ye God-fearing.

-Cristiano Cardone