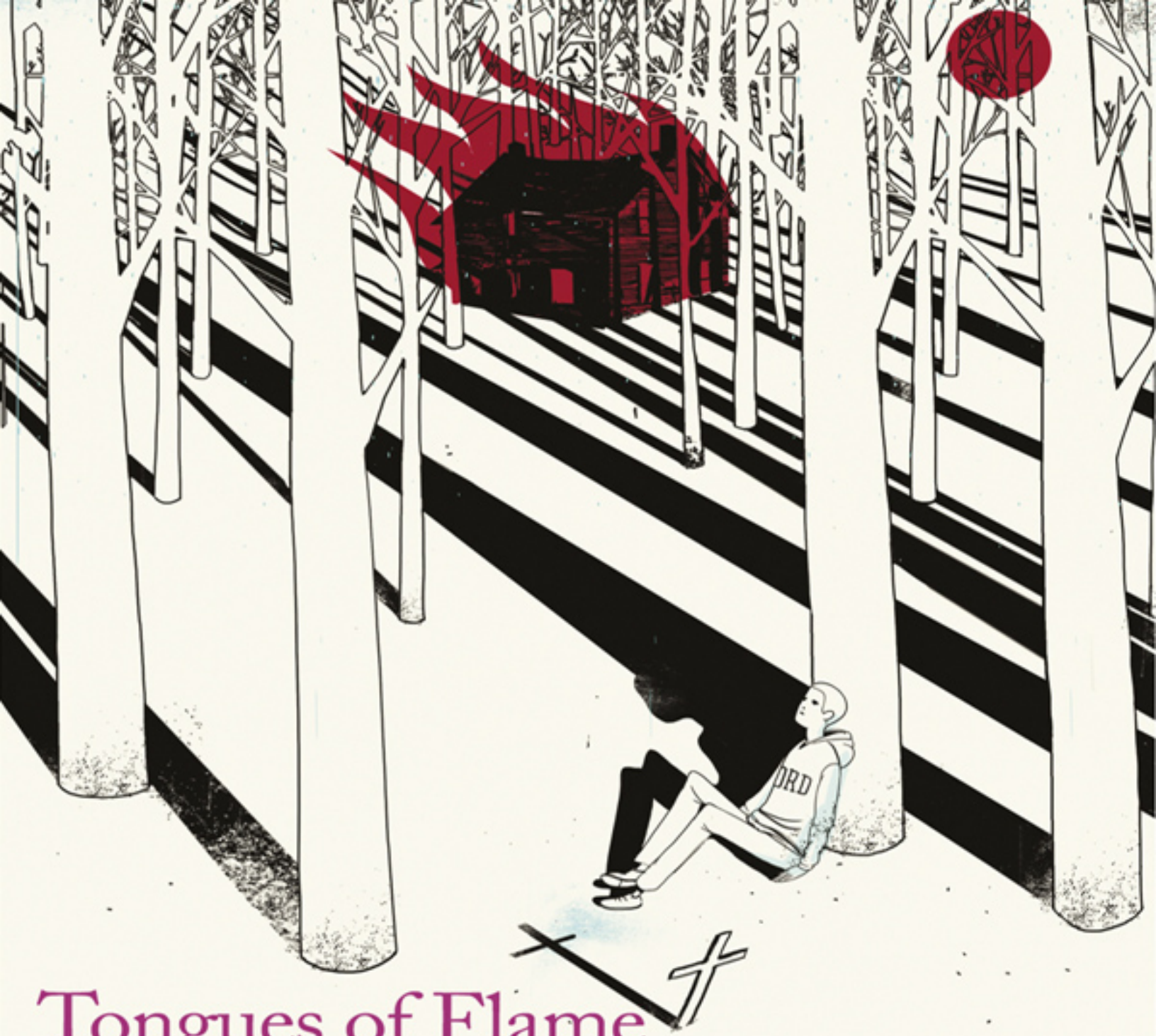

Tongues of Flame

'Religion, sex and mania bursting hoof-footed from suburban doors'
FAY WELDON

TIM PARKS

WINNER OF THE SOMERSET MAUGHAM AND BETTY TRASK AWARDS

VINTAGE

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About the Book

The gift of tongues, prophecy, exorcism … what might such concepts mean in a complacent backwater of North London? For Richard Bowen, adolescence becomes a nightmare when his parents join the charismatic movement and find a devil in his brother.

About the Author

Born in Manchester in 1954, Tim Parks moved permanently to Italy in 1980. Author of novels, non-fiction and essays, he has won the Somerset Maugham, Betty Trask and Llewellyn Rhys awards, and has been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. His works include *Destiny, Europa, Dreams of Rivers and Seas, Italian Neighbours, An Italian Education* and *A Season with Verona*.

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Teach Us To Sit Still

TIM PARKS

Tongues of Flame

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

For Mark

The few half-remembered events of seventeen years ago which prompted me to write this novel have been altered beyond all recognition for the purposes of fiction. No reference to any living person is intended or should at any point be inferred.

T.P.

PART ONE

A Devil in the House

IT WAS DONALD Rolandson brought the Sword of the Spirit into our house and it would have been about 1968. The world was full of strange new things just then I remember; there were wars and threats of wars and marches, an explosion of new hairstyles and new religions, and so perhaps it wasn't surprising that the Sword of the Spirit should have arrived that year, the tongues of flame and the dove and all the things she brought with her like leaves in a whirlwind. Nevertheless, my mother wasn't pleased at first.

'I'm not sure quite who he thinks he is,' she said, 'or who he thinks he's going to impress, playing holier-than-thou.'

My father would have been peeling the shell off his boiled egg. He had a high opinion of Rolandson and anyway he never spoke at breakfast.

'If he wanted to play that game he could have joined the Quakers or the Plymouth Brethren,' Mother said, and she said, 'If he has to beat his breast in public I don't see why he has to go and do it here. And after the best kind of education like that too.'

She poured the tea.

'As if everything was all going to change suddenly, just because he'd arrived. But they all think that at first of

course.’

And then she laughed. ‘I suppose he’ll grow out of it, bless his heart.’

She sat down with a grapefruit opposite Father and they looked at each other across the formica top of the table.

Father said, ‘Where’s Adrian?’

Mother turned to me. ‘Go and get Adrian,’ she said. ‘Tell him to come down here at once. He’ll be late for church.’

I went out of the kitchen and up the broad staircase. As soon as I was well out of the room they began to talk again, but I didn’t hear what they said because the walls of our house were very thick and the doors likewise and anyway they both spoke very low.

My sister was in the study sitting on Father’s desk, swinging her legs and speaking on the telephone to her boyfriend at the Missionary Training College in Croydon. I went up the stairs.

‘Bugger,’ Adrian said.

His room was quite dark with the curtains still drawn, the windows closed, and it smelt stale, of dirty socks and of sleep; the floor was littered with clothes and empty cups, record sleeves.

‘That’s what she said.’

‘Groan,’ he said. ‘The hell with it. Say I’ve got a headache if you have to say something.’

Adrian hadn’t been to church for more than six months now. In fact he didn’t come down to breakfast very often either. But on Sunday Mother considered it a kind of duty, I think, to remind him this was the Lord’s Day; and so it was she always sent me upstairs to wake him and to tell him he’d be late for church. She didn’t go herself because she was afraid of Adrian. She was afraid she would hear him say something she didn’t want to believe her son could say.

‘They’re loonies,’ Adrian said. ‘Bloody nuts.’

I went into my own room and put on my maroon tie and the herringbone jacket and combed my hair down to the

collar, looking in the mirror.

In church Father preached about Gideon's men whom the Lord sorted out by making them drink water from a stream and the ones who picked up the water with their cupped hands so they could look over their shoulder while they drank, those ones He sent home because they didn't trust in Him completely but in their own eyes: but those who put their heads down and drank directly with their mouths, those ones He took to His bosom and He kept because they trusted in Him entirely. And my father said that in this world we shouldn't always be looking over our shoulders at new fashions and new ideas, nor even at our fiercest enemies, but that we should drink directly from the life-blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ who had given His Body for us.

In the stalls in his white surplice and blue Oxford hood, Rolandson said very loudly, 'Ay-men!'

'There he goes,' my mother whispered. 'He can't even keep quiet while his own vicar is preaching.'

'He wants to make a grand impression,' she said. 'You can see that a mile off.'

I always sat with my mother and we always put ourselves in the last pew of the church because my mother liked to be able to see exactly who was in the congregation and then also, in this position, she could make signs to my father to tell him whether his voice was carrying right to the back or not. If she lifted both hands and put them together over her mouth as if in concentration, then this was a sign that his voice wasn't carrying well and he had to speak up. But actually this was a favourite gesture of my mother's anyway, whenever she was trying to think quietly and seriously about something; and so sometimes, engrossed in the sermon, she would do it absent-mindedly and Father would start to boom with an enormous voice so that everybody in the congregation was taken by surprise

and the younger people would turn round and grin at each other – ‘the under-twenties’, as my mother called them. But I roasted in embarrassment.

My sister, Anna, didn’t sit with us at the back of the church; she sat in the front row right beneath the pulpit because after the sermon she would go up with two other girls and they would sing together with guitars on the white chancel steps. Anna was a great fan of Billy Graham’s ever since she had seen him at a rally at Earls Court and she’d gone to the front to kneel before the Lord in the presence of thousands, even though she was already a Christian and had been for ages. So on the chancel steps she sang ‘I Gotta Home in Gloryland that Outshines the Sun’, and ‘You Gotta Walk that Lonesome Valley’, and all the other songs that were on the Billy Graham record, turn and turn about, one week after another.

When they finished singing ‘What a Friend We have in Jesus’, Rolandson said ‘Ay-men’ again in a loud, near ecstatic voice and some of the congregation said ay-men too because it was a sort of habit really to repeat what the clergymen said over these small things.

‘I wouldn’t mind,’ my mother whispered to me, ‘if he said “Ah-men”, but why does he have to say “Ay-men, aaaay-men”, as if we were at a blessed American Revivalist meeting or something?’

My father gave the blessing then, his favourite one: ‘And now unto Him who is able to keep you without stumbling and without stain …’ He used to make his voice rise and fall a little with the words so that it was mesmerizing – ‘May the Lord bless you and keep you, yea, may the Lord cause his face even to shine upon you …’

And now, after the blessing, there was always a long moment of quiet which was supposed to be for silent prayer, and it was this moment, almost the end of it in fact when everybody was already half-ready to go, shuffling for gloves and hats and handbags, that Rolandson at last spoke

out. He stood and spoke; and in the quiet and cold of the half-full church his voice was truly enormous.

‘It is the Word of the Lord causes me to speak,’ he boomed – the congregation froze still as one surprised animal – ‘and the Sword of the Spirit opens this my mouth. Speak through me Holy Spirit: breathe on me Breath of God …’ – and then he simply began to gabble very loud; to gabble, sounds quite indistinguishable as language or even words, but dramatic and rousing and guttural, and as he gabbled strangely like this he turned and slowly raised both arms towards the stained glass at the back of the church, through which the winter sun plunged on to bare pillars in great splashes of wine and blue. He went on like this for two or three whole minutes, gabbling, gabbling, gabbling; a noise of words without words. Then he stopped abruptly, but still held his arms raised, outstretched, draped with the white surplice like the pictures of the prophets in my Illustrated Revised Standard Version. The congregation began to fidget, ill at ease, and to lift their knees off their hassocks and wiggle their bottoms back on their pews. But my mother stayed still knelt, absolutely rigid with shock.

‘It is the Lord hath spoken,’ Rolandson finished with a falling voice, ‘and a great and mighty wind is blowing through our land. Let it touch even me, Lord, let it touch even me. Blessed be the Word of the Lord.’

He sank down to his knees and buried his head in his hands and appeared to weep.

* * *

At lunch we had lamb as always and there was Grandmother, my father’s mother, who was deaf, and Anna’s boyfriend, Ian, from the Missionary Training College in Croydon who always came on a huge Japanese motorbike. He had a small round freckled face with a broken nose and big ears and he grinned almost all the