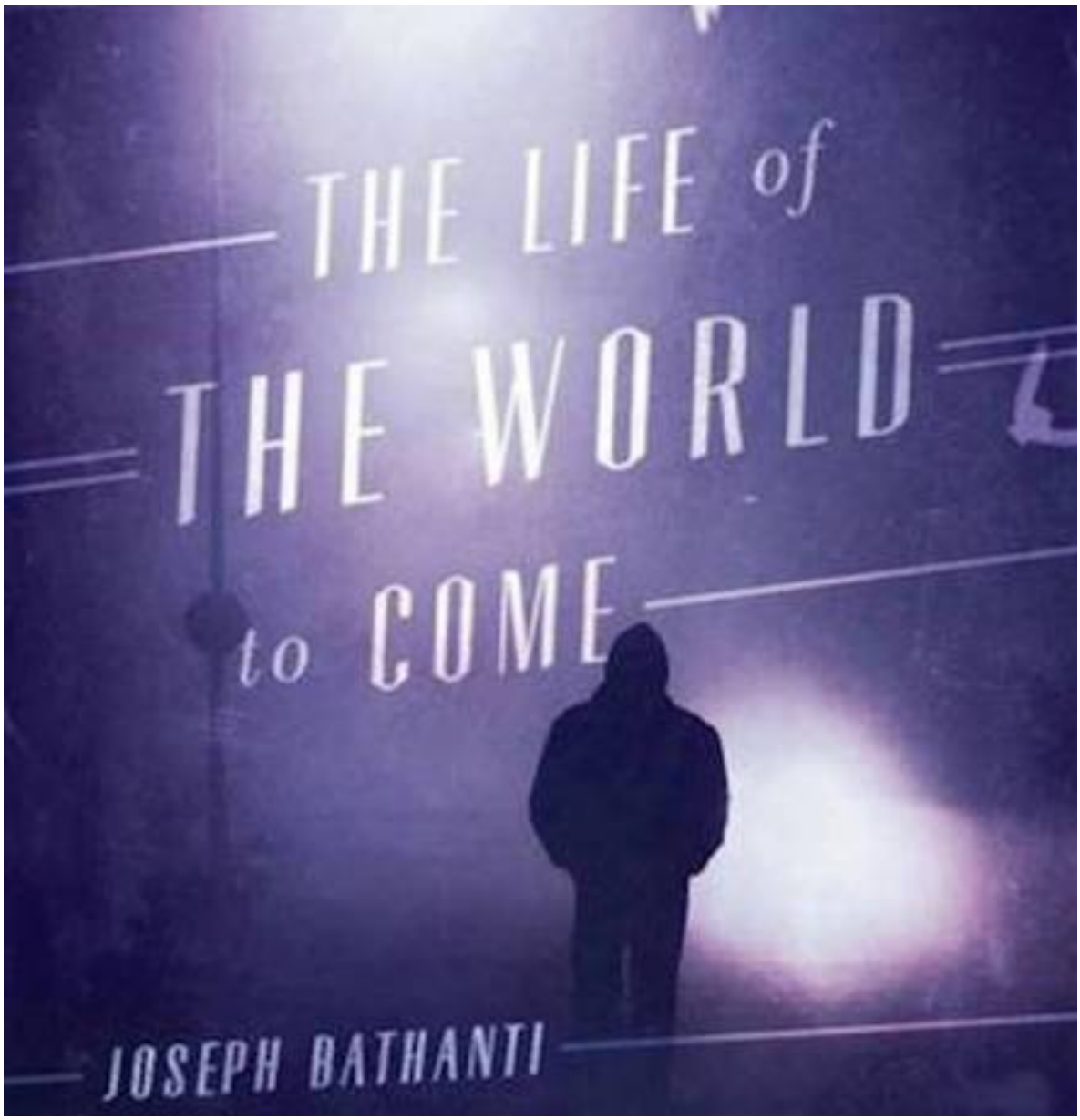
A Young Man’s Futile Flight Toward Freedom

Fred Gardaphe (March 02, 2016)



Literature can still do more than any film to reveal the extremes humanity can handle when facing the obstacles we all face when trying to realize our dreams.

East Liberty [2], Pennsylvania, a working-class neighborhood of Pittsburgh, has been the setting for

much of the fiction and some of the poetry of Joseph Bathanti [3]. His first novel, about to be reprinted, was in fact entitled “East Liberty.” In his latest novel, “The Life of the World to Come,” Bathanti returns to his birthplace to set in motion all the things that can turn a good boy bad. George Dolce, a kid born to working-class parents—both children of Italian immigrants—is a smart, hardworking college kid who gambles just enough to help his family out.

His bets, for the most part are smart and safe, and designed to get him through college and into an Ivy League law school.

When he takes a job at the local pharmacy, run by Mr. Rosechild, a Jewish man who has money to burn and a loyalty to his home team, the Pittsburgh Steelers, George hones in on his bookie’s business, taking the pharmacist for the money he needs to keep his family from in their home when his father loses his job.

The worse happens after George falls in love with Rosechild’s daughter, and the pharmacist’s betting gets out of hand. George gets in trouble with his bookie, which means he also must deal with the local gangster who runs things in the hood.

The result is a tragic story of a young man’s fall from grace and his futile flight toward freedom. Throughout the novel, George narrates what happens as well as what could happen. The result is a narrative tension that keeps the reader wondering how it’s all going to end.

Bathanti, a poet as well as a natural-born story teller, casts a literary crime story that becomes part thriller, part coming-of-age account of something that could happen to any smart kid who tries too hard to fight what he perceives could be the fate of following in his father’s hopeless footsteps. East Liberty is a place where even the best of the local kids end up on its skid-row streets. We see it all first, as George gives his middle-class girlfriend a tour of the neighborhood in her father’s Cadillac, and later, as George turns into Michael Roman and walks Crow, his new girlfriend, through East Liberty’s tough streets as he tries to make good all the bad he's done.

While it’s too late to change the past, George hopes it’s not too late to save his soul. Somewhere between George’s fantasies and the narrator’s reality lies the magic that makes this novel a must read. This tale of two Georges, crafted by a master of the literary trade, reminds us that literature can still do more than any film to reveal the extremes humanity can handle when facing the obstacles we all face when trying to realize our dreams.

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