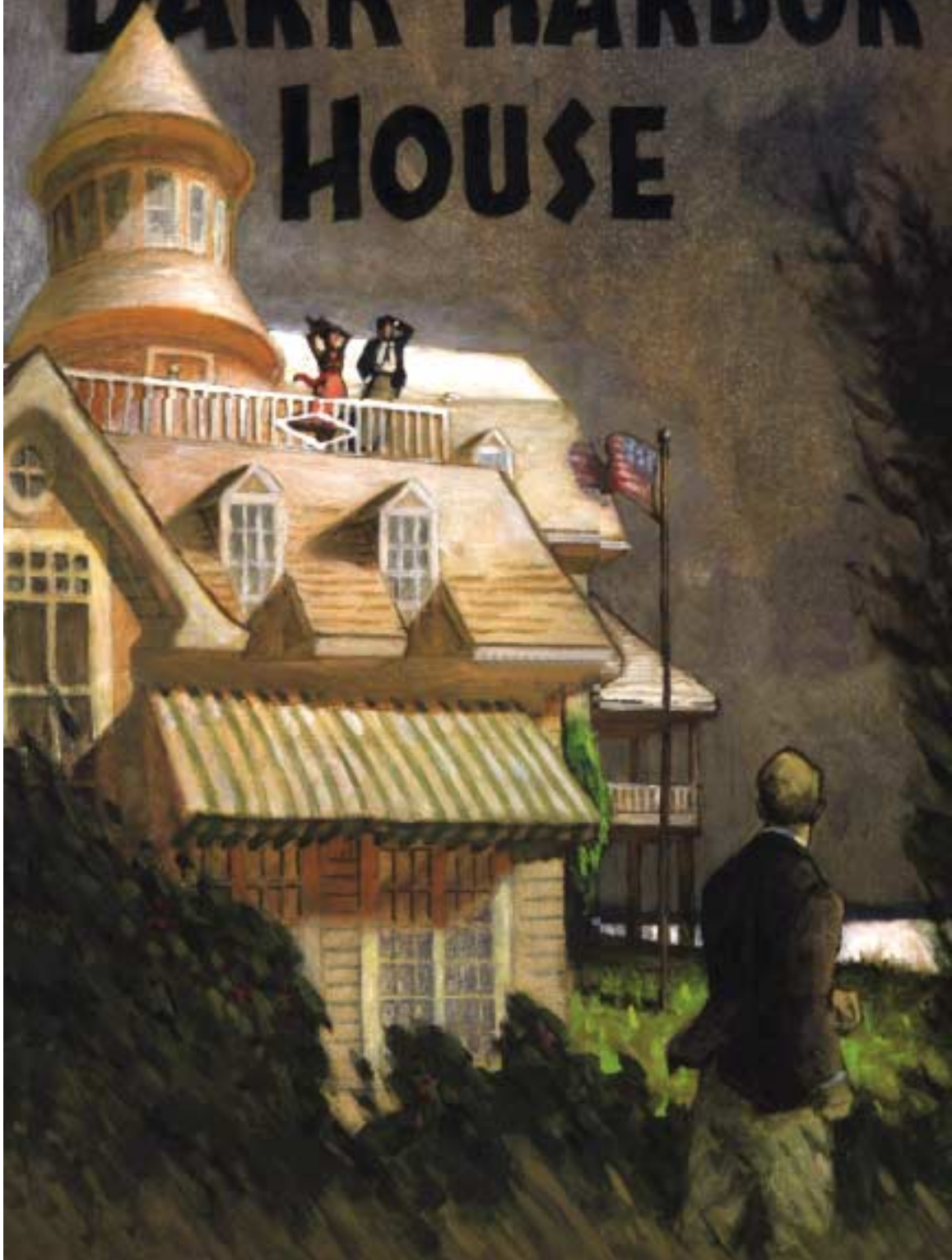


TOM DEMARCO

DARK HARBOR HOUSE



BOOK REVIEW

Comedy of manners

By ROBIN LONSKI

Dark Harbor House by Tom DeMarco, Down East Books, Camden, ME. 288 pp., paperback, \$14.95. ISBN 0- 89272-511-7.

In the late 1940s, the Forsythes invite a diverse group of friends to Dark Harbor House, their summer home on Islesboro [island off the coast of Maine]. Along with their baggage, the guests bring a quirky array of personal dreams, plans and obsessions to the once-grand summer cottage. The summer-long house party becomes an occasionally bewildering, often hilarious tangle of young lust, midnight love affairs and screwball misunderstandings.

If Dark Harbor House has a hero, he is the engaging and inept Liam Dwyer, one of the oh-so-sophisticated “young moderns” among the guests. Liam fancies himself an aesthete, a poet suffering from a “deep, abiding melancholy,” a gift of his Irish ancestry, he claims. Jody Forsythe thinks it a problem with his digestion.

Liam wants to be in love with beautiful Laura Beauchalet. He practices every line he'll speak to her, experimenting with different tones of voice and striking what he hopes are effective and poetic poses. The best laid plans, however, especially of young men regarding young women, often go astray.

With the arrival of the handsome, piano-playing Bruno Nougat, Liam's amorous expectations receive a set-back. Should he dash off a poem to Laura expressing his devotion, or slink off on the next boat to the mainland, leaving the field to his flashy rival? Is unrequited love worth missing a divine meal from the French chef? Perhaps not. After all, even a poet can appreciate fine cooking.

As if the present house party weren't interesting enough, past guests at Dark Harbor House have left behind them tales of immorality shocking even to the young sophisticates. In the early 20th- century, Dark Harbor House's owner hosted two female evangelists (loosely based on Aimee Semple McPherson and Ellen Goodman White) and their host of Angels and Acolytes as well as three health fanatics—W.K Kellogg, C.W. Post and the fictional Dr. Ralston. Rumors abound of some rather un-religious romps. Hints of nude baptisms, voyeurism and a bit too much camaraderie between the Angels and Acolytes are all heady stuff to the present young generation.

Rarely has an author assembled such an eccentric yet wholly credible collection of characters. *Dark Harbor House* is well-constructed, full of insight, honesty and humor. With all its plots, subplots, digressions and diversions, the story flows along smoothly and gently. DeMarco's easy and elegant style, deft and efficient character portrayals, especially of young people at that precarious coming of age stage of life—and lively wit make this comedy of manners a compelling and satisfying read. Tom DeMarco is a wonderful storyteller. Don't miss this book.

Tom DeMarco is a computer systems consultant living in Camden, Maine. *Dark Harbor House* is his seventh book.

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I. MR. COLLYER

“Portland.” The mahogany and fabric covered box above Liam’s head was speaking. “Portland Station next. Portland! Portland, Portland, Portland. Next will be Portland Station. Portland Station is next. The next stop is . . . Portland!” A hiss and then relative quiet.

Liam yawned, waking slowly. Outside there was still the thin rain that had been following all the way from Boston. He knew it was there, though the window was fogged so thickly that he couldn’t actually see. He stretched in his seat, yawned again. For want of anything better to do, he rubbed his hand on the window’s surface, clearing a small circle. The view revealed there was not much less vague than what he’d been able to see through the clouded glass: Mist, the suggestion of pine woods not too far from the track, now and again a bit of cleared field. There was a good deal of mud. No sign yet of the outskirts of a city or town. They rattled past an unmarked platform piled high with silver colored canisters. “Milk,” he said, apparently to himself, as there was no one else riding in the car.

He looked down at his nails, considering whether additional buffing would add to the general air of elegance or take him across the line into obsessiveness. Above all, not to be obsessive. Elegance, but casually achieved, was the goal. He turned the polished top of one cordovan loafer this way and that to reflect the light from the window.

The top crease of his linen trousers was in fairly good shape. The bottom crease, of course, would be a shambles, there was no avoiding that. And there would be at least a few of those sharp wrinkles that marked the crotch, almost like signposts pointing inward. Damned linen. You’d think they could invent something better than that, some kind of newfangled “synthetic” fabric that wouldn’t wrinkle at all. Of course, he could have worn a different trousers for the journey and then changed at the last minute into the linen to arrive looking fresh. There were risks in that, however. Arriving *perfectly* fresh might seem suspicious. If anyone suspected that he had changed to make a Grand Entrance, then the Grand Entrance would be spoiled. Better perhaps to arrive looking ever so slightly mussed.

A perfect exterior, in any case, was out of keeping with his mood of Deep, Abiding Melancholy. Liam sighed deeply. The sound of the sigh, as he considered it, was not quite what he’d had in mind. It wasn’t precisely the sigh of deep, abiding melancholy; more like a sigh of exasperation or even a swallowed belch. He sighed again, this time slightly less emphati-

cally. Much better. Now there was melancholy for you. He tried sighing a few times through the nose alone. Also acceptable, provided only that he could avoid the slight liquid gurgle. He was still nursing the last of a summer cold.

Yawning again, he ferreted about in his jacket pocket for Marjorie's letter and unfolded it in his lap. His hostess had written in a slightly childish scrawl, in her characteristic green ink:

My Dear Liam,

We're all so pleased that you can be with us again this summer at Dark Harbor House. We are looking forward to another season of gay times and good company. Of course, it won't be fancy, you know. As usual we are stony broke. But we'll somehow make do.

The contingent of young people is shaping up nicely. There will be yourself, Clark and Sissy, of course, three friends of Sissy's from school, including (I know you'll be pleased to hear this) the lovely Laura B., plus Clark's room-mate from Amherst, Evan Mayberry, Bruno Somebody-Or-Other, whom Sissy met at Yale, and a certain Miss Groton from Smith (I've misplaced her first name). If we put flags up in front of DHH the way the Plaza does for foreigners, then we could have the flags of Cornell, (Yourself) Radcliffe, (Sissy, Laura, and Angela Pickering), Smith (Miss Groton), Amherst, (Clark and Evan) and Yale (Bruno).

Among the old fogies, there'll be Yrs. Truly and the Colonel, Mrs. (Grace) Hollerith (Andrew's great aunt) (and a very awesome grand lady she is — she certainly terrifies me (do remind me to tell you about Aunt Grace at our wedding!!!)) More of the elderly set: Monsignor Leary who was at prep school with Andrew ages ago, Mr. Collyer again (sorry about that), and Scarlet.

Falling into neither category (neither college folk nor fogie) is our celebrity guest of the summer, Gabriella Lake, who was on Broadway this fall and evidently will be again next season, we hear, doing the lead in the new Clayton Lewis play, Ravishing Beauty. She is that.

Tyndall will meet you with the boat in Rockland. Keep an eye out for Mr. Collyer, who should be on your same train from Portland Station.

XXX,

Marjorie

Yes, by all means, keep an eye out for Mr. Collyer. How kind of Marjorie to have warned him. Of course Mr. Collyer would not be traveling Club in any case, not inclined to dig into his trust funds to pay anything beyond the barest minimum. Liam had splurged on a Club ticket for himself, allowing, along with the other benefits thereof, a comfortable degree of separation from old Mr. Collyer.

He leaned back in the leather seat, trying to conjure up an image of 'the lovely Laura B.' Blond hair, intriguingly blue eyes, almost like the eyes of a Siamese cat, radiant smile, a certain healthy amount of girlish bosom pushing pleasantly upward, long legs and fascinating long fingered hands. He could see each of the pieces of the puzzle, but not the whole. The whole was somehow more than the sum of the parts. And the whole, for the moment, was eluding him.

"Ah, Laura. So good to see you again," he practiced, offering a hand to the empty seat opposite. "Ah, Laura. *So* good to see you again." "Ah, Laura . . . [significant pause] how lovely to see you again." Or perhaps, "how truly lovely . . ." Best to get it down now, since he might well become flustered at the moment. It wouldn't be the first time Laura had got him flustered. "Laura. What splendid luck to have another summer together." No, that would imply that she ought to feel lucky too to be with him for another summer. "What splendid luck for me that we should again have the opportunity of being . . ." No, no, no. ". . . that we again should . . ." "Aren't I the lucky fellow to have the opportunity that our presence together in this lovely setting might provide that we should. . ." Yrggh, a double subjunctive; she would probably collapse in giggles. Stay away from the subjunctive, keep it simple. "Ah, Laura." Just that. Steady eye contact, deep focus, looking right into her. Let her see just a touch of the melancholy. "Ah, Laura." He listened critically to the tone of his words. Maybe a bit softer. "Ah, Laura."

The train had slowed, clattering into a covered area with platforms on both sides. "Ah, Laura. Together again." Liam checked his watch. He had twenty minutes to change to the Maine Central. Portland Station had but two tracks, side by side, the Boston and Maine on one side and the Maine Central on the other. It would be a matter of a minute at most to make the transfer. So he would just take his time and make the change at the last minute, while the final call was being given. That way there would be no chance of encountering Mr. Collyer on the platform. "Ah, Laura. *This is* a pleasure." The train lurched to a stop. The loud speaker above was droning again. Laura would be seated, he thought, as he approached. She would be looking up at him, smiling prettily. When she offered her hand, it would be palm down, not sideways the way some girls do. And so his hand, when it reached for hers, should be turned up, slightly cupped. She would say, very simply, "Liam," and then he would say What would he say? "Ah, Laura, I trust you have been w. . ."

"Well, here you are, Liam. What luck." A round little man with bowtie was standing above him. Liam looked up, gaping, his hand still extended toward the seat in front of him. The little man maneuvered around to seize the hand and shake it vigorously. "Good to see you, Liam. I thought it might be best to find you here, rather than chance a meeting on the platform.

"Oh, Mr. Collyer. Um, I trust you have been well."

Mr. Collyer was nodding. "Quite, quite." He had a young woman in tow, whom he now pulled forward to introduce.

"Mademoiselle, this is Mr. Liam Dwyer. Monsieur Dwyer est un étudiant a une de nos grandes universitaires. This young lady, Liam, is traveling quite on her own in this foreign land. I've saved her from having to manage the natives all by herself." He turned back to the woman to fill her in: "J'explique seulement à Liam comment je vous ais encontrée."

"Mademoiselle. Charmed, I'm sure." Liam took the young woman's hand.

"I don't think she understands, all that much, Liam," Mr. Collyer said in an undertone. "Possibly nothing at all."

"I . . ." the woman began to say.

Mr. Collyer waved his hand breezily. "But that's no great problem, is it? We're here to help, my dear, Liam and I. We're here to help. Now the first thing to do is to move ourselves over to the other train and find three nice seats together."

"I am afraid, Mr. Collyer, that much as I would enjoy being with you for this next stage of the journey, still, as it happens . . ."

"Hmm? Oh Liam, you're saying something, aren't you? Hold on a minute. I need to turn on my contraption." He began fumbling in his vest pocket. "Je fais marcher le gizmo," he explained to the woman, "pour mieux entendre . . . There. Switch on. Yes, Liam, you were saying? He held the little instrument out toward Liam, its wires disappearing into his shirt front.

Liam spoke directly into the box. "As much as I would like for the three of us to be together . . ."

"Yes." Mr. Collyer snapped off the switch and put the hearing aid away. "Of course. Three nice seats together. Now, if you would each give me your ticket. Votre billet, Mademoiselle." He pointed to his own ticket and urged her with his other hand. "And yours, Liam. Have you got your ticket?"

The woman, rolling her eyes, took a ticket out of her purse and gave it to Mr. Collyer.

"Merçi. And yours Liam? Let me see."

Liam reluctantly surrendered his ticket.

"Let me see, let me see, now. What have we got here? Oh, this will work out nicely. A piece of luck. You've each got a Club ticket which gives you the pick of the whole train. You can sit just anywhere. And my ticket is for the Smoker, so we'll just settle in there. Come along. Don't forget your jacket, Liam." With the butt of his cane he tapped Liam's neatly folded white jacket on the overhead rack. "Come along. Here we go." Mr. Collyer swept the woman toward the front of the car and started forward behind her with the three tickets. "Stick with me now. Come along."

“Voilà, une vache!” Mr. Collyer interrupted himself to point out the window. “I’m just telling her there’s a cow out there. Quite a few of them in this part of Maine. Les vaches partout. But where was I? What was I saying?”

“About Colonel Forsythe.”

“Hm?”

Liam shrugged.

“Well, whatever it was Oh, yes. About Andrew’s father, also a Colonel. All very confusing, but we’re up to that, aren’t we, Liam? Colonel Andrew Forsythe was the father of Colonel Andrew Forsythe, not Junior and Senior, mind you, though I never could figure out just why not. The elder Forsythe, now departed, made his money on the short side of the market. This was all before the income tax or at least before the tax was anything other than a token.

“You remember, don’t you Liam, that when the tax was first passed the country was on the brink of rebellion. People were not about to put up with it, I should say not. No one was for it. We had a meeting at the New York Yacht Club with practically the entire membership present, and I would have said that night that the tax just couldn’t be passed. I mean, there was not a single vote for it, not one in the entire hall. If we had voted. We didn’t, of course, vote on it, I mean. The vote, unfortunately, took place somewhere else, possibly in Congress. More’s the pity. And so, we had the tax, in spite of the objection of the New York Yacht Club.

“Well, it was not too long after that I was speaking of when the Colonel’s father took a huge position short of RCA. Encore une vache, Mademoiselle. Voilà.” The woman nodded glumly. “As luck would have it, that was the break in the market and so he cleaned up a boodle. Not that didn’t have one long before that, a boodle, I mean. He had several, scads of money. Not clear what Andrew the present has done to let all that fortune get away, but he has. The father was short of RCA and Andrew is just short of money.” Mr. Collyer chuckled. “Still, though, he does put on a fine show of a summer. I imagine we’ll be taken care of in the usual style, and want for nothing. Though it may rain occasionally through the roof in the east wing, no doubt, and you never can be too careful underfoot, what with things giving way every here and there and no one to make do with them but Mr. Jervis and his wife. Why, in the old Colonel’s day, there was a staff of twenty looking after the place. And even with the twenty, they were falling behind. I can’t imagine what it would take to put Dark Harbor House into proper shape again. But in the old Colonel’s day, and I was there for much of it, we had an approximation, I might say, to civilized life. An approximation, but still . . .” He spoke through a yawn. His voice carried on, mumbling a bit, as his eyes were closing. “Still there were the niceties . . . niceties . . . approximation . . .”

Mr. Collyer, Liam knew from last summer, was now within one minute of being sound

asleep. And since he heard almost nothing, awake or asleep, nothing was going to wake him up. The little man slowly let his chin down onto his chest, his glasses sliding forward slightly. Liam turned to the young woman.

"I gather you're not French at all."

"No. I'm from Bangor." She spit the words out.

"Oh."

"My name is French."

"And since you had a French name, he assumed . . ."

"No, my name is French. Elaine French."

"I see. Well, he means no harm."

"He attached himself to me in New York," she said bitterly. "I've come the whole way . . ."

"Sorry to hear it. Really."

"I brought a lovely book to read. I was looking forward to a bit of peace and quiet."

"I understand. Well, he's out for a while now."

The woman stood up. "Listen, I'm going to take my nice seat in the Club car. Tell your friend that I got down at Pemaquid or something. Tell him I was met by the Prince of Monaco who's summering there. Or maybe the King of Sweden."

"I don't think Sweden has a king, actually."

"Oh it does. Trust me."

She made her way forward toward the Club car. Liam stared after her sadly.

Mr. Tyndall was waiting for them on the platform at Rockland.

"Mr. Collyer. Mr. Dwyer."

"Mr. Tyndall." Liam shook his hand democratically. Tyndall was the Colonel's full time household employee, during the winters in Connecticut and summers in Maine. "Trust you've had a good year."

"Oh very good."

"The Colonel and Marjorie doing well, are they?"

"Quite well."

"And the *Nepenthe*? I understand we'll be going out to the island in *Nepenthe*. Got her all polished up, have you?"

"Oh yes. The engines, however . . ."

"Oh dear. Always a bit iffy, I remember. But we are going out in the cruiser, is that right?"

"Oh yes."

"That's good. A perfect day for it. Looking forward to feeling the spray in my hair. A little sun would be nice, but at least we've got a calm day. Don't know that Mr. Collyer would be up to a sea. I, of course, have a strong stomach."

Tyndall saw to the loading of Liam's two bags and Mr. Collyer's nine onto the porter's wagon. Liam wondered how it was all going to fit in the boat, which was long, but not long on storage space.

They headed out of the station and down toward the docks.

"Love that air," Liam said enthusiastically, breathing in. "Wonderful salt air."

"Mmn," Mr. Tyndall said. "Salt and sardine, I'm afraid."

"Oh yes. The sardine factory. Well, the world needs sardines, I guess."

"Yes. Elsewhere would be better though."

"Jobs, Tyndall, we have to think about jobs. People hereabouts need some sort of work. There has to be something for them."

"Perhaps."

"I'm sure of it. And sardines . . . well, I guess that's what there is."

"Apparently."

They were approaching the docks. "There she is, the *Nepenthe*!" Liam suppressed an urge to run forward to see the sleek craft. "She looks splendid!"

About thirty feet long, *Nepenthe* was stem to stern varnished red mahogany. She had a flush deck with three open cockpits, each one with a wide, bright red upholstered seat. There was a windshield in front of the forward cockpit. A thick black steering wheel was set there into the middle of the dash with a half dozen chrome beveled dials arrayed on either side of the wheel. From the flagstaff on her stern, a ragged American ensign, red gray and blue, drooped in the still air.

"Splendid," Liam went on. "This is going to be a treat." He ran his hand fondly along the windshield's chrome frame, even more thickly encrusted than last year with salt and corrosion. There was a yellow pennant at the small staff beside the windshield, which Liam pulled back to admire its ornate device. "And, yes, and here we have the Colonel's private signal, all ship-shape: check. American ensign: check. What else? Um . . . am I wrong about this, Mr. Tyndall, or does she seem to be ever so slightly down by the bow?"

"She is. Or more precisely, up by the stern. It's the engines, as I said."

"The engines? They're not . . . ?"

"Out, I'm afraid. At the shop. We put some concrete blocks in their place for ballast, but, as you can see, the weight is not quite as it should be."

"The engines are out?!"

“Unfortunately.”

“But then how . . . ?”

Tyndall nodded further down the dock where an old fashioned green and white lobster boat was tied up. “Mr. Jervis in the *Nellie B.*” There was a stout line leading down from the stanchion on the after deck of the *Nellie B.* to the bow of the *Nepenthe*.

“Oh” Liam said.

“If you please, Gentlemen” Tyndall motioned them toward the forward cockpit of the *Nepenthe*. “I’ll keep Mr. Jervis company in the towboat with the bags. Do make yourselves comfortable.”

Review by Harvey Ardman (author of *The Final Crossing*):

“Dark Harbor House is like a good dessert--delicious, satisfying and memorable. It is a combination drawing room comedy and coming of age story, set on a Maine island at the end of the 1940s, filled with genuinely funny, touching and believable characters, all of them keenly but gently observed, and written with care and verve. The book takes place in more innocent times than today, and yet there's plenty of delicious "hanky panky," as it was once called, and many other high jinks to smile at. It also features some intriguing background history involving, of all people, three turn-of-the-century cereal kings, W. K. Kellogg, C.W. Post, and Dr. Ralston, as well as a pair of beautiful and eccentric female evangelists. If you feel the urge to escape the digital age for a few hours, I can think of no more felicitous way than to lose yourself in *Dark Harbor House*.”

To Order

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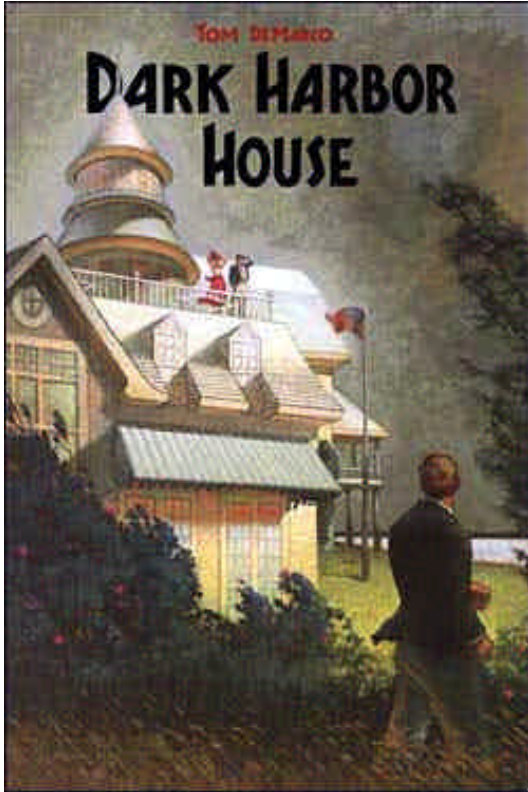
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A nice place to visit

Book Review by Karen Fisk

DARK HARBOR HOUSE

Tom DeMarco, *Down East Books*
280 pages, \$14.95



Camden's Tom DeMarco is the kind of author who sits back and allows his characters to make ninnies of themselves. And, in a comedy of manners, allowing the foibled and fascile to interact at will is the stuff laughter is made of.

Dark Harbor House, the latest of seven novels by DeMarco, is a coming-of age comedy set in the late 1940s in a summer "cottage" on Islesboro Island [off the coast of Maine]. The Forsythe family, a quirky but rather sensible lot, hosts a large number of regular guests each

summer in said cottage. Those guests include Liam Dwyer, our lovable, incredibly self-conscious ninny —er, hero.

Liam, at university in Cornell, fancies himself an aesthete: a poet hindered, he imagines, by his "Irish passions" and encumbered by his "deep, abiding melancholy." We meet him as he agonizes over the myriad creases in his linen trousers, especially "those sharp wrinkles that marked the crotch, almost like signposts pointing inward." How could the message be more clear? Liam has one thing on his mind, but he's embarrassed as all heck by it.

In fact, Dark Harbor House, as the cottage is known, is populated this summer with numerous twenty-something collegiates, all barely containing their raging hormones. Liam himself observes that Dark Harbor House ought to be called "Hormone House." His own object of lust is Laura Beauchalet who attends Radcliffe with Sissy Forsythe.

But focusing on sex is shortchanging this very charming story. The young people are actually at their funniest at their most innocent moments — when they are trying oh-so-hard to be sophisticated grown-ups. More often than not, they lose the battle to their own youthful exuberance and wonder.

Take, for instance, Liam's approach to archery. Laura, having declared archery "boring" (after her shot goes wide), suggests the group do something more sophisticated. Liam, "who'd been dying to try the

bow and arrow," stays behind. After gleefully learning how to shoot and achieving bull's eye after bull's eye, he practices saying with every shot: "I find the idiot enthusiasms of the unsophisticated to be particularly trying."

In addition to the young beauties at Dark Harbor House is a bevy of older folks who add "interesting" behavior to the plot. There is Colonel Forsythe's prep school mate, the Monsignor Leary, who is fond of cornering Liam in late hours hoping for a tantalizing confession. Then there is the Colonel's sister, Grace. An ancient, bent woman, Grace's troubled dreams and oddly dark statements lend the only gravity to this very light story.

Holding the summer's antics together is the subplot of uncovering the mansion's shady past. The house was once a center for religious evangelicals massed around the beautiful and controversial Jeannie Isobel. (She performed nightly salt-water baptisms, leaving her female "Angels" provocatively clad in clinging white silk— much to the delight of the attending male "Acolytes.") Thirteen-year-old Jody Forsythe is researching the history that leads to Isobel's disgraced departure and periodically shares her findings with the guests.

Reading *Dark Harbor House*, I was reminded of Evelyn Waugh, the master of acid commentaries on high society hypocrites disguised as "comedies of manners" — though in contrast only. For all the dense, cruelly sophisticated sarcasm pouring from Waugh's pen, DeMarco's pen is light, honest but indulgent. Whereas Waugh seemed to loathe his characters, DeMarco loves his.

Liam, at one point, finds Aunt Grace in the library, buried in children's classics, weeping. Despite Grace's history of venom, Liam kindly sits beside her, wraps her in his arms and allows her to weep until she is spent — because it is the right thing to do and because he has a compassionate heart. Though what significance this scene has — especially linked to Grace's previous rantings, which seem, perhaps, to hint at an unwanted pregnancy and abortion — is not entirely clear.

I'm not sure if DeMarco is trying to say anything particularly overarching and deep, except perhaps: "Be true to yourself." In this good-natured, no-grudges-held story, abortion and incest rear their ugly heads only to slink off to the margins. Perhaps, DeMarco conveys a gentle message: Life is sometimes messy, yet the nicest folks (or perhaps the most gullible) muddle through with grace.

On the whole, *Dark Harbor House* is good, uncomplicated company. I was sorry when the summer drew to a close, especially after vicariously participating in the Great Zucchini War (what a humdinger of a chapter). I was as sorry, perhaps, as Liam who on his return boat ride "waved and waved till Dark Harbor House, all but her tower roofs, was lost from view. . ."