



Mark Helprin

BY JESSICA TEISCH

“Nothing is random, nor will anything ever be, whether a long string of perfectly blue days that begin and end in golden dimness, the most seemingly chaotic political acts, the rise of a great city, the crystalline structure of a gem that has never seen the light, the distributions of fortune, what time the milkman gets up, the position of the electron, or the occurrence of one astonishing frigid winter after another.”

—*Winter’s Tale* (1983)

Mark Helprin has never been conventional. Published in the *New Yorker* for a quarter century, starting when he was 21, he’d walk into his editor’s office on his hands; he once rappelled down the side of the building and disguised himself as a window cleaner to get into the *New Yorker* offices—for fun. He held stints in the Israeli Air Force and in the British Merchant Navy, and he worked as an agricultural laborer, as a Pinkerton, and as Bob Dole’s speechwriter. He now farms his family’s land in Earlysville, Virginia. The list goes on.

It’s not surprising that Helprin’s novels and short stories are playful, magical, and, at the same time, deadly serious. World War II ended before Helprin was born in 1947, but war and its lasting effects are ever-present specters in his six novels, three collections of short stories, and three children’s books. “That’s the war that made our world,” he explained to *Doublethink* in 2006. “There’s no question about that. The history of all the years in which I will spend my life, every single one, that is the seminal event of the history that we will experience.” Helprin’s new novel *In Sunlight and In Shadow* (reviewed on page 35) bears good company with previous works in its focus on a war veteran and New York

City, Helprin’s birthplace and the fantastical setting for such acclaimed novels as *Winter’s Tale* (1983).

Although he cites as his influences Dante, Shakespeare, Melville, and Twain, Helprin’s fiction often raises comparisons to that of Kafka, Mann, Hemingway, and Tolstoy in its philosophical gravity, absurdity, ambitious sweep, and complicated entanglements of characters who act on their beliefs. For Helprin, the world has always been a source of beauty, romance, tragedy, and incongruity. “I write in service of illumination and memory,” he told the *Paris Review* in 1994. “I write to reach into ‘the blind world where no one can help.’ I write because it is a way of glimpsing the truth. And I write to create something of beauty.”

Harvard-, Oxford-, and Columbia-educated, Helprin currently writes political opinions for the *Wall Street Journal* and is a senior fellow of the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy. Whether one agrees with his conservative viewpoints on everything from defense to international relations, in his fiction he has, indeed, created lasting works of beauty.

Winter's Tale (1983)

A hymn to New York City, *Winter's Tale* is, at heart, a love story. Containing elements of magical realism (though Helprin claims to detest that genre), the novel takes place in Gilded Age Manhattan as a dozen characters collide in their search for justice. ("Justice can sleep for years and awaken when it is least expected," Helprin writes.

"A miracle is nothing more than dormant justice from another time arriving to compensate those it has cruelly abandoned. Whoever knows this is willing to suffer, for he knows that nothing is in vain.") Only when evil grapples with good, Helprin suggests, can there be genuine hope for change. In 2006, the *New York Times Book Review* called *Winter's Tale* one of the single best works of American fiction published in the previous 25 years.

THE STORY: "I have been to another world, and come back. Listen to me." Thus opens *Winter's Tale*, set in a mythic New York City—a sparkling snow-and-ice palace contrasted with a city of the poor—at the start of the 20th century and, briefly, at the end of it. When Peter Lake, an Irish orphan and petty thief, goes on the run from a gang, a mysterious, flight-powered white horse becomes his guardian angel. But the horse is only one bit of magic in *Winter's Tale*. While attempting to rob a mansion on the Upper West Side in the dead of winter, Peter falls in love with Beverly Penn, the young, eccentric, and dying heiress who talks of infinite worlds. She protects Peter—and his love for her allows him to stop time and bring back the dead. "Love passes from soul to soul," Peter says, and in that way, it casts everyone under its spell.

"Helprin's portrait of a snow-bound New York from a 1900s that we just about recognise is peopled with Dickensian grotesques and fancies; gangs who battle in the streets, a race to build a bridge all the way to infinity, hidden communities surviving in corners of New York that never were, fantastical families in tumbledown houses at the centre of frozen lakes. ... It's wonderful and perplexing and philosophical and, yes, sometimes infuriating." DAVID BARNETT, *GUARDIAN* (UK), 12/14/10

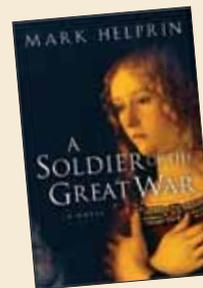
A Soldier of the Great War (1991)

This moral fable touches on many of literature's great themes, including love, loss, and mortality; war and its lunacy; and the importance of philosophy, religion, spirituality, and beauty. Despite its eccentric, larger-than-life protagonist, *A Soldier of the Great War* is also a classic bildungsroman that traces one man's spiritual growth over



time. It's not for the casual reader, though: it weighs in at more than 800 pages.

THE STORY: In 1964 Rome, Alessandro Giuliani, an elderly professor of aesthetics, meets Nicolò, a semilit-erate factory worker, when a trolley abandons them. Far from their destinations, the unlikely pair decides to journey into the mountains on foot. As they walk, the deeply spiritual Alessandro regales Nicolò with his life's tale. An idyllic youth gives way to the horrors of World War I (with its attendant heroics, desertion, and near execution), privations, loves, and losses. Enthralled by his eloquence, Nicolò slowly starts to understand the deeper meaning of his story. As Alessandro says, "[A]ll the hard and wonderful things of the world are nothing more than a frame for a spirit, like fire and light, that is the endless roiling of love and grace. I can tell you only that beauty cannot be expressed or explained in a theory or an idea, that it moves by its own law, that it is God's way of comforting His broken children."



"From all the Gothic turbulence of his life Alessandro gleans a few gracefully expressed banalities: that love is the one sane thing in the universe, that politics is a branch of original sin, that God cannot be pursued intellectually and does not care whether He is loved or not. Mr. Helprin manages to give these axioms a fresh luster in his mischievous, idiosyncratic and powerful book." THOMAS KENEALLY, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 5/5/91

Memoir from Antproof Case (1995)

Like *A Soldier in the Great War*, this picaresque novel features an extravagant, near-Homeric figure. A fanciful confession, a satire of the 20th century, and a love letter to a young son by a young wife, the novel is by turns comical and heartrending. Through the protagonist's improbable string of adventures, the novel speaks to obsession and love, revenge and redemption.

THE STORY: From a hilltop in Brazil, an octogenarian narrator (and former mental patient who says, "Call me anything you want. No one knows my name anymore") writes his memoirs for his young son. As he waits for the past to catch up with him, he dons a Walther P-88 (to protect him from assassination) and an antproof case (to safeguard his manuscript). He has consorted with presidents and popes, businessmen and murderers; has flown fighter planes



against the Nazis; has married an heiress; and has engaged in criminal acts of his own. His antiauthoritarian streak shines through as he chronicles his idyllic youth in New York City and his discovery of love. But there is a secret that has shaped his life—an unusual evil he constantly fights. “Whatever I do I’ve always done not because I want something but to compensate for a loss,” he says, “to bring about a balance, to create amends, to make things right.”

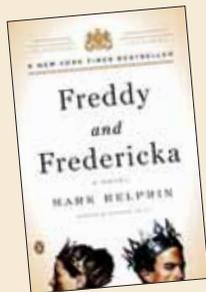
“Mr. Helprin’s work is in the tradition of grand, cerebral, picaresque storytelling, but with a modernist edge of self-parody. ... It is a funny, extravagant, prodigal piece of writing, its occasional drift toward excess always arrested by Mr. Helprin’s engaging mixture of the Melvillian (or perhaps the Conradian) and camp.” RICHARD BERNSTEIN, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 4/20/95

Freddy and Fredericka (2005)

Readers will recognize Prince Charles and Princess Diana in this farcical fairy tale about the contemporary ills of right-wing America and the British monarchy. An imaginative story about politics and society, with nods to Voltaire’s *Candide*, *Freddy and Fredericka* is a royal misadventure and, as Helprin has said, a story of the paradigm of romance. Despite receiving mixed reviews, it offers good, lighthearted fun. (★★ Sept/Oct 2005)

THE STORY: Helprin’s novel is a comic allegory of Freddy, the overeducated, awkward, jug-eared Prince of Wales, and his frivolous, vapid wife Fredericka. Because Freddy (and everyone else) knows he isn’t cut from the cloths of kings just yet, he and his wife are sent on an overseas quest to prove their worth. It’s a daunting task: they must reconquer the colonies for England. After parachuting into New Jersey naked, they travel across the country in a most unusual way as they drive rail stakes, steal art, travel down the Mississippi (with some echoes of Mark Twain), write speeches for a presidential campaign, and impersonate all manner of characters. As their royal assumptions collide with the reality of life on the road, can they rise to their full potential?

“[An] entertaining new novel—a rollicking picaresque saga that reads as though Evelyn Waugh had put the movies *Roman Holiday* and *Duck Soup* into a blender along with some old copies of *People* magazine and a couple of Mark Twain’s travelogues, and seasoned the resulting confection with generous helpings of his own black comedy. ... Although the reader will instantly recognize the real-life templates for this novel’s title characters, nothing in Mr. Helprin’s fable is quite what it seems.” MICHIKO KAKUTANI, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 7/14/05



A Kingdom Far and Clear (2010)

The Complete Swan Lake Trilogy

This collection contains Helprin’s novellas—*Swan Lake* (1989), *A City in Winter* (1996), and *The Veil of Snows* (1997)—in a single volume. Chris Van Allsburg’s (*Jumanji*, *The Polar Express*) fanciful, evocative full-color plates complement Helprin’s luminous, emotionally resonant prose. The three stories, which pit love and devotion against repression and greed, fit together. Although this fairy-tale collection is meant for older children and adults, the philosophical and thinly disguised political musings may be better suited to the latter.



SWAN LAKE (1989): Basing this tragic story on Peter Tchaikovsky’s famous ballet score of 1875, Helprin retells the famous tale about the star-crossed lovers, Odette, a princess turned into a swan by an evil sorcerer, and her prince—with surprising additions to the plot.

A CITY IN WINTER (1996): In a city covered in snow, a brave young princess travels to a dangerous city to avenge the murder of her parents and reclaim their lost kingdom and her throne. The story (part fairy tale, part political satire) picks up at the end of *Swan Lake*, when the little girl (the princess, later telling the story as queen) who has heard the story of Odette and her prince discovers that she is their daughter.

THE VEIL OF SNOWS (1997): In this continuation of *A City in Winter*, the queen and her kingdom have lived in peace for many years. But upon the birth of her first son, she fears imminent danger. Though the odds of peace, and, indeed, survival, remain slim, the distant icy mountains may harbor a symbol of hope. ■