



***Golden Hill*, by Francis Spufford**
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, December 2018

Acclaimed British author Francis Spufford, better known for his works of non-fiction, has written *Golden Hill*, a daring first novel. Deemed by BBC Radio as “the best eighteenth century novel written since the eighteenth century,” *Golden Hill* is indeed a rollicking tale.

Set in old New York, *Golden Hill* begins on a blustery November day in 1746, decades before the American Revolution. The *Henrietta*, a ship bound from England, has landed in New York Harbor. Onboard is Richard Smith, a young man in a hurry. In his possession is a promissory note for one thousand pounds which had been drawn up in London in his name.

Smith quickly makes his way to Golden Hill, Manhattan’s financial center. He calls upon the accounting house of Lowell & Company, requesting to have his bill redeemed. Gregory Lowell, the firm’s owner, is skeptical of Smith and demands that Smith explain himself. Smith is not forthcoming with personal information. “There’s a lovely power,” he says, “in being a stranger.” Nevertheless, Smith agrees to wait sixty days until another ship transporting a verifying note arrives from England. Before Smith takes his leave, he meets three women in Lowell’s household: Daughters Flora, fair and dull; Tabitha, dark and bewitching; and their African slave Zephyra.

Soon news was all around town that a mysterious stranger had arrived “with a fortune in his pocket.” People wondered if Smith was a spy or a scoundrel (or, heaven forbid, a Catholic). Smith, as he bides his time, meets Septimus Oakeshott, secretary to Governor George Clinton. Oakeshott, accompanied by his omnipresent slave Achilles, warns Smith that New York is “a place where things can get out of hand very quickly and often do,” and that its residents are “wild, suspicious, combustible—and the devil to govern.” As it is, Oakeshott harbors dark secrets of his own.

Golden Hill is written in eighteenth-century vernacular, with Fielding-like flare. Its plotline contains warring lovers, a stint in debtors' prison, and a disastrous duel. Richard Smith has a bit of Tom Jones in him. When he is caught in a romp with an overripe actress, his budding romance with Tabitha appears doomed.

At its best, historical fiction should be entertaining as well as edifying. *Golden Hill* succeeds on both accounts. Central to its story is the nascent abolition movement in 1746, the peak year for slavery in New York City. *Golden Hill's* surprising conclusion—revealing who Smith is and what he'll do with the money—neatly ties the tale all together.