

The Ice Harp: The American Novels

Norman Lock

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In Norman Lock's historical novel *The Ice Harp*, Ralph Waldo Emerson struggles with encroaching dementia and the incontrovertible realities of aging.

In 1879, Emerson is seventy-six and troubled. Once heralded as the Sage of Concord, the brilliant essayist, philosopher, and poet clings to his remaining knowledge, though his memory and thoughts are often addled and disordered. He also has frequent visions—visits from ghostly friends. He engages in reflective conversations with the late Henry David Thoreau, abolitionist John Brown, and fellow transcendentalist Margaret Fuller.

Emerson's wife, Lidian, worries about her husband's "fuddled" behavior, and that he'll soon be eating "breakfast in the asylum." But when Emerson meets James Stokes, a former slave and a fugitive soldier, he is confronted with a more immediate dilemma. After being provoked by racial slurs, Stokes killed a white man; he is trying to escape likely execution. As Emerson recalls his own anti-slavery exhortations, he contemplates the paradox of Black emancipation in post-Civil War America.

This compelling narrative is heightened by intricate historical details and its distinct New England setting. Oilcloth on a kitchen table is "gashed from cutting pie dough into strips." Emerson's neighbor, Louisa May Alcott, keeps first aid supplies in a ladies' hatbox, while in Thoreau's Walden Woods, the famed pond is like a "bowl brimming with silver." And without pathos, the book conveys Emerson's fearful frustrations regarding his mental state. Amid the pensive turmoil of his thoughts are instances of wry eloquence; he notes how memory "is the thread on which the beads of a human life are strung," and worries his thread has snapped.

A fascinating and haunting novel, *The Ice Harp* chronicles the vulnerable mortality of an American genius.

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