

Review of *The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre* *The Dallas Morning News*

Visions in the vapors

FICTION: Love and apocalypse mingle in the life of Daguerre

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By CHARLES EALY

Austin has a notable new novelist.

His name is Dominic Smith, and his debut historical novel, which is full of hallucinatory and beautifully rendered images, is titled *The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre*.

The setting is France in the 1840s, with Daguerre at the height of his acclaim as one of the founders of modern photography. But Daguerre also suffers from various maladies and delusions caused, in part, by his exposure to mercury vapors.

As Mr. Smith writes in his "Author's Note," Daguerre would "expose a sensitized plate inside a camera obscura, take the plate into a darkened room, then pass it back and forth above a heated mercury bath." The mercury drops would settle over the image, giving it luster and a minute level of detail.

But those same vapors begin to take a toll on Daguerre, whose Gothic visions open the novel, two years before the 1848 revolution rocked France. As Daguerre looks out his apartment's bathroom window, he senses the looming apocalypse that would hit Paris: "Men could sense oblivion coming, feel it in the knuckles and teeth." And he sees what looks like an albatross on the rooftop of Notre Dame. Then he sees that it's "a young girl in a white dress, her hands laced behind her back. She had felt wings pinned to her dress and she was going to jump from the ledge. She didn't jump; she leaned into the air in front of her and shot straight down."

The doom of such scenes would be oppressive if Mr. Smith didn't come up with an inventive way to hold our interest and give us hope. He does so by interspersing the gloom with tales of Daguerre's early childhood, when he loved and lost Isobel de Fournier. Just before the French Revolution in 1789, she was a maid on the estate where his father was head clerk.

Any alert reader will realize that Mr. Smith is setting up a reunion with Isobel, a moment of love regained, even if it comes after years of separation. But the joy of reading a novel often comes in the details, in the inevitable surprises and beauty of events along the way. And Mr. Smith provides plenty of those.

The early part of the book revolves around Daguerre's quest to photograph 10 things before his predicted apocalypse. And the list includes a beautiful naked woman, the perfect Paris boulevard, a perfect apple and his lost love, Isobel.

In his quest for a nude model, Daguerre enlists the help of the French poet Baudelaire. In Mr. Smith's hands, he is a droll and deadpan character, a frequent womanizer who introduces the photographer to a young prostitute. As it turns out, Chloe is the estranged daughter of Isobel. Thus begins Daguerre's expected journey back to love.

The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre is a richly promising start to the literary career of Mr. Smith, an Australia native who received a master's of fine arts degree from the James A. Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas.

Historical fiction is rarely the easiest route for an aspiring novelist, especially when the author is in Austin and the plot takes place in mid-19th-century France. But Mr. Smith has found a vivid way of creating images. Just like the hero of his novel.