

READER'S GUIDE



Silver Salts by Mark Blagrove

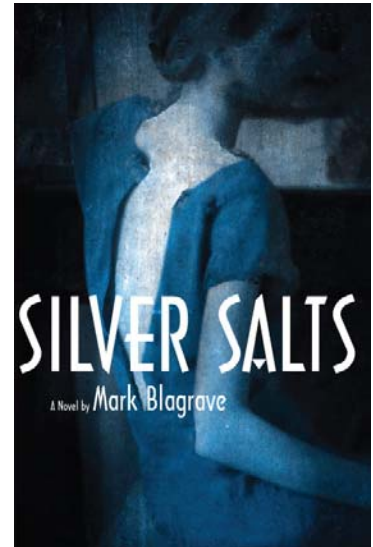
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INTRODUCING *Silver Salts*

The early days of Hollywood cinema are captured in the glimmering light of the projectors, images of pouty, expressive starlets, and the plunking cacophony of the house piano. It was a way of escape, especially for those affected by the Great Depression.

Lillie Dempster of Saint John, New Brunswick, often imagines herself on that big screen, in flickering silver lights. It is the one fantasy she can afford from her tragic daily life. In the burgeoning early years of the twentieth century, Lillie's life plays out like one of the tragic damsels from the silent films she loves. Orphaned by the Great War and the Spanish influenza at fourteen, Lillie is forced to move in with her upstairs neighbour, Frank.

When a group of filmmakers comes to town to shoot a movie, Lillie suddenly has the opportunity to live out her fantasies. Quickly recognized as a double for the leading starlet, Norma Shearer, Lillie makes her film debut, filling in for the often temperamental Norma. Hoping she has a future in film, Lillie makes her way to Hollywood, but, as she quickly learns, Hollywood is not all glamour and glitz, but just as exploitive as life back home.



IMPORTANT THEMES

Identity

The idea of identity and what it means to the characters changes frequently throughout the novel. Lillie is constantly bombarded with changing ideals of who she should be and how she should act. As a young girl, she is encouraged to be quiet and secretive to cover for her father's adulterous escapades, only to be told to be strong and outspoken by her politically vociferous mother. These changing ideas of identity lend themselves to her career as a stand-in, able to become Norma Shearer, rather than just mimicking her. But identity is complex, and as Lillie becomes increasingly like Norma, the more she is able to understand and shape her own life.

Loss

In the novel, loss does not only apply to the deaths of Lillie's family, but to a loss of innocence as well. Lillie is forever losing aspects of her innocence in the novel, from her virginity at the hands of Frank, to the death of the boy from the theatre, to her treatment in Hollywood. There is very little Lillie ever gains, except a toughness from losing so much in such a short time.

Independence

Lillie is constantly trying to assert her independence. She battles for her own say in matters to do with Frank and Norma, especially in the way that she lives her own life. This limits her freedom and often ends in shows of wilful independence, as she defies the edicts of Frank, Norma, and even Norma's handlers.

Success

Lillie's exploits are often tinged with the dream of success, whether this comes from a personal victory over another individual or from an independent accomplishment in the larger world. She dreams of breaking the bonds of poverty and despair that eludes so many in the "dirty thirties."

Q&A WITH MARK BLAGRAVE

1. The characters from Hollywood are, for the most part, real figures from cinema's silent era. What kind of research did you do to bring these characters to life?

One of the most fascinating things about Hollywood figures, of course, is the number of different types of stories that are told about them, and the fact that we can check all of that information and misinformation against a fixed image on the screen. My research, then, ranged from watching silent movies (something I love to do) to reading old newspapers with all their gossip about the stars, to reading the gushiest fan books and the driest academic studies. Particularly interesting for colour were David Wallace's *Lost Hollywood*, Thomas Doherty's *Pre-Code Hollywood*, Samuel Marx's *Mayer and Thalberg*, and Diana Altman's *Hollywood East*. As for the printed biographies of Norma Shearer, they are silent on the subject of her starring in *Blue Water*, and that was what originally piqued my interest, and led me to invent Lillie.

2. In the novel, you write about the influence and contributions Canadians had in establishing Hollywood as the centre of American film-making. Are there any other unsung Canadian cinema influences that you wish you could have brought up in the novel?

The window I allowed myself into early Hollywood was quite strictly by way of Saint John, New Brunswick. It was Mayer's adopted home town, though he didn't boast of it much once he was naturalized in the United States, and Walter Pidgeon was born and raised there. Norma Shearer's Saint John connection was through the few weeks' worth of shooting *Blue Water*, not long before she joined Mayer in Hollywood (though, as in the novel, no copy of the movie has survived). With Norma, I allowed myself to sneak in her brother Douglas, who was to play such an important role in the development of film sound. There were, of course, many other Canadians in on the ground floor of Hollywood. Mary Pickford is the most famous, and Jack Warner was apparently born in London, Ontario, but there were also Nova Scotians Josephine Crowell and Wallace MacDonald, and another New Brunswicker, Sam de Grasse. However, none of these had the direct Saint John connection that would make them part of my fictional Lillie's universe. Marie Dressler does manage to sneak into the book without a Saint John connection, but it's only one party...

3. What sort of struggles did you have to deal with in writing this book? Was there a learning curve in writing your first novel compared to your short fiction?

As a playwright, I bring to my work in any genre a preference for writing in scenes. For a short story, sometimes one scene will do; sometimes it's more. With the novel, I had to think in terms of several *acts*, each with many sub-scenes. A short story, by definition, "pays off" after a few thousand words: you open a gap for awhile, and then you close it. Keeping some of the "gaps" open for a whole novel was a real challenge. And then there's the question of variety in the narration. With every short story, you can try on a new skin, become a new narrator. For the novel, I eventually settled upon the idea of alternating between "I-Lillie" and "she-Lillie," which at least



ABOUT MARK

Mark Blagrove was born in the picturesque town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, and raised in Southern Ontario before he found his true home in New Brunswick. His short stories have been published regularly in leading Canadian literary journals including *The New Quarterly* and *Fiddlehead*, and his plays have been produced professionally as well as in university theatres. Mark now lives in Sackville, New Brunswick, where he is a professor of English at Mount Allison University. *Silver Salts* is his first novel.

allowed me to inhabit the character in a couple of different ways, even if I could not invent a new narrator every ten pages.

4. Did the narratives of early silent film influence the way you approached the narrative arc of *Silver Salts*?

In the book, there are a couple of references to the silent-filmmaking practice of filming a body falling off a cliff and then writing a story to go with it. Much of Lillie's story came to me that way, with the effects often coming to me before their causes, probably because of the historical foundations on which they were built. In retelling her story, I have Lillie, herself a screenwriter, organize events formally into the five reels that were the usual format of a silent feature. But she is inevitably also telling a tale that, while it may not always be literally "girl meets boy," is structured on the same patterns of set-up, development, variation, reversal, and pay-off as silent films were. On the broadest "girl meets... and loses... and gets" terms, Lillie meets her image, loses control of it, and regains it.

5. Were there any specific books or movies that inspired you while writing the novel?

As a teacher, I have the luxury of re-reading and rediscovering classic novels regularly, so *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice* and various of Dickens's and Timothy Findley's works are never far from me, if only to remind me of what I wish I could do. Doctorow's *Ragtime* was an inspiration, too. I read and admire a lot of contemporary Canadian fiction as well, though when I write I try to close out other's voices as much as any of us can.

6. Lillie and Frank have a very complicated relationship to say the least. Could you explain Lillie's motivations to stay with Frank long after she is able to move out on her own?

For better and for worse, Frank is, for a long while, Lillie's only real chance at belonging. He literally takes over where her parents left off, and, perhaps because he is no substitute, neither of them really knows when the job of "raising Lillie" is finished. The repetitious and habitual nature of their days together, and even the nighttime visits, becomes yet another instance of Lillie's servitude to the mechanical in her life: a film loop she can't escape. And the times, of course, were still such that many young women only struck out away from home in order to marry, something for which Lillie has no prospects. The lure of Hollywood is the only thing that can really pry her away, and even then she comes home, though too late to get any real closure with Frank.

7. Lillie is obviously changed by having to live as the shadow of Norma Shearer, but how is Norma changed by having Lillie in Hollywood living her life for her?

I suppose that Norma does change, though part of being a film star in those days was that your public believed you didn't. At any rate, Lillie's presence becomes a threat for Norma after Norma and Irving's baby is born. Motherhood brings about a change in her, a fierce instinct to protect what is hers, and that turns out to extend to her public image, which she has willingly let Lillie wear up until that point.

8. Out of all of the characters in the book, who has changed you the most?

Lillie.

9. Some of the greatest events in the first half of the twentieth century personally affected Lillie. How did the tragedies of these events shape your idea of who Lillie is?

Lillie's challenge is to establish an individual identity for herself in an age when nearly everything is working against that possibility. The First World War, to which she loses her brothers, and the Spanish Flu, to which she loses her parents, together introduced death on a scale that reduced people to mere statistics and saw them buried anonymously on battlefields or in mass graves. It must have seemed as though some huge Henry-Ford-style assembly line was mass-producing people for the slaughter. Less dramatic, but still part of an overall trend toward mechanization of the human were the developments in sound and image recording that Lillie literally grows up with in the book, and which she eventually learns to control.

10. What do you hope readers will take from this novel?

I hope that the novel says something about the preciousness and precariousness and vulnerability of identity, and, too, something about Saint John, a city not yet sung in this country's fiction.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Symbols such as mirrors, memories and stories occur throughout the novel. How do they contribute to the larger symbol of the theatre?
2. The author uses a narrative technique of setting the scene, like in a screenplay, to open the chapters, giving the novel the feel of watching a movie. What other film conventions are used to enhance the narrative in this way?
3. Discuss the role that political activism plays in the novel.
4. How must Lillie contend with identity throughout the novel?
5. Lillie's experiences are often overshadowed by the fact that she must remain silent. The excursions with her father at the outset of the novel and, much later in life, when she must silently stand in for Norma in the movies are just two examples. How does this silence affect Lillie and how does she eventually come to break free of it?
6. *Silver Salts* is a coming-of-age story. How is it similar to or different than other novels of the same ilk?
7. How is Lillie's job as Norma's double a turning point in the relationship between Lillie and Frank?
8. How does Lillie's life reflect the tropes of many Hollywood movie plots?
9. How are the movies a metaphor for Lillie's life?
10. Discuss the role of men in the book. Generally, how do they treat Lillie? How does this fit in with some of the major themes of the novel?