

## PURE MADNESS, SURE GENIUS

*The Citizen's Fall Reading*, Sept. 19, 2004

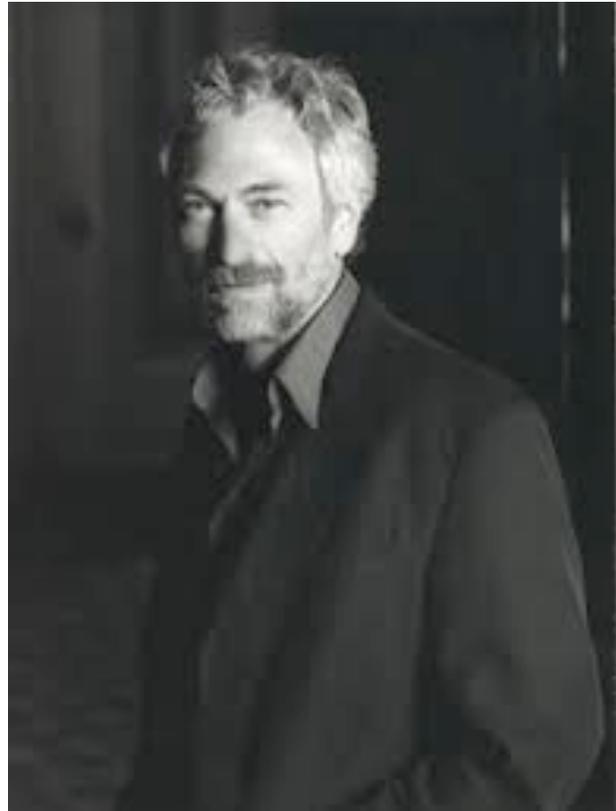
Reviewed by Richard Taylor

***“Hollingshead returns in a tour de force inspired by a home for the insane”***

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You can't get much farther from Bedlam than the calm and pristine waters of Cauliflower Lake. Each June, after Greg Hollingshead dismisses his English classes at the University of Alberta, he packs his car, heads to his Algonquin Park cabin and holes up to write.

You may know his work: *The Roaring Girl* won the Governor General's Award in 1995. *The Healer* earned the 1998 Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize. And now there's *Bedlam*, a new novel that's garnering acclaim as an imaginative tour de force inspired by Bethlem Hospital, a notorious home for the insane in London.

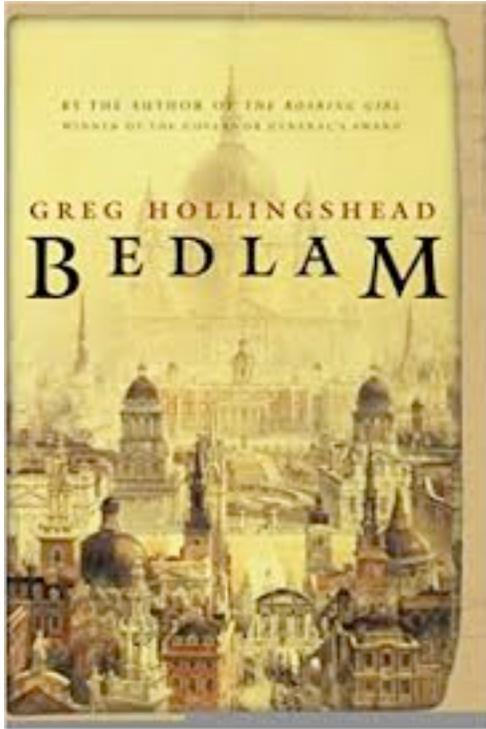


Greg Hollingshead won the Governor General's Award in 1995 for *The Roaring Girl*, a short story collection. He appears at the writer's festival Oct. 5.

This summer, I discovered Hollingshead's remote retreat and found the author at work in a cramped but charming screened in porch. It overlooked the still waters of a lake inhabited by just one other cabin.

Hollingshead's desk was covered in uncorrected proofs for a new edition of *The Roaring Girl*, paperclipped works in progress marked with pencilled revisions and recipe boxes filled with cards covered in scribbled jottings and plot points.

Hollingshead talked about his upcoming book tour. *Bedlam*, five years in the writing, is about a madman incarcerated for decades in a hellhole - a kind of



unromanticized version of Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The thought occurs: only a madman with delusions of grandeur would take on such an assignment. I ask if it was difficult to inhabit such a dark place during the writing of the novel.

“Not really,” he said, “I studied at the University of London years ago, lived in England a while later. In a sense, I’ve been wanting to write this story for a long time.”

Hollingshead has lost weight since I saw him two years ago. He’s had a hip replaced and his gall bladder removed. Writerly afflictions, I suggest. We discuss the benefits of swimming, hiking, walking and living lakeside.

Back in Ottawa, I read *The Healer*, which is set at the Cauliflower Lake cabin. Three characters play out their impassioned destinies against the ancient rock, lakes and forests of the Canadian Shield. The novel explores the fine line between madness and sanity - between physical and spiritual reality. In *Bedlam*, these obsessions are fleshed out by an even darker trio of intertwined characters in 18<sup>th</sup>-century London.

After the paranoia of the French Revolution, English spy/tea broker, James Tilly Mathews, is jailed in France for three years, then incarcerated in Bethlem for psychological and unspecified political reasons. His wife, Margaret spends the rest of the novel passionately trying to free her often-delusional husband. Her efforts are thwarted by the ambiguous motivations of John Haslam, Bethlem’s apothecary and chief administrator.

What unfolds is an exquisitely rendered tour of melancholy and raving madness tempered with profound love and hope. In short, titled chapters, *Bedlam* is narrated from several distinct voices, allowing Hollingshead to plumb the connections between his characters’ troubled souls and political and psychological webs of intrigue.

Hollingshead relies on scrupulous research to recreate the life and times of Georgian London: “It being Monday, and early yet, a hundred thousand furnaces of kilns, glasshouses, blacksmiths, gunsmiths, and dyers’ yards were not yet befouling the air with their coal-smoke reek. All was Sabbath-fresh, as in purer days.”

Not since Jean Rhys’ novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the story of the mad wife in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* has the sordid depravity and mercurial beauty of the unhinged mind been illuminated. But what gives Bedlam its redemptive grace is the depth of Hollingshead’s humanity as he tenderly but brutally describes Bethlem’s parade of unfortunate lunatics.

In one of many unforgettable scenes, Peg Nicholson is offered shortcake on her 82nd birthday. When Peg, famous for trying to kill the king, refuses to eat, she is force-fed and the reader feels the true horror of her mental torment.

Hollingshead style is strangely compelling. It’s harsh, intimate and wise and filled with poetic flashes and sublime humour: “They called me mad and I called them mad, and damn them, they outvoted me.”

Social and political issues from the late 18th century echo our own uncritical fascination with newness and power: “In an age of banks, credit, and the mechanized production of weaponry...when there are men who get their living by armed conflict and make it their business to keep up the quarrels of nations, war will be simply the normal state of things.”

Hollingshead moves characters through time and space with an ease that reminds me of William Boyd’s, *The Blue Afternoon*, a novel that seamlessly mixes fact and fiction with strongly motivated characters caught up in psychology, politics and history.

If there is sane logic in this mad world, Bedlam will be read by many and perhaps even made into a film. After all, as Hollingshead writes, “grandness and lunacy have always drifted through history in some essential consanguinity.”

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