

By Sally S. Eckhoff

**TINTIN IN THE NEW WORLD:  
A Romance**  
By Frederic Tuten  
Morrow, \$20

**TALLIEN: A Brief Romance**  
By Frederic Tuten  
Farrar Straus Giroux, \$17.95

**THE ADVENTURES OF MAO  
ON THE LONG MARCH**  
By Frederic Tuten  
Richard Kosak/Chodol, 1971. Out of print.

On a veranda overlooking blue mountains in the cooling Andean dusk, an unlikely couple fumbles toward an ardent understanding. The elegant Mme. Chauchat, vacationing from her usual office of player in *The Magic Mountain*, searches the large, black-dot eyes of her young man, who, being a cartoon character, is permanently stalled at the age of 12. "How I would have protected you, Madame Clavdia," assures the preternaturally wholesome Tintin, "from wild animals and wild persons, in our skin-carpeted cave high in the mountain clouds, our nest hung with bear furs and antelope skins and illumined by a secret light of the sky." What a plum assignment for Hergé's fictitious detective—stranded in the jungle with his faithful terrier, Snowy, and this fascinating Tartar redhead. And what a confession Tintin's vow: "Yes," he tells her, "had we known each other then, we would have destroyed the vacancy of Sundays and the misery of being small."

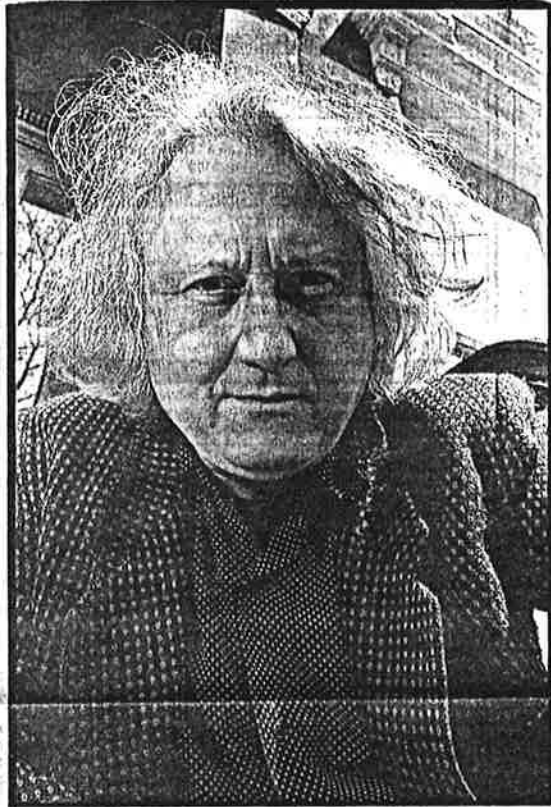
In each of his three novels, Frederic Tuten persuades people from the past—warriors, femmes fatales, even his smooth-talking, delinquent father—to speak with the present, in their voices but on his terms. The writer is completely at ease in history's fabulous furniture; these books may be the closest you'll ever get to being locked in the Metropolitan Museum overnight. Nap on Islamic embroidery and see Van Gogh in the blue light that shines between the hours of the dog and wolf. The tirelessly opinionated Tuten knows where the good stuff is. *Tintin in the New World* is a song about the community of beauty, the transcendence of language, and the treachery of love, and when Tuten gets his massive creation vibrating all at once, you'll see why such a huge range of subjects have known the smooch of his pen. "Me, the Bronx Racine, the Poussin of feelings," as he playfully introduced himself in his spectacular *Tallien: A Brief Romance*, is an awesome and intimidating storyteller, but one who never withholds rewards for truth fanatics and lonely hearts.

His first novel, *The Adventures of Mao on the Long March*, is dreamy and twisted, by far his most difficult work. The struggles between the Red Army and the Kuomintang are entwined with issues in contemporary art, scenes from the Civil War, and cinematic flashes of other jarring events. The mythic Chairman assumes an unfamiliar dimension—humanity—through his gradual revelation of ungovernable opinions and desires. For instance, slogging through the swamps of the Mantzu region, Mao ruminates: "No food but green wheat and raw turnips and, occasionally, a raw, flayed rabbit. . . Is this a revolution? Mao asked himself as he sat on his hams to write a poem about the Long March. 'Revolution? This is the shits, kiddo,' he whispered to the wet grass."

Next, Tuten moves to a different war and invests it with a suitably dazzling and voluptuous zeitgeist. In *Tallien: A Brief Romance*, the incendiary Jean Lambert Tallien, who has a brief but fiery career under Napoleon, impresses the hell out of the Convention and saves the magnificent babe Thérèse from the blade only to get shafted for his pains. He remains violently in love all the same. This book is as close to painting as a novel can get, dominated by overlapping figures, and harmonized with gestural swathes of color. "Thérèse poured him a cup of coffee. No woman in his life

# Wild Lives

## Frederic Tuten's Believe It or Not



had ever prepared and served him coffee. So much the richer for her hand. Her rosy aroma and creamy bare neck and the orange on the windowsill waiting for her to peel it with her silver knife, and beyond the window, the racing blue sky lapping the world: it really was a dream."

*Tallien* is actually two revolutions for the price of one: la France and la Bronx. Tuten intersperses his own experience growing up in a radical household with scenes from the reign of terror. Raised just below the Red Belt on the heels of the Depression, Tuten came to political awareness early, thanks to Rex, his real-life, Party card-carrying, Baptist dad. An organizer of restaurant workers, Rex seemed only to come home by accident, like on those nights when he got curb-stomped by strikebreaking goons and then unloaded on his family's doorstep. Sniffing the acrid glamour of his parents' marital hideout, Tuten paints a still-life of revolutionary vanity. "On the night table in their bedroom: Lenin, *On the Woman Question*; Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*; open packs of Camels, bottles of Royal Crown cola, pints of rye, a barrette." The young Tuten divines that those endless struggles taught us no lesson, possessing mostly misdirected heat that "sourced the last synapse between history and recollection."

Turning his attention from Mao and Tallien to an adolescent composed of gauche and bendy dots may seem like the act of a mind working backward. Yet Tintin's essential spotlessness makes him a perfect foil for Tuten's third literary experiment. Hergé's creation has been translated into 31 languages, including Picard, Galician, and Welsh, but Tintin has never sleuthed out what it might mean to grow up. The rosy-

cheeked blond kid is as pure as anyone Ben Jonson ever mourned. Exactly how painful is his passage going to be?

*Tintin in the New World* is a wild and often wrenching trip. Though it starts out like any detective story—mysterious missive arrives at the palatial estate of the hero during breakfast, bidding him to exotic climes where he's menaced in cafés and dangled over ravines—Tintin's tale is the germination of a human soul. This process does not, however, simply unfold through time; it calls for a simultaneity of experiences and a delicate interweaving of fates. The shape of the novel is unfamiliar and mutable, sometimes leading you straightforwardly through events, sometimes pitching you into the middle of impassioned political arguments, and at one point almost losing you in a dream, shared by two people in the same bed, that goes on for 60 pages.

Tuten works in literary hallucinations, dry spells, and paybacks, all in a language that's examined and composed to within an inch of its glamorous life. He also weaves in sea chanteys, verses in Spanish and French, conversational Italian, and red-hot rants on art and cultural guilt. The process of reading him is rich, tasty, and trying. It is boldly personal as well. Why else would that bright green Florentine leather case Tallien casually tucks under his arm in one novel find its way into Madame's closet in the next? The writer cherishes a lot of sneaking fondnesses: strong coffee, Chinese herbalists, Italian food, cats named Niccolino. He seems to harbor a love/hate thing for the French, a true affection for painting, a Jimmie Rodgers high lonesome wail. And a thwarted, majestic sense of justice.

Crash this into your heads, readers, and shove it all the way on up to the top. Be-

cause just as Tintin sips the cool air on board the ship that carries him to his destination or boggles at the windbag polemics of his dinner companions, his story is by turns bracingly fresh and bewilderingly subterranean. So Tintin leaves home—Marlin-spike—for South America, where he and his friends take up with Clavdia's entourage, which includes her lover, Peeperkorn, Signor Settembrini, Herr Naptha, and the saturnine Lieutenant dos Amantes. There, our hero drinks in extraordinary vistas and discovers within himself a tortured soul.

Well, every eternal 12-year-old should have his composure unzipped in a scene like this one: "Your spirit has sparked the flesh," he whispers to Madame Clavdia, who is so inexplicably drawn to the boy that she takes him to her room, oiling him up with some magical unguents before she ushers him into manhood. "Long silence. Then chirps of crickets and the cracking of stones decomposing in the cold mountain night. Many sighs float to the ceiling, some breathed to the mattress. Faint odor of sea spray, roses, and honey. A blue glow emanates from bed center, where two animals collide and cohere." Unlike the similarly polymathic Robertson Davies, whose prose has Intellectual stamped all over it but who writes as if physical expression were the province of the poor and futile, there's a sexual beast in many a Tuten personality, albeit a strangely gracious one. In *Tintin in the New World*, readers—and characters—are afforded many pleasures that are usually off-limits in the art novel. Not only beautiful food, sex, and parrot-green notebooks, but landscapes and violent weather too are made into situations of pure stimulation.

*That afternoon the sky went gray, and great sheets of rain made a waterfall of his window; red lightning cracked through the great broil of sea sky, and thunder boomed through the vast park. The tower shook and slightly swayed in the rushing winds. Tintin first feared that stone and glass would tumble into the mad sea below, but then he thought he would welcome the plunge and let the elements take him where they would. He'd ride sovereign over them on a matchstick or they'd break him and whirl him into a jelly of bones and dreams.*

Remaining alive and awake to all of this isn't easy. After the rain washes you and the souls of characters are shaped and killed and remade, you may find yourself wishing to call for a whinnying cup of espresso, or two, or three, if you had Tintin's Captain Haddock to bring them. At times, you might sense that you're following Tuten around, polishing the frames on his art collection while he leads you into room after room of arcane masterpieces. You may also be alarmed at the sight of all these social and aesthetic heterodoxies rolling around loose like peas on a plate. Does this guy scribe his visions wearing a Sulka smoking jacket and a fez, or what? If romancing the canon ties you in a knot, *Tintin in the New World* will give you a huge cosmic hairball. You are being entertained by a rapture freak who's busy (and happy) decorating one room in your imagination with Deuxième Empire furniture and making Aztec sacrifices in the other. Tuten's motive is never plain unless it is that vision satisfies and beauty is its own reward, even if you have to move heaven, earth, and the orderly process of narrative art to get at it.

As Tintin's melancholy guide Lieutenant dos Amantes discovers one critical night after too many Piacó Sours, the choice for those who wish to see their day arrive sometimes boils down to this: go slow or go crazy. "To sit on some smooth rock was everything. And then, perhaps, once in a while, when a fit big enough to deserve attention swept over him, he would make noises at the moon, little clicking sounds, and then, to surprise it further, let out a long, full, deep, mad howl. He'd see that moon smile a different smile." He hears a voice behind him: Tintin, full and manly and closer to death than he knows, says, "Let us have illumination light all the way of our road." Yes, let's. Let's have food and illumination and, best of all, a bed under these brilliant cartoon stars. ■