

BOOK CALENDAR

Sunday

Charlaine Harris ("Definitely Dead" and "Dead as a Doornail") and **Julie Phillips** ("James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon") sign their books, Dark Delicacies, 4213 W. Burbank Blvd., Burbank, 2 p.m. (818) 556-6660.

Tanya Erzen ("Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement") talks with Jon Wiener, 4 p.m. KPFF-FM (90.7).

Authors **Jerrilyn Farmer**, **Mona Gable**, **Noel Alunit** and **Mark Haskell Smith** discuss creativity and the writer's craft, Vroman's, 695 E. Colorado Blvd., Pasadena, 7 p.m. (626) 449-5320.

Brett Paesel signs "Mommies Who Drink," Borders, 1360 Westwood Blvd., Los Angeles, 7:30 p.m. (310) 475-3444.

Marisha Pessl reads from "Special Topics in Calamity Physics," the Mystery Bookstore, 1036-C Broomfield Ave., Westwood, noon. (310) 209-0415; Skylight Books, 1818 N. Vermont Ave., Los Angeles, 7:30 p.m. (323) 660-1175.

Monday

William Kent Krueger signs "Copper River," Book Carnival, 348 S. Tustin Ave., Orange, 6 p.m. (714) 538-3210.

Jacqueline Winspear discusses "Messenger of Truth," Vroman's, 695 E. Colorado Blvd., Pasadena, 7 p.m. (626) 449-5320.

Tuesday

Gregg Hurwitz signs "Last Shot," Borders, 3700 Torrance Blvd., Torrance, 7 p.m. (310) 540-7000.

Bart Kosko signs "Noise," Barnes & Noble, 1201 Third Street Promenade, Santa Monica, 7:30 p.m. (310) 260-9110.

Wednesday

Stephen J. Cannell signs "White Sister," Borders, 2910 Tapo Canyon Road, Simi Valley, 7 p.m. (805) 526-2800.

Thursday

Robert Fate reads from "Baby Shark," Mystery & Imagination, 238 N. Brand Blvd., Glendale, 7:30 p.m. (818) 545-0206.

Harry V. Jaffa ("A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War") talks with John Murphy, noon. KSPC-FM (88.7).

W.S. Merwin ("Present Company") talks with Michael Silverblatt, 2:30 p.m. KCRW-FM (89.9).

Saturday

Sissy Boyd, **Teresa Carmody**, **Vanessa Place** and **Christine Wertheim** read their work, Skylight Books, 1818 N. Vermont Ave., Los Angeles, 7:30 p.m. (323) 660-1175.

John J. Lamb signs "The Mournful Teddy," Mysteries to Die For, 2940 Thousand Oaks Blvd., Thousand Oaks, 1 p.m. (805) 374-0084.

For more listings, see calendarlive.com/books. Send notices to book.calendar@latimes.com

Victims of circumstance

By LUCINDA MICHELE KNAPP

Giraffe

A Novel

J.M. Ledgard

The Penguin Press: 298 pp., \$24.95

THE collective unconscious of humankind is relatively devoid of giraffes. *Giraffa camelopardalis* does not stride the plains of our unplumbed psychological depths. Beckoning us to read meanings hidden in the maps on its hide, it defies simple symbolism. J.M. Ledgard's "Giraffe" amends that gap in our inner mythologies. His giraffe stands for the Great Other.

No wonder Dali sent the animals sailing gracefully like tall-masted ships across his dreamscapes. They blend childlike wonder — images of balloon animals twisting long necks into our 5-year-old birthday parties — with an astronaut's perspective: an elevated and otherworldly view through enormous, lunar eyes, the embodiment of a distanced neutrality. They map mysterious archipelagos on their hides, maps that could come from the other side of the world, another solar system or a thousand years ago. The giraffe's large eye — largest of all land animals — rotates in its socket, taking in the holy heavens and seeming to peer over a curvature of the earth we can't take in.

It is folly to anthropomorphize the giraffe, put him in a silly sweater or observe expressions that seem human; he does not play this part for us. His ghostly impassivity, his very elevation from our suddenly small stature, makes the giraffe a symbol of an earth that does not need us in order to persist. Loping attenuated in slow motion, Ledgard's giraffes are mysterious and ethereal. They are longing. They are sublime.

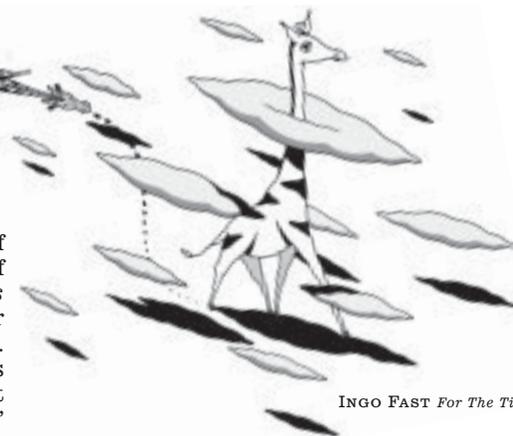
Ledgard, a foreign correspondent for the Economist, dazzles us in his first novel with chrysanthemum operatics of language. In prose that melts at times into lush poetics, he laces a story loosely around real-life events.

In a small Czechoslovakian town in 1975, secret police in chemical warfare suits sealed off a zoo and systematically exterminated its herd of 49 giraffes in the course of one night. It was an act of utter barbarism, but beyond that, it is illustrative of the slaving insanity that can descend on a culture so repressed and without hope. Ledgard may have been thinking of William Golding: In a world of hopelessness, madness is only a lock-step away.

As the story begins, various characters — from scientist to giraffe — lead the reader along the herd's fateful journey, from their capture in Africa to their new home in the small village zoo where they are supposed, with the noblest of intentions, to transform into a distinctly "Czech species" of giraffe. Each character's story unfurls and interlaces along the progression of events in an impressionistic manner, like individual skeins of water mingling in a murky river delta.

Ledgard's characters are less than fully developed. There is no intimacy between the reader and the various narrators who illuminate, with tiny flickering lights, corners of their own desolate and static lives, captured in what the characters poignantly call the "Communist moment." Rather, their voices are used to illustrate the sweeping atmosphere of depression and dour placidity, the still life of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, slowly decaying in its immobility, as the grand hotel stands

Lucinda Michele Knapp is an editor at LA Alternative Press and has written for Variety.



INGO FAST For The Times

boarded up in the town center and the local factory is propped up by trees whose branches are growing into the building. They are watched as distant subjects, as the giraffes in the zoo are observed. There are fleeting peeks into the hearts of Emil, a "haemodynamicist" who oversees the giraffes' capture and transport to Prague, and Amina, a factory worker who spends her days dipping glass ornaments into Christmas colors and her nights sleepwalking into vibrantly alive, natural landscapes, dreaming of leaving the calcifying village far below and ascending to the clouds.

But this is not a character-driven story. The largest, most silent player is time, as the reader, distanced by 30 years — a mere 30 years! — sees the gross stupidity, the banality, the myopic limping of the broken machine that was communism in the '70s. The players in the novel — the woodsman charged with the unfortunate executions; Amina, who has been awakened from her somnambulist life by the magical creatures; the zookeeper who deeply loves his charges; the virologist who assures us the giraffes are impossibly tainted; the government agent who's been subtly strong-armed into overseeing it all — were as powerless to change their circumstances as the giraffes, and with one government document they too could be marked for extermination.

Time, like the giraffe's distanced perspective, throws these dramatic events into sharp relief: the poignancy of soldiers shooting down swallows flying over the zoo; the way the rivers across which the principals in the story travel are slate-blank and gray, transforming a symbol of hope into an illustration of the Communist moment's stultifying illusion. Here there is no change, no lucidity, and there never will be.

Ledgard's language creates a lilting and variegated cacophony of detail — a vision of the natural world despoiled, of the terrifying glory of guttural death, of the raging life impulse and the equally overwhelming rule of man. Orders too cruel to be obeyed are followed regimentally, as though the gun were to one's own head instead of the giraffes', and, in fact, it is.

There is no redemption for these characters. There is only a giraffe hide lying on the floor of a retired butcher's apartment in 1999, waiting to tell its story. Only time itself moves, grows, changes, the individuals do not, and cannot — not in the Communist moment. We can do only so much as individuals against a force so overwhelming.

"Giraffe" is a stylist's novel, evocative — not sweetly so, but tensely and heartbreakingly — and a novelization settled around a framework of laboriously researched true events. The giraffes are resurrected here to stride ghostly again, to give us pause as we race rashly through life, to remind us that there are things in Nature we cannot possess, storms we cannot hold back, Niagaras we cannot harness. We are indeed small. ■

Ad Number: 0004966704-001
 Insertion Number: 17912461
 Size: 1 x 2
 Color Type: B&W
 Client Name: Garnet Benzie - Inhouse
 Advertiser: Garnet Benzie
 Section/Page/Zone: Book Review/R10/Los Angeles
 Description: Garnet Benzie

This electronic tearsheet confirms the ad appeared in the Los Angeles Times on the date and page indicated. You may not create derivative works, or in any way exploit or repurpose any content.

GHOSTWRITER SERVICE

NY Times Best Selling Authors

www.pegr.com
 1-800-WRITE90

Keeping home sweet home



As advertised in Australia's Sydney Morning Herald

A family fortune of millions lost

A family legacy of filmmakers gained

"Only In The Movies"

A larger than life trilogy by Garnet Benzie®

www.onlyinthemovies.net
www.myspace.com/garnetbenzie

Heritage Book Shop, Inc.

Did you know one of the largest collections of Rare Books, First Editions & Fine Bindings in the world is right here in Southern California?

We are always interested in purchasing Private Collections

8540 Melrose Avenue Los Angeles Ca. 90069

email: heritage@heritagebookshop.com

www.heritagebookshop.com

Telephone (310) 659-3674

Fax (310) 659-4872

Los Angeles Times

Publication Date: 08/27/2006