Sending a signal to Mars

An astronomer's fiery effort is the basis for a deconstruction of 19th-century theses.

GALLERY: Sending a signal to Mars

"Equilateral" by Ken Kalfus (Bloomsbury).

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Equilateral

A Novel
By Ken Kalfus

Bloomsbury. 224 pp. $24.

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

The equilateral triangle combines the virtues of uniformity and variety, Sanford Thayer, the main character in Ken Kalfus' new novel, proclaims.

The component of all regular pyramidal solids and the basis of all human art, it is "the most visually satisfying geometrical figure of them all." Drawing on his cigar, Wilson Ballard, Thayer's chief engineer, shoots back: "Bloody difficult to dig, though."

But dig they must.

A distinguished British astronomer "who looks for meaning everywhere," Thayer has secured international financing for his scheme to use 900,000 Arab "fellahin" (peasants) to excavate 1,027 billion feet of sand and construct an equilateral triangle, 306.928 miles on each side, precisely one-seventy-third of Earth's circumference, in the desert of Egypt, pour a 12-inch layer of petroleum into its trenches before dawn on June 17, 1894, and set fire to them.

Thayer is certain that the flame will be visible to astronomers on the planet Mars, who heretofore, like their counterparts on Earth, have been "unable to convince parochial skeptics that the markings on the distant planetary surface are the work of sentient beings."

By turns sophisticated, suspenseful, and entertaining, Equilateral uses this fantastic conceit to deconstruct the late 19th century's empirical, Social Darwinist ("survival of the fittest"), and colonialist worldviews, elements of which remain dominant in our own time.

Kalfus, whose novel A Disorder Peculiar to the Country was a finalist for the 2006 National Book Award, portrays Thayer as convinced that "history moves in a single direction and that the direction is forward"; that ethical practices promoting a race's well-being trump malign behavior; and that the Golden Rule has been bred into the Anglo-Saxon people. Much older than Earth,
Thayer concludes, Mars has had millennia to "assemble the social, spiritual and material resources necessary to survive a dehydrating planet." The "next step in evolution," Martians can teach Earthlings to be truly human.

Involved in a romantic triangle and plots against the British, as well as in a race against time to build the equilateral, the great astronomer will sense that he is ill-suited to the enigmas of the Middle East, "to the desert and its great expanse of non-meaning, to people for whom literal meaning is irrelevant and perhaps even an insult to God," and to "Byzantine lands" of what and not why. He will discover as well that he is drawn to that world "and its manifold mechanics."

Along the way, Kalfus (who lives in Philadelphia and is married to Inquirer architecture critic Inga Saffron) provides arresting images of Thayer's obtuseness. As the fellahin sing "equilateral songs," filled with gratitude to God, and raise their hands as he passes by, Thayer concludes "that they know he has brought them here to win them glory." He plays Ping-Pong and chess with Miss Keaton, his secretary, and announces, while sipping tea in his plush, upholstered chair, that he does not think any dervishes are "lurking beyond the glares of our fire."

Contemptuous of history, Thayer orders that the golden bulls, rams of porphyry, and papyrus scrolls unearthed by the fellahin be reburied because "Mars will not wait." And, as the narrator intones, "he can't be blamed for confusing the identities of two Arab serving girls."

In the end, although his eyesight has been impaired, Thayer is acutely aware of the flame light, which is "completely, boldly," open to his gaze. His question has "become comprehensible by the miracle of concordant intellects." He understands - or thinks he understands - the sign he gets in return, which speaks of two minds in agreement from the start, of trust and kindness, and of appetite.

Thayer has made a discovery and had a revelation. A howl "reverberates against the wall and shivers against the windows." There has been an arrival. Unfortunately - or fortunately - it has not come from Mars.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.