

TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

by Benjamin Taylor

Los Angeles Times

November 13, 1995

Review by Michael Harris.

What odd and bewitching creatures the first airplanes must have been! Half bug, half angel; tinkered out of the most common materials--wood, cloth and wire; both too frail and too heavy, it would seem, to leave the ground. Yet they flew.

Benjamin Taylor's debut novel is like that. The story of a wealthy Jewish family's decline in turn-of-the-century Galveston, Tex., it's also a mythic tale in which a spinster Latin tutor is a sibyl, a 14-year-old boy's curiosity about the father he lost in a hurricane is paralleled with Aeneas' journey to the underworld, and the prophet Elijah arrives in the "Ellis Island of the West" in the guise of a mute elderly immigrant who gives puppet shows and spells out his every utterance on an "alphabet board."

Taylor (*Into the Open: Reflections on Genius and Modernity*) uses dark elements--syphilis, drowning, laudanum addiction, madness, bankruptcy, suicide--as ribs on which to stretch a fabric of reverie, youthful hope, homoeroticism and comedy. It's an unlikely contraption, too clever by half. We can hear it creak as it rolls down the runway.

Yet it flies.

The lifting force, and the glue that holds things together, is Taylor's style. He can soar in a paragraph from the vernacular to poetry; he can sum up a character in a few sentences of dialogue, whether it's the venerable Rabbi Gernsbacher flirting with heresy or two young aeronauts, Peter Munger and Albert Roache, cobbling together a flying machine with help from what remains of the Mehmel fortune.

"Gerson and Liselotte Mehmel had brought their Europe with them to America," the novel's magisterial narrative voice tells us--a raw country that for these highly cultured people was a "last recourse, good for making money, that was all."

They made the money brewing "the finest beer in Texas." Their son Aharon, married to a New Orleans beauty, Lucy Pumphrey, built a mansion despite the misgivings of the family banker, who had seen "the angel of luck" dance through the wainscoting of his office when he financed the brewery but saw "a different angel, a dark one" hover behind the younger Mehmel. In Taylor's Galveston, even bankers are mystics.

When *Tales Out of School* opens, it is 1907. Aharon is dead, victim of high water and venereal disease. His widow, torn between her native Catholic and adopted Jewish faiths, is hooked on patent medicines and losing her mind. His bachelor brother, Leo, studies birds and squanders his inheritance on the airplane project. Gernsbacher is "tired of being a rabbi." The brewery is sinking fast.

The only person on his way up seems to be Aharon's son, Felix, who is studying the classics with tutor Etta Murph and her lover, Velma Truley. He picks up knowledge of a profaner sort from Wick Frawley, a kid from across the tracks who unearths Aharon's old medical records while cleaning a doctor's office and initiates Felix into sex.

Still, it takes the mysterious Yankel Schmulowicz and his magical puppets to give the novel's propeller a twirl.

The creature coughs and trembles. Such a heaviness of learning to bear on its wings! Such a flimsy construct of fantasy to hold together with nothing more than a few tens of thousands of well-chosen words! One might as easily impose European order on Texas, as the Mehmels, Gernsbacher and others try to do in vain.

Yet it flies.