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Doctor Sleep  
By Madison Smartt Bell  
Harcourt Brace

In *Doctor Sleep* Madison Smartt Bell weaves an arresting, if uneven, tapestry that reaffirms his place among the best of our important young writers. Yet this novel, far quirkier than his 1989 *Soldier's Joy*, may do little to alter Bell's current fate. Like Peter Taylor, Elizabeth Spencer and Richard Bausch, Bell enjoys passionate esteem among his peers but remains under-read by the public, greatly to its loss.

The several threads in *Doctor Sleep* unfurl from three closely observed days and nights in the life of Adrian Strother. Four years earlier, Adrian swore off both heroin and New York City and moved to London. Now he works as a hypnotist, "a sort of psychological repairman," whose most interesting client, Eleanor Peavey, suffers multiple personalities: prim Miss Peavey by day, prostitute Nell by night.

She is the least of Adrian's problems. Wracked by insomnia, he walks London streets where a serial killer brutally murders little girls. Mistaken for his friend Stuart, a born-again former addict now forming a heroin self-help center, Adrian is stalked by thugs and abducted by London's chief heroin distributor. When drug traffickers are not hunting him, he--under pressure from Scotland Yard--is hunting them. On free nights he moonlights as a stage hypnotist at a burlesque club or works out at a tae kwon do studio and spars with his West Indian friend, Terence, after class in the dark.

Back in Adrian's flat, his pet boa constrictor is losing color and won't eat, and Adrian's neglected girlfriend, Clara, has left him for the fourth time. Nicole—the goddess-like former call-girl Stuart battered and Adrian secretly married—is in London, maybe to pick up with Adrian again or maybe to ask him for a divorce. All the while, Adrian reflects obsessively on the Hermetic mysticism of Renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno.

Little wonder Adrian cannot sleep.

This barrage of plot elements may sound like genre pulp revised by the *New Age Journal*, but it is in fact a stage in the evolution of an extraordinary literary career. In *Doctor Sleep*, the 33 year-old author's sixth novel and eighth book, Bell offers copious evidence that he must be ranked among the best of a generation of American writers approaching their full literary maturity. Bell may not always hide the seams where plot and philosophy join, he can oversensationalize an ending and his fascination for characters from society's dingiest creases does put some readers off. However, he blends perceptiveness, a deadpan mastery of the grotesque and profundity of mind so powerfully that even Temple University's David Bradley--a writer seldom accused of hyperbole--wrote in The New York Times of Bell's "genius."

At the end of Bell's 1985 story "Zero db," the audio technician narrator advises, "Listen. Listen. Listen. Listen. We can never be too attentive to our world." Bell listens, and watches. His painstaking attentiveness to technical accuracy—the tae kwon do and stage hypnosis scenes are conspicuous examples—win the reader's trust. Tellingly, he thanks people in his acknowledgements for "research

assistance both deliberate and inadvertent.” He renders what he absorbs in vivid detail: “The funny thing about Waltham is that he moves like a fat man even though he’s not”; a woman has “skin the color of clotted cream”; seeing an old friend in bed, Adrian remembers “when he’d been so thin you wouldn’t know for sure if it was him in there or only wrinkles in the sheet.”

Far removed from the Tennessee hills, glacial pacing and third-person restraint of *Soldier’s Joy* as *Doctor Sleep* is, the two books feel strongly linked. *Soldier’s Joy*, in fact, was written in London, where Bell spent the 1986-87 academic year after his wife, poet Elizabeth Spires, won the Amy Lowell Travelling Poetry Scholarship. Like returning Vietnam vet Thomas Laidlaw in *Soldier’s Joy*, Adrian seldom eats and never sleeps, has thematically important attachments to both his male friends and his pets and is painfully reticent about his feelings. Most importantly, like Laidlaw, Adrian is a solitary figure in need of healing.

There is nothing new about that. Since his first novel, *The Washington Square Ensemble*, with its cluster of heroin dealers, Bell has always written with conspicuous sympathy for the alienated and the bruised. Like Adrian himself, the last two novels have left the New York drug scene, but Bell has never portrayed that scene in the hip way of his less substantial contemporaries. He searches for characters beaten down by a combination of life and poor choices, whose hearts (to paraphrase a line of Spires’s) are a bit off-center, yet who possess a desire to seek affirmation. At some point, a moment flickers in which a new choice is possible, and they choose to move toward grace, sometimes amid religious symbolism. It may not be going too far to suggest an occasional Christ-like undertone in Bell: “As ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

As the elements of *Doctor Sleep* bond artfully together—as Eleanor Peavey’s pathology links to the vicious child murders, which tie to the London drug lord who bears on Adrian’s work with Scotland Yard and Adrian’s need to face the truth, which joins him in spirit to Eleanor Peavey—perhaps the most important element turns out to be Adrian’s fasting snake. Adrian feels a Jungian connection to it and keeps it, as he says, “in honor and acknowledgement of the snake in me.” The boa constrictor will not eat for the same reason Adrian cannot sleep: He is undergoing a dramatic metamorphosis.

At the beginning of the novel, when Adrian feels his mind is “broken,” he ponders the writings of Giordano Bruno and glimpses a divinity in himself and a unity in all creation that inspire waves of exhilaration. Adrian’s frequent musings on Bruno (the Teilhard de Chardin of the counter-Reformation, burned at the stake in 1600) sometimes seem forced upon the story. They do, however, add depth and mass, and prove crucial to Adrian’s transformation--while retarding it at the same time.

Like shooting heroin (or, for that matter, writing a novel), Bruno’s mysticism offers the hope of reordering experience into a harmonious whole. Bruno played Plato to the Renaissance’s Aristotles, finding the Church earthbound, he extolled instead a pre-Christian philosophy that soared above the duality of matter and spirit, the measurability of things, and proposed a pantheistic unity throughout the universe.

Not odd, then, that Adrian, before fully grasping the nature of his quest, envisioned a beatific future with Clara: “When I succeeded in becoming God, I meant to re-create the two of us wholly new, as I went about my business of making a whole rejuvenated world for us to live in. New Adam and New Eve, we’d rise up from the ashes of our former selves and blaze with a purifying, incandescent light.”

Not odd, either, that Clara has packed her bags and split. Clara leaves Adrian because he never let her know him, offering “intimacy without acquaintance”: “Not much was discussed. An attachment formed itself via tropism, like vines wrapping round each other. Vines don’t talk it over, do they? On the other hand, they tend to stay wrapped. I couldn’t recall we ever made any decision. Only a touch, an embrace, a reluctance to part at morning, the custom of creature comfort.” Clara does not want to be a New Eve. She wants only “a little warmth and sunlight, rational conversation, concrete things. Something to be sure of.” Adrian is slow to learn that he might soar best in the here and now, that what he needs for peace and sleep had been within reach. And it might be too late to recapture it.

As Adrian obliquely pursues his goals, surrounded by deaths fast and slow and private pains too searing for conscious acknowledgement, Bell draws toward a suspenseful finale as eccentric as the book it closes.

Predictably unpredictable, Bell has again captured a new setting and written convincingly about love, without tender-mindedness, and vision, without softheadedness. Like his characters, he goes his own way and keeps getting stronger.