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Into the Abyss

By Floyd Skloot

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In 2006, the British political and war correspondent J. M. Ledgard published his first novel, “Giraffe,” a finalist for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize. Closely based on the true story of 49 giraffes slaughtered at a zoo in Communist Czechoslovakia, it was a risky, bitter performance that balanced numerous narrative voices — including that of an erudite, lyrical giraffe — against stark reporting.

Ledgard tried to tell this loaded story in a nuanced way despite being in authorial captivity, bound by a plot and many characters predetermined by actual events. His strategy was to showcase novelistic technique: fracturing narrative structure, using language that called attention to itself, manipulating point of view. So while inherently harrowing as a story of confinement, savagery and despair, “Giraffe” was also a novel about writing a novel, a kind of self-tutorial witnessed by his readers.

Ledgard’s follow-up, “Submergence,” shows he has gained control over a full range of skills. He is still concerned with confinement, savagery and despair, and still recognizes that “life is never neat.” But now Ledgard writes from deep immersion in his well-imagined characters and setting, telling a strong central story involving a terrorist hostage-taking and a perilous deep-sea dive, and deploying language at once precise and flexible, as in this moment when new lovers part at the foot of a staircase: “Without warning he was battered with conflicting emotions and identities, as if a train had braked hard and all the baggage had come crashing down on top of him.” “Submergence” is a hard-edged, ultracontemporary work about people a reader cares for, apart and together, through extraordinarily precarious conditions.



Deep immersion: J. M. Ledgard is East Africa correspondent for The Economist. Jammat

The two main characters are James More, a British spy held captive by jihadists in Somalia, and Prof. Danielle Flinders, known as Danny, a biomathematician preparing for a dive in a submersible craft that will take her to “the largest uncharted hydrothermal vent field in the world, far below the plunging icebergs and the blue-black top” of the Greenland Sea. What links their stories at a narrative level is the brief, passionate romance they shared during the previous year’s Christmas holiday at a hotel on the French coast. What links them thematically is isolation and the sharply focused consciousness that accompanies life-or-death ordeals. Ledgard makes sure we get the connection early, writing of the imprisoned James that “when there was no moon he was sunk in the blackness Danny saw when she explored the abyssal deep.” This is a book obsessed with unexplored depths, whether of self, of world conflict or of the ocean, a zone Danny calls “the other world in our world.”

Each character’s piece of the story is suspenseful. Like James, a descendant of Thomas More with plans to reread his ancestor’s immortal book “Utopia” someday, the reader is placed within the hell of hostage life. We are never sure if James will survive, never allowed to relax or trust moments of calm. We look with dwindling hope to each of the well-realized jihadist characters for potential signs of compassion or weakness. As James is moved from place to

place within Somalia, we wait for Ledgard to offer a way out. Instead, he immerses us deeper in the harsh physical and psychological truths of James's experience: "He was losing resolve, losing his sense of himself, of his story. His capacity for solving problems was diminishing."

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Danny, whose experience is quieter, whose isolation is by choice, nevertheless operates under vast pressure, literal and metaphoric, as she enters another kind of alien environment, placing herself at great risk. We are never confident of her safety either. The submersible's journey is as tense, its outcome as uncertain, as James's fate among his captors. She also goes — and takes us — to a place we can scarcely imagine, and convinces us that the reasons for such exploration are sound. "The fact that life can exist in the darkness, on chemicals, changes our understanding about life everywhere else in the universe."

Knitted by their love story, these separate narratives gain emotional power neither would have alone because we know James and Danny to be devoted to each other, know them to be capable of profound connection and intimacy. They have something; they get each other; they are not clichéd spy or academic. He understands her quest for order, her passion for research, and while she never knows he is a spy, she finds him "utterly readable." Ledgard manages the romance gracefully, unspools it slowly, allows it to resonate. Danny could be speaking for any of the novel's dimensions when she notes that "the lesson from this is that it is easier for human beings to push outward than it is for them to explore inward."

Near the end, when James sustains himself by recalling his time with Danny, he seizes upon something she said: "The strangest life exists in the cracks." This could serve as a novelist's credo. Ledgard has given, in "Submergence," glimpses of very strange life indeed: the spy in a place so lawless that chaos is the only norm, the scientist in our planet's least knowable region, lovers expert at self-containment. Out of this, acute understandings emerge, as when Danny, the day before her descent, realizes that "the very precariousness of her condition and more generally the condition of mankind made her body and choices more precious to herself. It was incumbent upon her to live fully; to give and to receive." She is thinking of her own situation, but she might as well be speaking for us all.

SUBMERGENCE

By J. M. Ledgard

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Floyd Skloot's 18th book, "Revertigo: An Off-Kilter Memoir," will be published next year.

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